HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JULY 2016)

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP
24 October 2016
House of Commons

Monday 24 October 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

House Building and Planning

1. John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on (a) house building and (b) affordability of housing of allowing urban property owners to build up, not out, to the height of the tallest building in the same block without requiring planning permission.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): My hon. Friend highlights the importance of increasing brownfield development and building to higher densities to deliver more homes. I announced our plan for urban regeneration at our party conference and I will set out further proposals as part of our housing White Paper later this year.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the need for more homes in the right places so that the housing market works for everyone. That means encouraging urban regeneration, making the best of brownfield land and building new homes where people desperately need them. Later this year, my housing White Paper will ensure that that happens across the country, including Weston-super-Mare.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely the Secretary of State is not going to fiddle-faddle with regulations like this at that level. What this country needs, given the housing and homes crisis—the deepest in a hundred years—is bold, imaginative innovation in the house-building programme, and we want it now.

Sajid Javid: I think “fiddle-faddle” is an appropriate description of what happened under 13 years of Labour government, when house building fell to its lowest level since the 1920s.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Recently the leader of Rossendale Borough Council and I wrote jointly to the Minister for Housing and Planning to say that our objectively assessed housing requirement did not take account of topographical and flooding issues in the Rossendale valley. Will the Secretary of State, on behalf of our hon. Friend the Minister, agree to a meeting with the leader of the local authority, Alyson Barnes, and me to discuss those specific issues?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a passionate case, and while it would not be appropriate to comment on the details, I can make sure that the Minister for Housing and Planning meets him.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council.
My constituents would broadly support the idea of building up, not out, but in middle England towns such as Kettering, with its limited public transport options, the problem is that the more residents we squeeze into any street, the greater the pressure on parking spaces. Does my right hon. Friend accept that there is a big difference between inner-city developments and developments of this sort in middle England towns?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right, and highlights the need for correct and adequate infrastructure in towns and villages across the country if we are to build the homes that we need. The proposals that we will introduce later this year, including the White Paper, will certainly take account of that.

Rough Sleeping

2. Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of rough sleeping since 2010.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): One person sleeping on the streets is one too many. All too often, support and intervention are only provided at crisis point, which is why we have launched our £40 million homelessness prevention programme—an end-to-end approach to tackling homelessness and rough sleeping to get people back on their feet.

Luciana Berger: St Mungo's reported last week that four in 10 people sleeping rough in England have mental health conditions, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder. Poor mental health makes it harder for rough sleepers to get off the streets and almost impossible to gain access to mainstream NHS services. St Mungo's reports that “the small number of specialist...mental health services are facing cuts or disappearing altogether.” How exactly is the Secretary of State addressing the growing mental health crisis among people sleeping on the streets?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. As she rightly points out, homelessness is not just an issue of providing enough homes but of dealing with other causes. There is a cross-party working group on homelessness, and the Government are working across all Departments to deal with these complex issues. I am sure that we will make further progress.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is often alleged—I am not sure how much statistical evidence there is—that a disproportionate number of rough sleepers in Britain come from the armed services. Will the Secretary of State tell us, first, whether or not that is true and whether there is any statistical evidence; and secondly, what more can be done to ensure that when people left the armed services they are given proper accommodation and kept off the streets?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue. It is a disproportionate number, which is unacceptable. Almost all local authorities have signed up to the armed forces covenant, which will help, but we have to do more. The fact that the Government have committed £500 million to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping over the next four years will certainly help.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Two weeks ago, I joined the excellent Wintercomfort organisation in Cambridge, which provides services for rough sleepers in the city. It was in no doubt that the numbers are rising inexorably. How can reducing the support for supported housing in any way help to deal with this issue?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman should know that we are not reducing support for supported housing. This is an issue that we continue to take seriously and that we will continue tackling.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Clearly, having any single individual sleeping rough in this country is a disgrace. Will my right hon. Friend take urgent action to identify the people who are sleeping rough and to ensure that they get the help and support that they need, so that they have a home of their own and they can get back to a normal way of life?

Sajid Javid: Of course the Government can help with that. My hon. Friend will know that last December the Government committed to looking at options, including legislation, to deal with homelessness and to help rough sleepers. I am pleased to announce to the House today that the Government will be supporting his Bill, the Homelessness Reduction Bill, which is also supported by Crisis and Shelter. I thank him for all his hard work on the Bill and also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), who is responsible for local government.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is good to see the Secretary of State and his new team in place, and it is even better to see our new strong Labour team in place. We will hold the Secretary of State and his team hard to account for the public for their failings.

With Labour in government, the number of homeless people sleeping rough on our streets fell by three quarters. Since 2010, the number has doubled. Why does the Secretary of State think that that has happened?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of Labour in government. Let me remind him what happened—he was a Housing Minister for some of that time. Labour cut the number of houses available for social rent by 421,000. Since we have been in office, more council housing has been built, helping people to find homes, than in the entire 13 years of the Labour Government. If Labour had spent as much effort on finding homes, than in the entire 13 years of the Labour Government, we would have had better results.

John Healey: You can’t help the homeless if you won’t build the homes. Over the past six years, the Secretary of State’s Government have cut all funding for building new, genuinely affordable social housing. He asks about my record. In 2009, when I stood where he is standing, Labour in government started 40,000 new social rented homes. Last year, it was 1,000. From Labour’s Front Bench, I welcome the Secretary of State’s
backing for the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), but will the right hon. Gentleman take the opportunity on Friday also to deal with the causes of rising homelessness? Build more affordable housing. Act on private renting and reverse the crude cuts to housing benefit for the most vulnerable people.

Sajid Javid: Again, the right hon. Gentleman raises his record in office. The House needs to be reminded that, under Labour, house building fell to its lowest level since the 1920s. That is Labour’s record, and Labour will never get away from it. Soon we will introduce a White Paper on housing. Let us see if he is able to support it.

Neighbourhood Plans

3. Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What plans he has to enhance and extend neighbourhood plans. [906725]

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The Government are fully committed to neighbourhood planning, which enables communities to shape the development and growth of their local area in a positive manner. The Neighbourhood Planning Bill will further strengthen and future-proof the process and ensure that communities have the support that they need.

Jason McCartney: I think we would all welcome local communities being involved in their local plans in more detail. However, does the Secretary of State agree that one of the big challenges is ensuring that developers use land that they already have planning permission for, with a particular emphasis, as we have heard, on brownfield sites?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Where sites have planning permission, developers should move ahead as quickly as possible. People in desperate need of housing expect developers to work with the local authorities to deliver these new homes. That is why we are trying to help where we can. The Neighbourhood Planning Bill will make it much easier to modify them and it will give localism, as will the £3 billion home building fund that was announced last month.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): There will be no real localism while developers have the right to appeal planning decisions and communities do not. In cases where a neighbourhood plan is in place, will the Secretary of State commit to seriously consider allowing a community right of appeal when a developer proposes a speculative development that goes against that plan?

Sajid Javid: A community right to appeal would further slow down the planning process, which is not in anyone’s interest. We need more homes built in this country and we need them built quickly, and measures such as those in the Neighbourhood Planning Bill are precisely the ones that will help.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): In Eastleigh, we face countless hostile planning applications, some destroying ancient woodland and beautiful green spaces. Does the Secretary of State agree that the borough council’s failure to deliver a local plan and much needed associated policies for neighbourhood plans prevents councils such as Botley from bringing forward their neighbourhood plans, thereby letting down my constituents?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has been a consistent champion in this House of the need for Eastleigh to have an up-to-date and properly supported local plan. Eastleigh Borough Council needs to get its act together. Her constituents deserve to have their voices heard, and our neighbourhood plan will strengthen that right.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): In a recent appeal by the developer, the Planning Inspectorate totally overlooked the local neighbourhood plan in Tettenhall in my constituency. From memory, it made one passing reference to that plan in a 17-page decision upholding the developer’s appeal. I would not expect the Secretary of State to comment on a particular appeal, but will he have a look at how seriously the Planning Inspectorate takes local neighbourhood plans?

Sajid Javid: It would be wrong of me to comment on the detail of a particular planning application, but I hope that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, which is now before Parliament, will strengthen these neighbourhood plans. It will bring them into legal force far quicker, it will make it much easier to modify them and it will give more support, including financially, for communities to put them together.

High Streets (England)

4. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support high streets in England. [906727]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): We all want to see our high streets succeed and thrive and that is why we have introduced the biggest cut in business rates, worth £6.7 billion. We have launched the high street pledge, we have introduced digital high street pilots, and we are celebrating our high streets through the Great British High Street award, the finalists of which we announced last week.

Luke Hall: Thornbury High Street attracts visitors from around the country to its art festival, regular farmers markets and annual carnival. Does my hon. Friend recognise the contribution of tourism to local high streets, and how is he working with his colleagues at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to support high streets as local and regional tourism destinations?

Andrew Percy: I know from my constituency how important the high street is in attracting people in. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he is doing in his constituency. We saw an increase in footfall in August of 1.1%. We are working closely across government with our colleagues in DCMS on funds such as the Discover England Fund and, of course, the Coastal Communities
Fund, which is funding a significant number of projects that are all about increasing tourism and jobs in the tourism sector.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Minister mentioned business rates. As a result of the business rate revaluation, many retailers on high streets up and down the country face significant increases in business rates. That will not help high streets, and it will not help retailers. Is that not the reality of what he has just announced?

**Andrew Percy** (Corby) (Con): Of course, the business rate cut is helping 600,000 of the smallest businesses, which do not pay any business rates at all. It is fiscally neutral, and three quarters of businesses will see a cut. I would have thought that that would be something the hon. Gentleman would welcome.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): In the next week I will be launching my annual best shop and market stall competition, with a new category—best café—this year. Will my hon. Friend join me in wishing all the entrants the best of luck, and does he agree that independent outlets are key to creating a unique and thriving town centre?

**Andrew Percy** (Corby) (Con): Again, the business rate cut is of significant value to many of our pubs. A huge number of tourists coming to the UK list a visit to a great British pub among their desires for their trip. That is why we made the changes we did to beer duty.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): We have some beautiful high streets in Corby and East Northamptonshire, and our pubs are an integral part of them. What steps are Ministers taking to help to promote our pub trade and ensure that these vital community hubs are protected?

**Andrew Percy** (Corby) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Clive Betts) referred to the UK list of projects. There will be no financial detriment to our local communities if Scotland is dragged out of the EU through hard Brexit?

**Sajid Javid** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know that, first, the Chancellor has already guaranteed that any application for EU structural funds up to the autumn statement will be fully honoured and, beyond that, that fund applications will be honoured as long as they meet the UK national interest. However, leaving the EU also gives us an opportunity to design a new fit-for-purpose investment model that will benefit all our communities in the UK in exactly the way we want.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Clive Betts) refer to the UK list of projects? What steps are Ministers taking to help to promote our pub trade and ensure that these vital community hubs are protected?

**Sajid Javid** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Con): The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has stated that only one third of the £1.3 billion of structural funds Scotland will receive up to 2020 has been allocated to local authorities. Some 20,000 businesses will benefit from these funds, potentially creating up to 11,000 jobs. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that there will be no financial detriment to our local communities if Scotland is dragged out of the EU through hard Brexit?

**Sajid Javid** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Con): Yes, I do. I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that the impact across the country of leaving the EU will be felt by local authorities in some ways—we have just heard a good example of that—and I assure him that I am having a very strong dialogue with the relevant Ministers to make sure that local government’s voice is heard.

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State has just said that the Government will guarantee the funding for EU-supported council schemes signed off before the autumn statement, and perhaps those signed off before we leave the EU. On support for farmers under the common agricultural policy, however, the Government are going to guarantee every single penny up to 2020. Why will the Government not give the same treatment to local communities, which will really suffer if these important schemes are lost because of the Government’s failure to give them proper support?

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**Sajid Javid** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Con): As always, my right hon. Friend is dead right to say there will be opportunities. Is it not the case that, whereas at the moment local councils and regions are forbidden to fund regional airports and other forms of infrastructure under EU law, that will no longer be the case and the United Kingdom will be able to choose what is best for our citizens?

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend is dead right to say there will be opportunities. Is it not the case that, whereas at the moment local councils and regions are forbidden to fund regional airports and other forms of infrastructure under EU law, that will no longer be the case and the United Kingdom will be able to choose what is best for our citizens?

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**Sajid Javid** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Con): As always, my right hon. Friend makes a very important point. Once we leave the EU, no EU rules or regulations will apply, and we will be able to come up with those that best suit the needs of local communities.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a very interesting point that the hon. Gentleman over there has just made.

**Andrew Percy** (Corby) (Con): We have some beautiful high streets in Corby and East Northamptonshire, and our pubs are an integral part of them. What steps are Ministers taking to help to promote our pub trade and ensure that these vital community hubs are protected?

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Mr Speaker: The “hon. Gentleman over there” was the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant).

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady mentioned WTO rules, if I heard her correctly. That may or may not be the case, but even if it were, she will understand that WTO rules are not the same as EU rules.

Alison Thewliss: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I will certainly table more questions to find out more detail on that.

The Secretary of State may be aware that Glasgow City Council has produced a document with a series of requests of the Scottish Government and the UK Government to help to prevent the detriment that is likely as a result of a hard Brexit. I expect other local authorities around the UK will do something similar. How will he ensure that the range of voices within local government is listened to and acted on by this Government?

Sajid Javid: I will make sure the voices of English local government are heard. When it comes to Scottish local government, I am sure it will work with the Scottish Government, who, as we have seen today, are engaged in the process.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member of Oldham Council.

In July, the Secretary of State highlighted the importance of local government having a say in the process of leaving the EU. He also committed to having a conversation with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, so it would be great to get an update on those conversations and to find out exactly what role local government will have.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that the process is ongoing and will take a number of months, if not years, so there will be plenty of opportunity for dialogue, including within the Government. I have had discussions with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on various issues that will affect local government, but I will not give a running commentary on them.

Jim McMahon: I do not think that anyone is expecting a running commentary, but any commentary would represent progress, given the silence at the moment. Local government wants to know what part it will play; at the moment that understanding is fuzzy, to say the least. The Secretary of State will know the importance of EU structural funds—£5.3 billion of investment that is vital to many of our local communities—and the ability to administer those funds is a key component of the 10 devolution deals that are set so far. Does he agree that uncertainty about the future of those funds is stopping the vital long-term planning that is needed and risks damaging those devolution deals, which have only just been agreed, and that the poorest in the community will suffer as a result?

Sajid Javid: The Chancellor has provided significant certainty about structural funds, especially for applications that are made before the autumn statement. Recently, at the Conservative party conference, he provided further certainty about funds beyond then. That is exactly what business is looking for.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister meant outside the Chamber.

Affordable Homes

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of empty homes in England.

Henry Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. Protecting green spaces and providing new homes are both important. What further steps can the Government take to ensure that empty homes are reutilised, notwithstanding the fact that they have already reduced the number of empty homes to an extremely low level?

Gavin Barwell: Local authorities have strong incentives. They earn the same financial reward through the new homes bonus for bringing an empty home back into use as for building a new one. They also have strong enforcement powers. They can charge up to 150% council tax for homes that have been empty for more than two years and apply empty dwelling management orders to force owners to bring properties back into use.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): In our town centres there are thousands of empty rooms on upper floors that could easily be converted into homes, yet they do not appear in the now excellent statistics to which the Minister refers. Will he bring together the key stakeholders and agencies to look at what the real barriers are that have meant that Governments of all hues have failed to achieve that conversion?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend is a former Housing Minister. I am happy to do as he suggests and perhaps to talk to him offline about that. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister meant outside the Chamber.
Gavin Barwell: The Housing and Planning Act does no such thing. The hon. Lady’s question made it clear that she was interested in more affordable homes for people to rent or buy. The Act requires developers to provide affordable starter homes for first-time buyers, but there will still absolutely be a determination to deliver affordable homes for rent. I look forward to visiting Greater Manchester shortly to discuss these matters.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Developments such as Chapel Hill in my constituency will have 40% affordable homes. Does not that show that the planning system already gives local authorities the relevant powers they need, and that they should be using them in the same way as Conservative-led Basingstoke Borough Council?

Gavin Barwell: I had the privilege of meeting the chief executive of my right hon. Friend’s council the other day, and I commend the council for its work. Her example clearly shows that our aim should be to deliver affordable homes to both buy and rent.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): In Cumbria, we suffer from brain drain, as graduates do not want to return to us after university. Proper planning for affordable housing in the rural north could be the answer. As well as attracting young talent, that could take pressure off housing in the rural north could be the answer. Will the Minister ensure that we do not have a one-size-fits-all planning policy for affordable housing?

Gavin Barwell: I thank the hon. Lady for her excellent question. Too often, the housing problems that we face are portrayed as a problem for just London and the south-east. The Secretary of State, the ministerial team and I are clear that we need a housing policy that delivers more homes right across the country, and recognises the circumstances in different housing markets.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): In Bath, all our brownfield sites will be developed by 2025 to 2030, with the only nearby sites being the brownfield land south of Bristol that has been left undeveloped for decades by the Labour council and Labour Mayor of Bristol. Does my hon. Friend agree that the changes in the last planning Act and the infrastructure Bill will make a huge difference to developing brownfield land across the whole of the south of Bristol and west of England?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Brownfield registers and permission in principle can make a big contribution to ensuring that as much development as possible goes on to brownfield sites. The example he gives also shows the benefit of sometimes working across councils, as is happening in Greater Manchester, to plan for strategic housing needs.

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16. [906743]Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): In Cumbria, we suffer from brain drain, as graduates do not want to return to us after university. Proper planning for affordable housing in the rural north could be the answer. As well as attracting young talent, that could take pressure off the London housing crisis. Will the Minister ensure that we do not have a one-size-fits-all planning policy for affordable housing?

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Teesside Investment

8. Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): With reference to the report by Lord Heseltine, “Tees Valley: Opportunity Unlimited”, published in June 2016, whether he plans to provide increased levels of support or investment for Teesside.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): The Government are clear that there are huge opportunities on Teesside, which is why the Secretary of State met Tees Valley leaders last week. That is also why we are committed to implementing the groundbreaking devolution deal. We have made the transfer of the first £15 million. In addition, we will be providing Tees Valley with £37.7 million this year from our local growth fund.

Tom Blenkinsop: While not flawless, the Heseltine report recognises the real potential on Teesside. However, the recommended electrification of the North Allerton to Teesside line has been ruled out. Carbon capture and storage was recommended but has been ruled out. Prioritisation for the national teaching service for the area is still under review. The immediate transfer of the former SSI site to the new mayoral development corporation is recommended but still in limbo, with previous promises on funding taken away. Will the Minister give any of the report’s recommendations the go-ahead in the near or middle-distant future?

Andrew Percy: We are already implementing some of those recommendations. Many, of course, were down to local implementation. Just last week, we issued the indemnity allowing the site inspections to be undertaken. Once the inspections have been completed, we expect the MDC, which we wish to establish in the middle of next year, to come forward with proposals on resources. The national teaching service pilot scheme has already been rolled out. We will confirm plans for rolling it out further later in the year. I want to work with the hon. Gentleman and other key stakeholders in the region because there is huge potential in that site—we are absolutely clear about that.

Midlands Engine

9. James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve trade and investment through the midlands engine.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I led the inaugural midlands engine trade mission to north America in September. I am leading a second mission to China this month. Establishing a mayoral combined authority within the west midlands will help to bring about even more trade and investment opportunities for the midlands engine.

James Morris: The black country economy and the west midlands have had a substantial revival over the past few years. In the last year alone, there has been a 46% increase in foreign direct investment in the black country. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to do all we can to take advantage of the devolution settlement in the west midlands, in the context of the midlands engine, to drive the growth of trade and investment into the west midlands from around the world?

Sajid Javid: The black country and the wider west midlands have seen strong performance of inward investment and exports. Our historic west midlands devolution deal includes an investment fund of £1 billion
to drive growth, and what we also need to drive growth is strong local leadership. There is no doubt in my mind that Andy Street will bring that to the west midlands.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: We note the sedentary approval for that proposition from the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant).

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): There are many great businesses in Stoke-on-Trent, such as engineering firm Brown McFarlane, that want to grow through trade and investment. Thus far, however, we have had very little engagement from John Peace and the midlands engine. We are not part of the combined authority of the west midlands and the black country. Will the Minister tell the House when John Peace will be visiting Stoke-on-Trent, and what plans the midlands engine has for north Staffordshire?

Sajid Javid: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there are many excellent businesses in his part of the world, and I think that Sir John Peace is a fantastic choice to chair the midlands engine. The hon. Gentleman rightly makes the point that the midlands engine is not the same as the west midlands devolution deal. I am sure that Sir John Peace will take a great interest in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, and I will make sure that he hears the hon. Gentleman’s case.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend highlights the importance of these devolution deals, including the deal for greater Lincolnshire, in bringing about more growth and better productivity in all regions of the UK. As my hon. Friend said, eight councils out of 10 have accepted the deal—I hope the others will as well—which will make a great difference to jobs and growth.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I had thought that the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) would require a degree of intellectual dexterity to relate the question to Leigh or Manchester, but he might have been saved by the Secretary of State’s referring, perhaps gratuitously, to all regions. I think that the right hon. Gentleman is a beneficiary of that.

Andy Burnham: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

One cannot help but notice that all the talk these days is of the midlands engine. Suddenly, the northern powerhouse is about as popular on the Conservative Benches as its originator, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne). Although I am not against investment in the midlands, will the Secretary of State give a cast-iron guarantee that manifesto commitments to invest in the north, including in High Speed 3, will not be delayed or diluted by new commitments to the midlands?

Sajid Javid: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has significant ambitions, but he must not talk down the north at every opportunity. He will know that the Government are as committed as ever to the northern powerhouse, and that applies to all our commitments around investment and growth.

House Building

10. Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps he is taking to build and develop more homes.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently announced the £3 billion home building fund to ensure that we are not so reliant on a few large builders, and the £2 billion accelerated construction programme to speed up building on public land. We will be setting out further plans in a White Paper later this year.

Mr Mak: Havant Borough Council is working with communities to update our local plans to ensure that local housing needs are met strategically. Will the Minister join me in congratulating them on their work and welcome their commitment to ensuring that home ownership is within reach of everyone?

Gavin Barwell: I am happy to do that. It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency recently and to meet Councillor David Guest, who is leading this work on behalf of Havant Council, and the great housing associations First Wessex and Radian, which are doing great work in this field.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): A fair proportion of these homes have to be affordable. Earlier this year, Westminster Council approved a scheme for 103 luxury flats in Westminster. Thirty per cent. of those would have given us an estimated value of £100 million; in fact, the council agreed to just 2% and took a contribution of £6 million. Will the Minister make it his urgent business to ensure that councils do not evade their commitments to providing a reasonable proportion of affordable housing?

Gavin Barwell: Both the Secretary of State and I have made it very clear that we need more homes of every single kind in this country—more homes for people to buy on the market, more affordable homes for rent, and more shared ownership. I hope that the hon. Lady will therefore welcome the Government’s starter homes policy to ensure that developers provide starter homes for first-time buyers when they build out schemes.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): In Swindon, we have cross-party support for our local plan, and by working with developers in advance of the submission stage of planning, we are delivering the popular Tadpole Farm development. Will the Minister agree to visit Tadpole Farm to see what best practice we can share to deliver much needed new homes?
Gavin Barwell: That would be a delight. It is good to hear in this Question Time about councils that are getting on with the business of developing local plans that meet the housing needs of their areas. I hope that all councils in England will follow that example.

18. [906745] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give some reasons why home ownership among people under 35 has fallen by more than a third of a million since 2010? What will he do to start reversing that trend so that people of my age are able to afford their first home?

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Gentleman uses an interesting timescale, because the fall in home ownership among the under-35s started in 2004-05 and the previous Labour Government did nothing about it. Indeed, the new shadow Minister said that he is not sure that he thinks that is such a bad thing. That decline was halted in the past year. The job that now falls to the Secretary of State and me is to reverse that decline so that young people have the chance to fulfil their dreams.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In her conference speech, the Prime Minister acknowledged that the Conservatives’ house building record was not good enough. Given the historic failure of the past six years under the Prime Minister’s predecessor, whose house building record was worse than that of any Prime Minister since 1923, how can we be convinced that the present Government will do anything differently to prevent six years of failure from becoming 10?

Gavin Barwell: Let us take care of the party politics first. The previous Prime Minister inherited from the previous Labour Government the lowest level of house building since the 1920s, but the number of homes being approved has now increased significantly. In the year to June, our planning system granted a record number of applications. However, if the hon. Lady wants to put aside the party politics and is saying that we need to do better and to build more homes, she will find complete agreement among this ministerial team.

Light Pollution

11. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): If he will issue guidance to local authorities on taking steps to control light pollution and protect dark skies. [906737]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): The national planning policy framework is clear. Local planning policies and decisions should limit the impact of light pollution from artificial light, including the impact on intrinsically dark landscapes. Our March 2014 planning guidance sets out how light pollution should be considered in the planning system.

Helen Goodman: Light pollution is not just a problem for people who want to look at the stars; it is also a problem for birds, which become confused about when they should begin the dawn chorus. They sing for so long that they have no energy left to mate. I am sure that the Minister understands why this is a problem. But Brexit—

Hon. Members: Brexit! [Laughter.]
Supported Accommodation

13. Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential effect on homelessness of the decision to cap housing benefit for supported accommodation at local housing allowance rates. [906739]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): The Government are committed to protecting the vulnerable, including homeless people. That is why we deferred the implementation of the local housing allowance rates for supported housing until April 2019. From then on, we will provide a new funding model to meet additional housing costs above the local housing allowance rates.

Mr Hanson: That is all very well, but the chief executive of the National Housing Federation has already stated: "We want to put supported housing on a secure and sustainable footing for the long term and we are not confident that the new system will guarantee this." What is wrong with that point of view?

Mr Jones: I have met the chief executive of the National Housing Federation and discussed this issue with him at some length. We are giving confidence to the sector that funding will be devolved to local authorities, and that that funding will be ring-fenced. Save for the changes to social rent increases, the quantum of funding to the sector will be the same. The chief executive seemed reasonably reassured on that point.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Following the statement made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), on 15 September, it is vital that the consultation on the funding of supported housing should get under way as soon as possible. Can the Minister tell the House when it will commence?

Mr Jones: The consultation will be released very shortly, and the evidence review on which this process has been based will be released at the same time.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister should realise that people living in supported accommodation are among the most vulnerable in society. He has left a whole series of charities and others in the third sector, including Framework in Nottingham, in limbo as a result of the lack of a decision on this issue. He must ensure that the Government put their money where their mouth is and support those vulnerable people. They need help and they need it now.

Mr Jones: As I have just said, save for the social rent increases, the quantum of funding will be the same in this regard. We are setting out certainty, and we will certainly be doing that in the consultation, which will be released shortly.

Business Rates

14. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): If he will make it his policy to reverse the decision to introduce a business rate rise for organisations that seek to own and supply themselves with rooftop solar power. [906740]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): Business rates are based on valuations carried out independently by the Valuation Office Agency. Nearly three quarters of businesses will see no change or a fall in their business rates next year, thanks to the 2017 revaluation, with 600,000 set to pay no business rates at all. For the minority that face an increase, a £3.4 billion transitional rate relief scheme will ensure that no business is unfairly penalised.

Sir David Amess: Despite what my hon. Friend has said to allay my fears, I wonder whether I could persuade him to meet me and local representatives of the solar industry and other constituency interests. We might come up with a few arguments that he has not yet heard and that might persuade him to change his mind about these rate rises.

Mr Jones: I am aware that the rateable values of certain types of rooftop solar insulation are increasing under the revaluation. However, there are many factors that determine the rateable value of a property, and the installation of solar panels is only one element. Many will see an increase in the rateable value of their solar panels but see their overall rates bill reduced. That said, I hear what my hon. Friend has said and I am more than willing to meet him and local representatives of the industry.

Coastal Communities

15. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to regenerate coastal communities. [906741]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): It is a pleasure to see my hon. Friend in his place. We are all proud of our coastal communities. I say that as a Member representing a coastal community myself. We have already invested £125 million in coastal communities across the United Kingdom through the coastal communities fund, £92 million of which was invested in England. We want to go even further, and we have identified at least a further £90 million for local projects. The bidding for those funds has begun, and 40 projects have made it through to the next round. We will be making a decision on them early next year.

Gordon Henderson: I welcome the Minister's response and his kind words. The Queenborough Harbour Trust in my constituency has been successful in the stage 1 bidding process for obtaining a grant from the coastal communities fund. What advice would he give to the trust members as they enter stage 2 of the process, to ensure they get some success?

Andrew Percy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his advocacy on behalf of the trust. It should seek guidance and support from its funding officer and its capital adviser who has been assigned to it by the Big Lottery Fund, which administers the coastal communities fund on our behalf. Advice is also available to it on the Big Lottery Fund website.
Topical Questions

T1. [906747] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): The recess was far from a quiet period in my Department. Earlier this month we announced the £5 billion of funding for new homes, and we have continued to drive forward devolution deals, and we are in the process of offering councils extra certainty through four-year funding settlements, but there is plenty more to come, including the White Paper—and, if I am even daring to dream, the press pack outside No. 10 through four-year funding settlements, but there is plenty more to come, including the White Paper—and, if I am even daring to dream, the press pack outside No. 10 might stop confusing me with Sadiq Khan.

Dan Jarvis: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. I am sure he shares my concern about the very high number of excess winter deaths in our country each year. He will understand the importance of Government, national and local, working together to address this, so will he say what specific plans his Department has to co-ordinate activity and minimise the number of cold weather deaths this winter?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue and rightly highlights the need for co-ordinated Government action. Public Health England has already published a cold weather plan, which gives recommendations for the NHS and public health and social care and community organisations to work together and help the people who are most vulnerable this winter.

T3. [906749] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on his plans to encourage innovation in the construction industry?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): We have huge plans in this area. One of the key objectives of the home building fund and the accelerated construction projects the Secretary of State announced at party conference is to encourage more use of offsite construction.

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State’s Department is supposed to be England’s voice in government, yet standing up for the English and the services they depend on seems low on Ministers’ list of priorities. The independent Care Quality Commission pointed out recently that the Government’s huge funding cuts have left services for England’s elderly and vulnerable at tipping point. With the social care crisis across England getting worse week by week, when might we expect the Secretary of State to act?

Sajid Javid: I recognise that there is growing demand for social care across the UK, especially in England, which is why in the last spending review we pledged an additional £3.5 billion by 2020, including allowing councils to have a social care precept, so there is money that is ring-fenced, and also the better care fund.

T6. [906752] Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): North Devon Council and the coastal communities team have just heard that their bid for funding for Ilfracombe’s excellent new water sports centre has made it through to the next round. Will the Minister congratulate them and agree that this is an excellent example of this Government reinventing our coastal communities?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): Of course I agree with my hon. Friend’s compliments to the Government on this and wish Ilfracombe all the best. It has made it through to the final 40, and we will be making an announcement on the final fund early next year, so congratulations again.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry, but that is complete and utter nonsense, and I have to say that if Opposition Members are really interested in the northern powerhouse, they should stop talking it down at every single opportunity and trashing it. We have delivered through the northern powerhouse a record number of enterprise zones and billions of pounds of investment in public transport projects across the north, and I know from my 10 years as a local government councillor in the north that that is a lot more than the Labour Government managed to do for the north during their time in power.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Pendle has perambulated from one part of the Chamber to the other, but we are nevertheless happy to hear from him.

T7. [906753] Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Local business rates retention will be a great boost for many local councils. What discussions has my hon. Friend had with local authorities about 100% retention?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): This is a reform for which local government has long campaigned and in which my hon. Friend has shown great interest. To deliver the commitment, we held an open consultation that invited councils and businesses to have their say and have established a joint steering group with the Local Government Association to consider the mechanisms needed to set up and run the new system.

T4. [906750] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The revaluation of property for business rates is creating uncertainty for businesses and local authorities. Stockton faces two different problems: small leisure businesses have been priced out of our town centre; and telecommunications companies are fighting their valuations, potentially knocking huge holes in the council’s budget. How will small businesses be protected? Will the Minister assure me that the 2017-18 finance settlement will take future valuations and changes into account so that Stockton Council will be no worse off?

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman is confusing two issues. On business rates, there is a record package of £6.7 billion of business rates relief. On local government funding,
I assure him that the revaluation process is a revenue-neutral exercise after which no local authority will be disadvantaged.

The national planning policy framework requires councils to plan for a mix of housing, but my hon. Friend makes a good point. It is important not only to get the right housing for our elderly population, but to release crucial family housing and to boost the second-hand market, allowing developers to build more homes.

Mr Marcus Jones: I say to the hon. Gentleman that 100% of business rates will be retained in local government to be spent on local government services. There will need to be a form of redistribution so that local authorities that do not collect as much in business rates are not left in a difficult situation. The hon. Gentleman will be glad to know we consulted extensively in the sector and received more than 450 responses.

Mr Speaker: We are doing a number of things. At the party conference, we announced the home building fund, which will provide home builders with the finance that they often cannot secure commercially. We are also looking into planning policy to ensure that we release the vital small sites that small builders can take on.

Danny Kinahan: I welcome the Prime Minister’s determination to keep the Union together. With devolution to councils and cities and to areas such as the northern powerhouse, can we have regular meetings with the devolved Governments and their oppositions to ensure that we are all pulling together?

Sajid Javid: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will. I am pleased that he has expressed his views about the importance of Unionism. It is key that we continue to work together—that is when we are at our strongest. I support the Union, and Unionism is absolutely central to that. That is my view and that is the Prime Minister’s view.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): General aviation airfields, not least White Waltham in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, make a valuable contribution to pilot training, business aviation and sporting aviation. Is the Minister aware that they are now seriously under threat? It is proposed that Redhill aerodrome will become an estate of 4,500 homes, and he will know about Wellesbourne airfield near his constituency. Please can we have a policy that protects general aviation airfields across the country, because otherwise they will all be covered with concrete?

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend’s passion for the aviation industry is well known. I am happy to meet him to discuss that vital sector and what we can do in planning policy on protection.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Chesterfield Borough Council stands ready to help end the housing crisis by building more homes, but the Government have reneged on the deal they did with Chesterfield in 2012. Changes to rents and the money coming into councils have made it much more difficult to deliver the houses that we need. Will the Minister meet a delegation from Chesterfield to understand the changes so that we can build the houses that Chesterfield needs?

Gavin Barwell: I am happy to meet a delegation to discuss this issue, but of course the reduction in rates helps vulnerable tenants in reducing the bills they face. The hon. Gentleman is, however, right to say that we must make sure we find a way to ensure that councils, along with housing associations and private builders, can build the homes we desperately need.
and homelessness. Does the Secretary of State understand that the reports say there is a link, with 60% of people from the homeless community also having mental health issues? What is he doing to liaise with the Department of Health and with local authorities to change that link?

**Sajid Javid:** As my hon. and learned Friend highlights once again, homelessness is more than just a housing issue. She can be assured that we are working across government—my Department, the Department of Health and the Treasury—in making sure that we are doing everything we can, as our recent announcement on homelessness helps to demonstrate.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): One of the main ways that developers in London manage down the levels of affordable housing is by a financial viability assessment. Does the Minister agree that all local authorities should make those assessments public at the start of the planning process, so that communities can transparently scrutinise them?

**Gavin Barwell:** What we need to do is take as much of the conflict as possible out of our planning system, be it in respect of agreeing the level of need, the local plan determination or viability assessments. There is nowhere in this country where the gap between what we are building and what we need to build is greater than in London.

**Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): Forgive me, Mr Speaker, as I raise the issue of Christmas shopping. As internet retailers prepare for black Friday and as online shopping breaks records, rural high streets struggle. Will the Secretary of State support Wealden high streets in Hailsham and Crowborough and increase footfall by visiting Uckfield high street for his Christmas shopping?

**Andrew Percy:** I will of course be spreading my Christmas shopping across large parts of my constituency, but I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency. She raises an important point, which is that as we get towards Christmas people should try their best to shop local.
NEW MEMBER

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Tracy Lynn Brabin, for Batley and Spen.
Robert Alexander Courts, for Witney.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. We will come to points of order later, but in the usual way. I am very happy to attend to a point of order at a later time.

European Council

3.37 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on my first European Council.

I went to the Council last week with a clear message for my 27 European counterparts. The UK is leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe, and we are not turning our backs on our friends and allies. For as long as we are members of the EU, we will continue to play a full and active role. After we leave, we will be a confident, outward-looking country, enthusiastic about trading freely with our European neighbours and co-operating on our shared security interests, including on law enforcement and counter-terrorism work. That is the right approach for Britain to take. It was in that spirit that we were able to make a significant contribution at this Council on ensuring a robust European stance in the face of Russian aggression, on addressing the root causes of mass migration, and on championing free trade around the world. Let me say a word about each.

Russia’s indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Aleppo and the atrocities that we have seen elsewhere in Syria are utterly horrific. It is vital that we keep up the pressure on Russia and the Syrian regime to stop the appalling actions and to create the space for a genuine political transition in Syria. It was the UK that put this issue on the agenda for the Council. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made the case for a robust response at the Foreign Affairs Council last Monday, and I spoke personally to Chancellor Merkel and President Tusk ahead of the Council last week. The Council strongly condemned the attacks, called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, and demanded that those responsible for breaches of international humanitarian law and human rights be held accountable—but we need to go further, which is why we agreed that, if current atrocities continue, the EU will consider “all available options”. We also agreed that everything should be done to bring in humanitarian aid to the civilian population.

On Friday in Geneva, the UK secured an extraordinary session of the UN Human Rights Council to press for a ceasefire to enable humanitarian access to Aleppo. There are millions of innocent civilians trapped there and in other besieged locations across Syria in desperate need of food, shelter and healthcare. The UK is already the second largest bilateral humanitarian donor to this crisis. If we can secure the access needed to Aleppo and other besieged areas, we stand ready to accelerate over £23 million of aid for the UN to distribute on the ground to help the most vulnerable in the hardest-to-reach parts of Syria.

Turning to the migration crisis, the Home Secretary will be giving a statement on Calais shortly. At the European Council, I confirmed that the UK will continue to provide practical support to our European partners, including through our naval presence in the Aegean and the Mediterranean. As part of that effort, HMS Echo will take over from HMS Enterprise in the central Mediterranean early next year. However, I also reiterated the case that I made last month at the United Nations for a new global approach to migration based on three fundamental principles: first, ensuring that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach; secondly,
improving the way we distinguish between refugees and economic migrants; and thirdly, developing a better overall approach to managing economic migration, which recognises that all countries have the right to control their borders and that all countries must commit to accepting the return of their own nationals when they have no right to remain elsewhere. This new approach includes working more closely with both source and transit countries, and the Council agreed to do more to help those countries prevent illegal migration and to return migrants who have no right to stay in EU countries.

On trade, I am determined that as we leave the EU, Britain will be the most passionate, the most consistent and the most convincing advocate of free trade anywhere in the world, so as we look beyond our continent, we will seize the opportunities of Brexit to forge an ambitious and optimistic new role for Britain in the world. As part of this, I have been clear that the UK is already discussing our future trading relationships with third countries. As I made clear to the other member states last week, this will not undermine the EU’s trade agenda. In fact, it is now even in competition with it, and for as long as we remain a member of the EU, we will continue to buck the EU’s free trade negotiations.

I share everyone’s disappointment over the stalled talks between the EU and Canada, and we will, of course, do anything we can to try to help get those discussions back on track. I remind those who suggest that these difficulties have a bearing on our own future negotiations that we are not seeking to replicate any existing model that any other country has for its trade with the European Union. We will be developing our own British model—a new relationship for the UK with the EU—for when we are outside the EU, a deal that is ambitious and bold for Britain.

I updated the European Council on our position on Brexit. I have said that we will invoke article 50 no later than the end of March next year, and that as part of the withdrawal process, we will put before Parliament a book once and for all the European Communities Act. The legislation that gives direct effect to all EU law in Britain will no longer apply from the date upon which we formally leave the European Union, and the authority of EU law in Britain will end.

The Government will give Parliament the opportunity to discuss our approach to leaving the European Union. In addition to regular updates from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my own statements following Council meetings, and the deliberations of the new Committee on Exiting the European Union, the Government will make time available for a series of general debates on the UK’s future relationship with the EU. These will take place before and after the Christmas recess, and I expect will include debate on the high-level principles that the Government will pursue in the negotiations.

Members on all sides will recognise that the Government must not show their hand in detail as we enter these negotiations, but it is important that Members have this opportunity to speak on the issues that matter to their constituents as we make our preparations to leave the EU. Although we have not yet formally started the Brexit negotiations, I made it clear at last week’s European Council that my aim is to cement Britain as a close partner of the EU once we have left. I want the deal we negotiate to reflect the kind of mature, co-operative relationship that close friends and allies enjoy; a deal that will give British companies the maximum freedom to trade with, and operate within, the European market, and allow European businesses to do the same here; a deal that will deliver the deepest possible co-operation to ensure our national security and the security of our allies; a deal that is in Britain’s interests and the interests of all our European partners. But it will also be a deal that means we are a fully independent, sovereign nation, able to do what sovereign nations do, which means we will, for example, be free to decide for ourselves how we control immigration. It will mean our laws are made not in Brussels but here in this Parliament, and that the judges interpreting those laws will sit not in Luxembourg but in courts right here in Britain.

The negotiations will take time. There will be difficult moments ahead, and as I have said before, it will require patience and some give and take. But I firmly believe that if we approach this in a constructive spirit, we can ensure a smooth departure. We can build a powerful new relationship that works both for the UK and for the countries of the EU, and we can secure the deal that is right for the British people, whose instruction it is our duty to deliver. I commend this statement to the House.

3.46 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of the statement she has just given us.

Funnily enough, I, too, was in Brussels last Thursday, meeting socialist leaders and their counterparts. I have to say I was given a little longer to speak than the five minutes the Prime Minister had at the dinner that evening, and I had it at a more reasonable time of the day.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): And listened to.

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed, I was listened to very carefully by all those around the table.

I made it clear to the other leaders that Britain should continue to be a full and active member of the European Union until negotiations on our exit are complete. I think the Prime Minister was trying to send the same message, but the manner in which she conveyed it was rather different, as she seemed not to be trying to build the consensus that is necessary or to shape a future relationship with the European Union that is beneficial to everybody. She had a very different approach.

The message that came to me loud and clear from European leaders last week was that the tone taken by this Tory Government since their Tory party conference earlier this month has damaged our global reputation and lost us a lot of good will, not just in Europe but around the world. Although the Prime Minister’s words may have appeased the hard-line voices behind her, the approach she and her party have taken has only spread anger and resentment all across Europe. I do not believe that we will get the best deal for this country by using threats, by hectoring or by lecturing the European Union. For these negotiations to succeed, the Government need to adopt a slightly more grown-up approach.
For negotiations to succeed, Britain needs a plan. What is clear to everybody— European leaders, non-governmental organisations and business—is that, quite clearly, the Government do not have one.

Can the Prime Minister tell the House if any progress has been made since the Council meeting last week? Is she willing to tell us whether access to the single market is a red line for her Government or not? She has made it clear that she wants to end freedom of movement, but has not been clear to business about what will be in its place, causing uncertainty for business and for the many EU nationals who reside in this country and make such a great contribution to our economy. Can she tell us if her Government are supporting moves by senior Conservatives to amend the great repeal Bill by adding a sunset clause, allowing Ministers to strip away EU laws on workers’ rights and environmental protection in the years that succeed the exit from the European Union? Can she also tell us how the Government plan to make up the shortfall in funding to the regions resulting from the loss of structural funding to vital capital programmes all over this country?

One week, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will say one thing; the next week, the Chancellor will say another. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister says very little, other than, “Brexit means Brexit” and “We will not provide a running commentary.” The rest of the world looks on and concludes that Britain has not got a clue. The truth is that this is not a soft Brexit, or even a hard Brexit; it is simply a chaotic Brexit.

With all that uncertainty and all those mixed messages, confidence in the economy falls day by day and the British people become more worried about their future. Two weeks ago, the Treasury said that leaving the single market would lead to a £66 billion loss to the economy. The trade deficit is widening and the value of the pound is falling. The FTSE has already fallen by 18%, resulting in industries, including the auto industry, delaying vital investment decisions and the banking sector looking to relocate. That indecision and poor economic management is starting to hit our economy severely, weakening our hand as we walk into the most important negotiations for many generations.

We on the Labour Benches respect the referendum result and accept that Britain must leave the European Union. We also understand that this will be a monumental exercise, with the decisions made now affecting the lives of British people for years to come. The Prime Minister appeared to make some sort of concession about parliamentary scrutiny. In her reply, I would be grateful if she would explain the exact nature of the debates that will take place each side of the Christmas recess.

We as an Opposition will not just stand by and let this Government choose the terms of Brexit unopposed. It is our duty to scrutinise and to make sure that this Government have a Brexit plan for this country, not just for the Eurosceptics sitting behind the Prime Minister. We will continue to push for this Parliament to have a very full say in the matter, whatever happens in the debates around the time of the Christmas recess.

Today the French authorities begin the formal closure of the Calais camp, and I would like to take this opportunity to welcome those children who have already arrived in this country, as well as others who have family connections. The camp—I have seen it for myself—has become a hellish place where a few of the world’s most vulnerable people have come to try to survive and to call it their home. Yet it remains unclear what process and timetable the Government are working under to bring together children who are entitled, under international law and the Dubs II amendment, to refuge in the UK.

I reiterate the urgency in the letter that I sent last week to the Prime Minister, asking her to intervene personally on behalf of our country and to be open and accommodating to those children. I am grateful for the reply that I received an hour ago, but will the Prime Minister be more precise about the timetable for allowing children and others who have family connections to come to this country, and will she ensure that Britain does not evade its responsibility to help those who have suffered from the biggest global displacement since the end of world war two? The displacement is primarily caused by atrocities in Syria, and we utterly and totally condemn indiscriminate bombing. The only solution in Syria is a political one.

These issues are the ones that future generations will look back on when it comes to defining this political generation. If we continue to approach the challenges that we face in a divisive and aggressive manner, they will only grow larger. If, instead, we work together—in this House and with our European partners and the rest of the world—to help those desperate people around the globe, we may quickly find that the large problems that we face today will appear smaller than we first thought.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman said at the beginning of his response to my statement that he had been over in Brussels last Thursday, meeting various socialist leaders who listened to him. I suppose that, from his point of view, it is good to know that somebody is listening to him.

May I address the last two issues to which the right hon. Gentleman referred? As I said in my statement, and as he knows, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will make a statement on Calais and our response to the issue of unaccompanied minors, bringing children to the United Kingdom and the details involved. All I will say now is that we have been working very carefully, for a considerable time, with the French Government, not only to improve matters in relation to Calais, but to ensure that we abide by our requirements, under the Dublin regulations, to bring to the UK children—unaccompanied minors—who have family links here. That process has speeded up. We have put in extra resources from the Home Office and we have seen more children brought here. We have also adopted a scheme to bring 3,000 vulnerable children from the region—the middle east and north Africa—to the United Kingdom, working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. We are putting in place the Dubs amendment—the Immigration Act 2016 proposals—which require us first to negotiate and discuss with local authorities their ability to receive children in the United Kingdom. The overriding aim of everyone in the House should be to ensure that it is in the best interests of the children who are being looked at and dealt with. It is no help for those children if we cannot properly provide for them when they come to the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman did not discuss the wider migration crisis, other than to make a reference in which he said it was mainly due to Syrian refugees.
What we have seen in the migration crisis is large numbers of people moving, not from Syria but mainly from parts of Africa, which is why the United Kingdom has consistently argued for more work upstream to stop the numbers of people coming through and to ensure that people have opportunities in source and transit countries, rather than requiring to come here to the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman made a reference to the indiscriminate bombing in Aleppo. I assume that he was referring to Russian action as well as to Syrian regime action. It was important that the UK put that matter on the table for the agenda of the European Council, which made the agreements that it did.

Coming on to Brexit arrangements, the right hon. Gentleman referred to the tone since the Conservative party conference. I have to tell him that when I was in the European Council last week a number of European leaders commended the speech that I gave at the conference, including one or two socialist leaders who may have talked to him.

The right hon. Gentleman says that we do not have a plan. We have a plan, which is not to set out at every stage of the negotiations the details of those negotiations, because that would be the best way to ensure that we did not get the best deal for the UK. He talked about free movement, and I notice that at the weekend the shadow Foreign Secretary once again refused to say what the Labour party’s position on free movement was and whether it would bring an end to it.

The right hon. Gentleman talked about indecision. I have to say to the Leader of the Opposition that he could not decide whether we should be in or out of the European Union, and he could not decide when we should invoke article 50. The only thing we know about his position is that he would have unfettered immigration into this country—the very thing that the British people have told us they do not want. Unlike him, the Conservative party is listening to the British people.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): In congratulating my right hon. Friend on her principled stand in implementing the verdict of the British people, despite the doom and gloom that pours out from parts of the media, may I ask whether she is aware that last week the Chairman of the European Parliament’s Committee on Budgets stated that the EU was too intrusive, it broke its own rules, its members did not trust one another and that it needed, as he put it, an electric shock? Does she agree that the EU itself is in deep trouble? It knows it, and the British people got it right.

**The Prime Minister:** One of the challenges for the 27 remaining states of the European Union is to decide the shape and way in which the EU acts as it goes forward. They have seen the views of the British people, and that a number of elements led the British people to decide to leave the EU. It is for the remaining 27 to think carefully how they want to take the EU forward in future.

**Angus Robertson** (Moray) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. As she knows, 62% of voters in Scotland voted to remain in the European Union. Since then, we have heard regularly that apparently Scotland matters to the UK Government. Indeed, we hear that Scotland is an equal partner in the United Kingdom. Given that, I imagine that the Prime Minister must have raised it at the European Union Council meeting, but I am sorry that the Prime Minister herself has not mentioned it in her statement today, so can she perhaps tell the House which specific issues raised by the Scottish Government she shared at the EU Council meeting?

Today, the Prime Minister held meetings in relation to the Council with the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They have reacted since with frustration. The Welsh First Minister, Carwyn Jones, has said:

“If the UK government cannot negotiate an agreed position with the devolved administrations then it has little hope of negotiating a good Brexit deal with 27 EU countries.”

Scotland’s First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said that she had received “no more information or detail” about the UK’s negotiating position. The Institute for Government has warned that imposing a settlement on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland may result in “a serious breakdown in relations between the four governments and nations of the UK”.

The Prime Minister cannot pretend to take the interests and concerns of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and for that matter Gibraltar seriously. Either she will or she won’t and, if she won’t, Scotland is absolutely right to hold an independence referendum and we will protect our place in Europe.

**The Prime Minister:** The right hon. Gentleman asked me to take seriously the views of the Scottish Government and indeed of the other devolved Administrations. That was precisely why we were sitting round in the Joint Ministerial Council plenary session this morning. It is precisely why I have said to the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland that we will hold more of those meetings, so that we have a greater level of communication with those Governments.

What I want is for us, in determining the UK’s position—because it will be the UK that will be negotiating with the EU our future relationship—to take into full account and understand properly the impacts and the particular issues that are of concern to the devolved Administrations. That is precisely what we discussed today. It is precisely what we are going to be discussing in detail with them over the coming weeks and months. Of course there are particular positions in Northern Ireland. The issue of the border with the Republic of Ireland is a specific concern that we are aware of and working on, and it is that understanding that we want for the future.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the possibility of yet another referendum in relation to Scottish independence. I suggest, if he wants to ensure the future prosperity of the Scottish economy, that he just look at the fact that, actually, Scotland has more imports and trade arrangements with the rest of the UK than it does with the EU. Her first and foremost desire should be to remain part of the UK.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): I strongly welcome the Prime Minister’s statement. Will she confirm that this Parliament and the last Government gave the decision
to the British people on EU membership, so surely it is now the duty of this Parliament smoothly to implement their wishes?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. This Parliament voted six to one for the British people to decide whether we should leave or remain in the EU. The British people gave their verdict. It is now our job to get on with it and to make a success of it.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncast er Central) (Lab): In preparation for the Council meeting, did the Prime Minister commission any English regional impact assessments of Brexit? DB Cargo UK, whose headquarters are in Doncaster, last week announced 893 redundancies, stating, and I quote from a letter to the ASLEF trade union:

“The Brexit effect means investment decisions on major infrastructure projects...have been delayed or stopped altogether and customers have decreased or cancelled orders.”

Therefore, will the Prime Minister undertake to publish Brexit regional impact assessments? How will she ensure that the voice of the English regions is heard during Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady makes an important point about the impact that Brexit will have on the economy generally as we go through this period of negotiations. Although people often talk about the impact on Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, there will of course be potential impacts on different parts of the United Kingdom. The Department for Exiting the European Union is talking to different industrial sectors and to agriculture throughout the UK precisely to understand what the priorities are and what the impact might be to ensure that when we negotiate the deal we negotiate the best possible deal—one that is right not just for the four nations but for the country and that works for everyone.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the very positive message she delivered in Brussels about future co-operation and about free trade, and, in particular, her desire to continue tariff-free trade between us and Europe. Did any of her European colleagues advocate to her the return of tariffs on trade between us and Europe?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. I know that he has long been an advocate not only of our leaving the European Union but of the trade possibilities that would be available to us thereafter. We did not have a detailed discussion about the matters to which he refers, precisely because we have not yet started the formal negotiations.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister is about to embark on a very complex set of negotiations with her European counterparts. Everybody recognises that she will not want to reveal the details of her negotiating hand, but that is very different from setting out her objectives, which I hope will contain a lot more detail than just high-level principles. May I ask the Prime Minister to give the House an undertaking that she will publish her negotiating objectives in time for the House and the new Select Committee to consider them before she presents them to the other member states?

The Prime Minister: I have set out the objectives that we wish to aim for in the negotiation that we will undertake. I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on having been elected as Chairman of the new Select Committee, and his Committee will of course be looking at a whole variety of issues to do with Brexit. There are in fact already more than 30 different reviews and investigations being undertaken by Parliament into various aspects of Brexit, so Parliament is going to have every opportunity to consider the various issues involved.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Rolls-Royce, a magnificent British company, employs a number of my constituents and offers many of them fantastic apprenticeships. I went to see them on Friday and they told me about their concerns, which are shared throughout the whole of the aerospace sector and other sectors, such as the automotive sector, about the consequences of our nation leaving—if it does—the single market and the customs union. Will the Prime Minister give an assurance to British businesses that she will listen to their needs and concerns as we now move to leave the European Union?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the quality of businesses that we have here in the United Kingdom. Rolls-Royce is one of those businesses that sets a fine example, including in the way it takes on apprentices. The way in which it has contributed to the growth of our economy is very important. I and all those involved in the negotiations will be listening to business. That work has already started and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has already been holding those discussions. I have held a number of roundtables with business to hear their concerns from them. The overwhelming view that has come to me is that, given that we have taken the decision to leave the European Union, business wants to work with us to make sure that we make every success of the opportunities to us outside the EU.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): In her discussions with fellow European Council members, was the Prime Minister able to spell out that despite the complicated negotiations ahead it is quite clear that the British people expect the next general election in 2020 to represent the final vote and say on our immigration policy, the final vote and say on our trade policy and the final vote and say over UK laws?

The Prime Minister: I have said on a number of occasions that the vote to leave the European Union was a vote to ensure that we can have control over our budget, control over our laws and control over the rules on immigration that we set out.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Since it is clear from the Prime Minister’s welcome endorsement of free trade that she will seek the closest possible engagement for a sovereign country with the European single market, does she agree that this objective would be better served by lobbying our partners than by throwing dust in the eye of the commentariat in this country?
The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that it is important that we recognise that the work that will be done will be done sitting around the table with our European partners and negotiating with them. There will obviously be comments made in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in public about what is happening, but what will matter is the discussions that will take place sitting around that table.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. It is a sad day when a Government are willing to compromise the safety and security of their citizens to appease the dangerous and irrational ideology of a few, so will she confirm now that we will remain an active member of Europol and that we will urgently opt in to this critical aspect of European cross-border security and policing, for which the regulations were confirmed in May this year, to defend ourselves from terrorists and to combat organised crime, including drug trafficking, paedophilia and people trafficking?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman does not need to tell me about the importance of our security and law enforcement co-operation with our European partners. I simply refer him to my statement, where I said:

"After we leave, we will be a confident, outward-looking country, enthusiastic about trading freely with our European neighbours and co-operating on our shared security interests, including on law enforcement and counter-terrorism work."

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I wonder whether the Chair of the Select Committee does not have a point in arguing that we should quite soon publish our objective. Is not our objective that, having adopted every last EU law into our laws, on Brexit day we want to conclude a free trade agreement? That is overwhelmingly in the interests of the rest of Europe and, incidentally, it would do so much for the poorest nations of the world, as we lead the battle in the world for free trade and prosperous world.

The Prime Minister: I agree.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Just to be crystal clear about the Prime Minister’s statement and her answers, is it her intention that the UK will be leaving the customs union?

The Prime Minister: I could give the hon. Gentleman a very lengthy answer about that—[Interruption.] From a sedentary position, the shadow Foreign Secretary talks about “the substance”. The important point about the customs union is that the way in which you deal with the customs union is not a binary choice. There are different aspects to the customs union, which is precisely why it is important to look at the detail and get the answer right, not simply make statements.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): As we proceed with new bilateral, surely none of us wants to see first-class European goods and services becoming uncompetitive. I understood from my right hon. Friend’s answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr Lilley) that there is no proposition to put tariffs between us and our European partners. Will she confirm that she is willing to offer them a free trade deal bilaterally?

The Prime Minister: At the risk of repeating yet again what I have said previously in this House, we want to get the right deal. I want to get the best possible deal with the maximum possible opportunities for British businesses to be able to trade with Europe: to operate within the single market and to trade with it in both goods and services. That is our clear aim—we want to be able to have that good trading relationship with the European Union—but there are other things that we will be doing at the same time, such as ensuring we can control the movement of people from the European Union into the UK.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): We welcome the Prime Minister’s meeting today with the First Ministers of the devolved Administrations, and we hope that that will continue to be a meaningful engagement. It is vital that we do everything we can to support industry. Would the Prime Minister care to comment on speculation that we are considering a cut in corporation tax? We would of course very much welcome that in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister: No, I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that he should not believe everything he reads in the newspapers.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): On migration, on 14 September in a communiqué to the Council the Commission said that we should establish a European travel information and authorisation system by November of this year. Greece is now objecting to the common European asylum system. Where does that leave the proposed agency?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to say to my right hon. Friend that the European Union has been looking for some time at the proposal for something that it has described as a smart borders system, looking at the model of the system used in the United States. That concerns the security of the EU’s external border. There is a separate issue, namely the arrangements in Greece relating to the asylum system. The Greek Government have made some changes to how they deal with asylum claims in response to the requirements of the EU-Turkey deal.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The Prime Minister is being uncharacteristically coy about the terms of the negotiation to leave the European Union, yet we know that once the papers are given to the Commission they will be shared with the European Parliament. Will she now undertake to share those papers with this Parliament—the sovereign Parliament—so that we can have a proper opportunity to look at the position that the Government are taking and comment upon it?

The Prime Minister: I assure the House, as I have before, that it will have a proper opportunity to look at these issues as we go through—and not just a one-off opportunity: as I have set out, there will be a number of debates that will enable Members of this House to give
more detailed comments on various aspects of the impact of Brexit on different sectors of the economy, for example.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry and drafting a report on inter-institutional relationships in the UK, so I very much welcome the meeting of the Joint Ministerial Council this morning. Will the Prime Minister say a bit more about that? Will she in future give oral statements to the House on meetings of that Joint Ministerial Council to emphasise the importance of those meetings? Did the other Administrations accept the principle that there should be a sub-committee looking at the particular issue of Brexit?

The Prime Minister: We discussed having more meetings of the plenary session, which is what I chaired this morning, and those further meetings will take place in due course. We agreed that a Joint Ministerial Council sub-committee will be set up to deal with the negotiations for leaving the European Union, looking at the issues around those negotiations. That was welcomed by all the devolved Administrations. I look forward to that being a constructive discussion around the table. As we put together the UK’s position on these matters, it is important that we fully understand the impacts on the various parts of the United Kingdom.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Prime Minister spoke in her statement of negotiating to reflect the kind of mature, co-operative relationship that close friends and allies enjoy. With that in mind, if Northern Ireland can quite rightly get a special deal and the City of London is being considered for one, why is it so politically difficult for her even to comprehend a deal for Scotland, something supported by the voters, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament?

The Prime Minister: The deal we will negotiate will be the right deal for the United Kingdom. It will take account of the concerns and the implications for various parts of the United Kingdom—different sectors of our economy, for example. The position of Northern Ireland will be a particular one because it will be the one part of the UK with a land border with a country that will be remaining inside the European Union. Given that, there is good will and a good spirit from both this Government and that of the Republic of Ireland for ensuring that future arrangements do not entail a return to borders of the past.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): The Prime Minister has a very difficult job on Brexit, but the Government’s policy of saying as little as possible will become increasingly unsustainable. The vacuum is already being filled by leaks not from the Commission but from her own Cabinet Brexit Committee colleagues. Does she accept that unless the Government can provide at least some clarity about their direction of travel soon, many financial and other businesses, which have been in touch with me about this, will respond to the uncertainty and plan for the worst, and that that will be at a considerable cost to the UK?

The Prime Minister: I am well aware of the impact uncertainty has on businesses making future decisions about investment here in the United Kingdom. It was in that light that I set out the framework of the timetable for invoking article 50. I have also given clarity to both employers and employees about the legislative position that will apply on day one when we leave the European Union: EU law will be brought into UK law, as part of the great repeal Bill, to ensure that there is no legal vacuum. The Government will continue to speak about these matters. I understand the point my right hon. Friend makes, but I think he knows full well that if the Government were to set out every jot and tittle of our negotiation position, that would be the best way to get the worst deal for the UK.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): A few moments ago, the Prime Minister failed to adequately answer the important question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton). Has the Prime Minister carried out any detailed analysis of the impact the harder form of Brexit she seeks will have on the economy in the regions, in particular the north? If she has, will she publish it? If she has not, will she concede that her anti-EU rhetoric, and her talking up of a hard Brexit over the last month, has been deeply irresponsible?

The Prime Minister: First of all, as I said in response to the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), we are looking at the impacts on different parts of the United Kingdom. The premise of the right hon. Gentleman’s question is a false one. He talks about the hard Brexit that the Government are going to take the country into. There is no suggestion of that whatsoever. [ Interruption. ] The right hon. Gentleman seems to think that all of these matters are binary decisions between either being able to control immigration or having some sort of decent trade arrangements. That is not the case. We are going to be ambitious for what we obtain for the United Kingdom. That means a good trade deal as well as control of immigration.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): It seems to me that we are much more likely to achieve our foreign policy objectives working together, so I welcome the Prime Minister’s moves to put Russia’s behaviour on the Council’s agenda. She may have noticed the very robust statement at the weekend by the new shadow Secretary of State for Defence condemning Russia’s behaviour. When does she think the Leader of the Opposition will join the shadow Secretary of State in being able to criticise Russia for the indiscriminate bombing taking place in Syria and recognise its part in the Syrian refugee crisis that we are all trying to deal with?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes a very valid and important point. I note that although the European Council discussed the role that Russia was taking in the indiscriminate bombing in Syria, the Leader of the Opposition failed to refer to Russia and its actions in Syria when he came to the Dispatch Box. I hope he will not be too slow in coming forward and making it clear that he condemns Russia’s activities; otherwise people will assume that he does not.
Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The European Investment Bank provides vital funds for affordable housing, hospitals, investment in new technologies and our utilities. We received £5.6 billion last year for projects up and down the country. Has the Prime Minister had any discussions about our stake in the European Investment Bank—we hold a sixth of the shares—and will she confirm that she will do nothing to put it at risk?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I can inform her that the Treasury is in discussions with the European Investment Bank. We recognise the important role the bank plays and want to ensure that nobody loses out as a result of the decision taken by the British people. Those discussions are ongoing with the European Investment Bank.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Although a committed European, Tony Blair once said that he faced European summits with a sinking heart, so may I say how pleased I am that the Prime Minister enjoyed her first summit? Does the experience of the Wallonians dictating to Belgium and causing a walk-out by the Canadians not show that Brexit must not only be for England and Wales but for the whole United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The decision taken to leave the EU is a decision of the United Kingdom. It will be the United Kingdom that negotiates that deal, and it will be the right deal for the United Kingdom.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Our national health service, universities and businesses are already losing talent because of the uncertainty about the status of EU citizens here in the event of Brexit. It is an uncertainty the Prime Minister could end now. Why won’t she?

The Prime Minister: I expect to be able to guarantee the status of EU citizens here in the United Kingdom. I intend and want to do that. The only circumstances in which that would not be possible would be if the status of British citizens in the European Union member states was not guaranteed. This is an issue that, as I have said previously, I hope to be able to discuss at an early stage.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): As someone who campaigned to leave the European Union, I am delighted to see my right hon. Friend’s incontrovertible commitment to ensuring the will of the British people and forging a successful future for our country outside the EU. Does she agree that her starting position in the forthcoming negotiations is a strong one, and that we are beginning to see positive revisions of growth, steadily low unemployment and exports set to outpace imports—proving the scaremongers who predicted dire recession absolutely wrong?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has seen that some of the economic data since the referendum have been more positive than was predicted prior to the vote. I will not, however, pretend that it is going to be plain sailing in the future. There will be ups and downs, and there will be difficult moments in the negotiations, as I have said. What is clear is that we will maintain a clear focus on delivering what the British people want, which is to leave the European Union.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In her elliptical words on migration, is the Prime Minister alluding to the UK and EU’s interest in making President Bashir, indicted by the International Criminal Court, a partner in managing migration and countering terrorism? She needs to be more explicit about what she and her colleagues envisage from the Khartoum process, and what it means for the hordes of refugees from Sudan and through Sudan.

The Prime Minister: The European Union is looking initially at working with a small number of African countries to ensure that support is available to reduce the number of people who wish to move to Europe. The Khartoum process is an important element of the work that is being done. The UK has consistently said that we need to operate upstream. That is about working with source countries, working with the transit countries and dealing with the organised crime groups that are engaged in these horrific crimes of people smuggling and human trafficking which are leading to misery. As I say, the EU is looking at dealing initially with a small number of countries, but of course we recognise that it is difficult to return people to some countries. It is important to accept the principle and start to put into practice the process of working with people upstream.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Technically, it seems that the UK cannot enter into trade deals with third-party countries while we are still a member of the EU. It is also generally acknowledged that we will start to do this at some point before we leave. Is this an issue that my right hon. Friend has looked at? Is there some timetable to work to here? Was it mentioned at the summit?

The Prime Minister: As far as the summit is concerned, my point was that any discussions on trade deals with third countries are not in competition with what the EU is doing. We continue to press for the EU-Japan deal and we continue to press the benefits of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership around the European Union table. My hon. Friend is right that there is a limit to what we can do when it comes to entering into a trade arrangement before we have left the EU, but that does not mean that we cannot scope out negotiations and start to have those discussions, which indeed we are doing with a number of countries.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister made quite a revealing statement today when she said that she will not seek to replicate any parts of the Canadian-European Union trade deal. We know that that is stalling over guarantees for labour, environmental and consumer protection. So we know what the right hon. Lady is ruling out; will she now tell us what she is ruling in?

The Prime Minister: Nice try, but I did not say that I was ruling out bits of the Canadian deal. What I said was that we would not replicate the EU-Canada deal, just as we are not trying to replicate the Norway model or the Switzerland model. What we are trying to do, and what we will do, is to deliver the deal that is right for the UK.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her approach to her first EU summit. Some 61% of people in Kettering voted to
leave the European Union and they voted to leave the whole thing, so that we get back control over our laws, our budget, our borders and our trade policy. While there might be 500 Members of this House who were remainers and are now remoaners, she is acting on behalf of the British people in trying to get the best deal for this country.

The Prime Minister: All I would say to my hon. Friend is that, regardless of which side of the debate Members were on before 23 June, we should all accept the voice of the British people and put that into practice.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on her handling of her first European Union summit. I will not ask her whether she enjoyed it, but does she accept that millions of people who voted to leave—including, let us not forget, millions of Labour voters—will only believe that we are really leaving when we invoke article 50? Will she assure the House that she will not be taken in by those who want to delay and delay and delay in the hope that somehow, somewhere, they will get another referendum?

The Prime Minister: I have made it very clear that there is no question of another referendum. While I felt that it was right for us to take some time to prepare before the start of the negotiations through the invoking of article 50, it is also true that, as the hon. Lady says, members of the public will want to see article 50 invoked so that they know that this is going to happen. That is why I think that the timetable for invoking it by the end of March 2017 is the right one.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The people of Somerset are rejoicing at the clarity of the Prime Minister’s approach to leaving the European Union, the European Court of Justice will have no jurisdiction of any kind whatsoever as the final arbiter of any UK law?

The Prime Minister: When we leave the European Union, the UK laws will be determined here in the UK. It will be British judges sitting here in the UK who opine on the application of those laws, and it will be this House that determines the legislation that covers the British people.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Given that our European partners have not yet committed themselves to trade negotiations alongside negotiations on article 50, what assurances can the Prime Minister give British businesses that in March 2019, when we leave the European Union, they will not face World Trade Organisation rules and tariffs?

The Prime Minister: We are seeking not just to negotiate the exit from the European Union, but to be able with the new relationship with the European Union. As I have said, our ambition and intention in doing that are to ensure that we get the best possible deal in relation to trade with, and operation within, the European market. That is what the whole Government are working on.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The terrible migration problem that we are currently seeing is largely due to human trafficking gangs. One of the great legacies of the former Prime Minister, and indeed the former Home Secretary, is that we now lead the fight against human trafficking. Does the Prime Minister agree, however, that we must build relationships not just with the European Union but with all European countries if we are to deal with this evil trade?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has taken a particular interest in the issue of human trafficking, and has done excellent work in encouraging activity that reduces and indeed stops it. He is right: there are countries such as Albania where it is important for us to operate, and, indeed, the Government have been working with them to try to reduce human trafficking. It is also important for us to work with countries such as Nigeria, which are often sources for the trafficking of young women, in particular, into sexual exploitation here in the UK, to reduce the number of opportunities for the criminal gangs to ply their horrific trade.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I pursue the point made by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)? The situation in Libya is becoming beyond a crisis: 150,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean, and 3,000 have died on the way. Was there any discussion about sending the High Representative, Federica Mogherini—herself an Italian—to Tripoli, perhaps with our Foreign Secretary, to try and work directly with the Libyan Government to deal with human traffickers, but also to prevent people from setting off in the first place?

The Prime Minister: The European High Representative has been making a number of visits to countries in north Africa that are either source countries or transit countries for the migration crisis that we have seen in Europe. The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that many people are coming across from Libya into Italy. I am pleased that it was the United Kingdom that was instrumental in getting the United Nations Security Council resolution that has enabled action off the Libyan coast to be taken, as well as rescuing thousands of people. Sadly, people are still dying in the Mediterranean, but the Royal Navy has been involved in the breaking up of boats that have been used by the criminal gangs. This is an ongoing activity, however, and we need to take every step we can to stop this terrible trade in human beings that brings so much misery.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): The University of Portsmouth in my constituency depends on an interchange of people and ideas with EU countries and other countries around the world. What action will the Government take to reassure students and academics that the UK universities sector will remain open and inclusive?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that Britain is open for business and that our universities sector is open for those sorts of exchanges. This is precisely what we have done in relation to people coming to the United Kingdom from outside the European Union. I hope that we have given some reassurance to the universities in relation to the arrangements that they put in place with other EU member states prior to our leaving.
We have made it clear that when funding arrangements are put in place that meet our priorities and provide value for money, they will continue beyond the point at which we leave.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I suggest to the Prime Minister that people believe that she is going to lead this country out of Europe and that they certainly do not judge her on when she is going to activate article 50—if they know what the hell article 50 means. In those circumstances, and given that at time goes on we will realise the enormity of the task, may I suggest that she invokes article 50 by March next year only if it is truly in the interests of this country to do so?

The Prime Minister: I would simply say to the right hon. Gentleman, as I said in earlier response, that the British people want to see action being taken to ensure that we leave the European Union. We are doing the preparatory work, and although I have not set a specific date in the first quarter of next year, I believe that the decision to invoke article 50 by the end of March is the right one.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I too rejoice that my right hon. Friend’s iron resolve that “Brexit means Brexit” is sending a clear message to the British people. May I invite her to remind the country that, if we remain in the single market when we leave, we will no longer be in the taxi but tied up in trade within the European market, but that we also put in place the other things I believe were a requirement of the British people in their vote, such as control of immigration.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Does not the decision in the referendum deserve similar respect to the public majority in favour of the name Boaty McBoatface? Does the Prime Minister notice there has been a strong movement in public opinion in Wales against Brexit because people realise the promises of the Brexiteers will not be honoured and they now see the effects on the Welsh economy? There is going to be an awful result in Ireland to fixed, hard borders that will not be enforceable and will be hugely expensive, and the Prime Minister is ignoring the views of the people of Scotland. Does she not think her little Englander myopia will lead to the break-up of the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, and this Government are putting that into practice. The hon. Gentleman and others can try all they like to reverse that decision and to delay the implications and the application of that decision—to find ways to weasel around the decision that was taken. The British people spoke. This Parliament said to the British people, “It is your choice.” They chose; we now will do it.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): India invests more in the UK than the rest of the EU combined and has spent the last nine years trying to negotiate an EU deal. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to visit India to boost trading links between our two countries, noting that the Confederation of Indian Industry stated that an agreement between us “would be almost made in heaven”?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is very perceptive because in fact I will be visiting India in early November, and I am pleased to say I will be taking a trade delegation with me, but it will be focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises to try to ensure we boost the relationships between SMEs here in the UK with the important Indian market.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Russia’s behaviour in Syria has already been utterly despicable, but it was particularly worrying to see the Admiral Kuznetsov sailing through the English channel this weekend probably on its way to smash what is left of Aleppo into smithereens. I am delighted the Prime Minister wants to have a strong position with European colleagues in relation to Russia, but there is one thing we in this country can do ourselves, which the Americans have done as well: to say that anybody involved in the murder of Sergei Magnitsky or the corruption he unearthed is not welcome in this country and will not come to this country.

The Prime Minister is being advised by others and will end up going back to the old Cameron position, but may I suggest to her that this is something we could do and it would make a difference?
The Prime Minister: This is an issue the hon. Gentleman has campaigned long and hard on. He has asked this question of David Cameron in the past when he was Prime Minister and he has asked it of me as Home Secretary, and I am sure he has asked it of previous Foreign Secretaries. We have our own rules and regulations in terms of how we determine who is able to enter the UK. The hon. Gentleman talks about the old position; it was the position of the UK Government and it remains the position of the UK Government.

Mr Speaker: There is much to be said for a bit of repetition, which is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The majority of voters in South Dorset are also congratulating the Prime Minister on her stance. Does she agree that voters of EU countries will scrutinise their politicians very carefully as we negotiate our exit and vote accordingly at the next opportunity they have if they perceive their leaders doing anything to endanger jobs and prosperity to maintain a flawed political project?

The Prime Minister: As I said in response to an earlier question, it is important that the leaders of the remaining 27 think about what the nature of the EU going forward should be. But I have also been clear with them that from the UK’s point of view the vote was not an attempt to break up the whole of the EU. We have an interest in seeing a strong EU and in working with it, with the UK continuing to be a strong and dependable partner. But I do think other leaders inside the EU should consider the message given by the British people when they voted on 23 June.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The head of the British Bankers Association, a former adviser to the current Foreign Secretary, has warned that many of Britain’s biggest banks are preparing to relocate in early 2017, putting at risk some 70,000 jobs, many of which are in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister tell us how the Government plan to ensure that the financial sector on the issues that it believes are the priorities for the future so that we can ensure that we get something in the best interests of the United Kingdom, to our economy as a whole and, obviously, to particular constituencies regarding individuals and their employment. We are in discussions with the Government Department to do the work of understanding not just what is important for us here in the UK, but what is of importance for the 27 member states of the European Union. The deal will be not just about the UK, but something that works for both sides.

The Prime Minister: I have been clear in a number of responses this afternoon about the importance we place on being able not just to trade with but to operate within the European market—for goods and for services. I say that precisely because I am aware of the importance of financial services to the United Kingdom, to our economy as a whole and, obviously, to particular constituencies regarding individuals and their employment. Being able to operate within the European Union is important to other parts of our professional services, such as legal services. We are in discussions with the financial sector on the issues that it believes are the priorities for the future so that we can ensure that we are able to get the best possible deal in the negotiations.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in a free society there is never an obligation on anyone—certainly not Members of Parliament—to change their views just because a majority has voted a different way? However, there is an obligation on all of us, including those of us who voted to remain, to work in the national interest and not to undermine it by tying the hands of the Prime Minister and the Government in a way that would never happen in commerce or in private negotiations.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks with the voice of experience on this matter. That is exactly the point. If we are to get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom, it is important that we are able to enter the negotiations not having set out a whole series of red lines and not having set out our negotiating position in detail. We need to be able to negotiate the best possible deal for the UK. Tying the Government’s hands would be the best way of getting the worst deal for the UK.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister met the leaders of the devolved Governments this morning, but uncertainty is what is giving everyone doubt about Brexit, particularly in Northern Ireland where one member of the Executive is for in and one for out—we do not know where we are going. Who do we have on the ground in Europe ensuring that we are gathering intelligence and advice and that we are ready to fight our corner and ensure that we get something in the best interests of the whole UK?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we understand the possibilities of our future relationship with the European Union. That is why I thought that was important in the negotiations, which will be lengthy. I recognise that there will of course be an element of uncertainty until we have agreed the deal, but that is why I set up an entirely new Government Department to do the work of understanding not just what is important for us here in the UK, but what is of importance for the 27 member states of the European Union. The deal will be not just about the UK, but something that works for both sides.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): On Syria, paragraph 20 of the European Council conclusions talks about the “resumption of a credible political process”. Is that in line with Geneva I and Geneva II, the peace process and the transition to democracy? We must ensure that the opposition get the right assurances about a fair deal rather than their having to go to the talks and accept a diktat from the Russians because of their upper hand in the aggression and their killing of civilians on the ground.

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, we want the ability to return to talks that can lead to a proper political transition in Syria. The United Kingdom has played an important role and will continue to play an important role in supporting the opposition. Only two or three weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary hosted Syria opposition parties here in London, where they set out their future aims and vision for Syria. It was important for us to support them then and we will continue to do so.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that she wanted the UK to be the most passionate, consistent and committed advocate of free trade anywhere in the world. Would that not be best demonstrated by...
[Mary Creagh]

the UK remaining a member of the single European market of £9 trillion, protecting the jobs and incomes of my constituents? Does she also agree that following the same process as Canada—seven years to negotiate a trade deal only to see it fall at the eleventh hour because it was rejected by one of Belgium’s seven Parliaments—is not something that we should aspire to?

The Prime Minister: I understand that although the discussions on the Canadian deal have stalled, attempts are still being made to ensure that that deal can go ahead, and we would encourage it to go ahead. On the wider point the hon. Lady makes, I am sorry but I am going to repeat what I have said previously: people put this purely in terms of some variation of access to or membership of the single market, but what matters is what the trading relationship is. If we make ourselves hidebound, saying that it has to be in this particular form at this stage, it will not be open to us to negotiate the best possible deal. What matters is that we have the maximum possible ability to trade with and operate within the single European market, and to do that across both goods and services. That is what we are aiming for.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that when negotiating for Brexit it is important not only to negotiate collectively with the member states, through the European Council, but, equally if not more importantly, to have conversations individually with each member state, as has been shown by the experience of negotiation on the Canadian trade deal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. and learned Friend makes a very important point. That is precisely why both I and other Ministers are not just interacting with the European Union in its various forms—the Council and so forth; I have made a number of trips to meet my opposite numbers in various member states of the European Union. We will continue those discussions with those countries bilaterally because we want a good, strong relationship with them bilaterally when we leave the European Union, as well as having a good relationship with the EU.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): A recent report by Common Vision highlighted that young people are more internationalist in their outlook and, as such, voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. What discussions did the Prime Minister have with her European counterparts about protecting the opportunities that the EU provides for young people in my constituency, across Scotland and throughout the UK?

The Prime Minister: Of course the negotiations have not yet formally started with the European Union, but the sort of deal we are talking about, and the sort of deal we want to get that will enhance prosperity and ensure jobs for the future, will be good for all generations here in the UK.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Have our European partners realised that a new UK-EU free trade arrangement will be good as a positive-sum game for all concerned, given that 22 of 27 of them have a trade surplus with us? Is the Prime Minister detecting that common sense is finally starting to prevail?

The Prime Minister: I think that member states and the EU are increasingly looking at this in relation not just to what it means for the UK, but what it means for them as well. I have said consistently that this is not just about the UK, in some sense, being a supplicant to the remaining 27 of the EU; it is about us negotiating a relationship that works for both sides.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Article 50 puts any country seeking to leave the EU at a disadvantage, in that if you have not got the deal you want within two years, you could flip on to trading with the EU on World Trade Organisation terms, putting your companies and sectors at huge disadvantage. With that in mind, we need to create a certain amount of good will from our European partners, and making them think that their EU citizens living here are the cause of all our problems is not the way to build good will. I accept that the Prime Minister will want to find reforms to the way that immigration works, but will she guarantee that her Cabinet—I see the Home Secretary sitting next to her—will exercise more care in the language they use on these matters?

The Prime Minister: The Government, and all Ministers in the Government, exercise every care in the language they use in these matters. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that the image he portrays of the impression we have given for EU citizens is quite the wrong one; I have been very clear about our expectations and intentions in relation to EU citizens living here in the United Kingdom. But he must accept, as must other Members of this House, that we also have a duty to British citizens who are living in EU member states, and that is why I want to ensure that the status of both is guaranteed.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend raised the matter of the crisis in Syria at the European Council, but I am wondering whether any spotlight was put on the crisis in Yemen. Approaching 7,000 people have been killed there, and when 7,000 people were killed in July 1995 at Srebrenica the international community moved into high gear to sort it out. Does the European Union have any plans to try to sort out the appalling crisis that is happening in Yemen?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the problems that are being experienced by many people in Yemen and to what is happening in Yemen. We want to see a political solution there, just as we do in relation to Syria. That is the only way to get long-lasting peace and stability for the country. I am pleased to say that there has been at least a temporary cessation of hostilities in Yemen. Over the weekend, I spoke to the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and among the issues that I raised in that conversation was the importance of trying for all involved to sustain that cessation of hostilities.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Prime Minister has had a lot of questions about the customs union, because, for exporters into the EU, having to comply with the rules of origin from the outside would raise costs by 25%. She knows that Nissan is one of
those exporters. It has an extremely important role in the north-east. When Nissan officials left the meeting with her, they seemed much happier and satisfied with what she had said. Will she share with the House what she said to them?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the hon. Lady knows—I said this in answer to an earlier question from a Labour Member—that the customs union is a more complex issue than it at first seems when people describe it in public. We have been discussing this matter with a number of companies, and I am very clear that the intention of this Government is to ensure a competitive market and that people are able to prosper here in the United Kingdom and to add to our economic growth.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May I thank the Prime Minister for her statement and say that I entirely agree with her that, until we leave the European Union, we should continue to play our full part in its affairs, not least because I expect the EU will want us to keep paying our full contributions until we leave. Does she think that her fellow EU leaders understand that if we leave the European Union and have to fall back on WTO tariffs then, according to today’s Civitas report, EU exporters would be liable to pay £12.9 billion a year, which is more than twice the £5.2 billion a year that UK exporters would be liable to pay, and it is therefore very much in the interests of the rest of the EU to agree a tariff-free deal with us?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Of course this is not just about the United Kingdom, but about the future impact on the economies of the member states of the European Union. He is absolutely right that, as we go into the negotiations, it will be for member states to recognise that there are implications for them, and those implications could be negative for businesses and jobs in their countries. That is why it is in the interests of all of us to get the best possible deal in relation to trade.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, recently issued a statement in which he said that there will be no soft Brexit; there is either a hard Brexit or no Brexit at all. Given that the Prime Minister was just in Brussels, did she pick up on that hardening political mood music, which makes it absolutely clear that the idea of the customs union is a more complex issue than it at first seems when people describe it in public.

The Prime Minister: I repeat what I said earlier, which is that we have not yet started the negotiations, but what I found when I talked to other leaders and colleagues in the European Council at the end of last week was a recognition that this is a complex matter that we have to negotiate, and an increasing recognition that we have to ensure that the deal that we get is positive for both the European Union and the United Kingdom. I got the impression from what was being said to me that we are going to be able to sit down around that table and get the best possible deal for both sides.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): During a recent visit to Berlin with Members of the Bundestag, it was clear that there was genuine goodwill towards the United Kingdom, as well as an understanding that there are detailed negotiations ahead. There are clear shared economic interests with member states, but can my right hon. Friend confirm that there are also common security concerns relating to Russia as well as counter-terrorism issues that will help focus the minds of EU negotiators on arriving at a positive outcome in their deliberations?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Much of the discussion tends to focus on the trade relationship that we have, but there are many other areas in which we co-operate with other European Union member states, such as law enforcement, counter-terrorism and security, where we want to have a close and enduring partnership with them once we leave.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am sure the Prime Minister understands the concerns of the British medical research sector about its continued access to vital European medical research networks post-Brexit. Without revealing her hand, can she give an assurance that she has a plan to protect access for this vital research?

The Prime Minister: There is an assumption behind the hon. Gentleman’s question that the only way to access such research networks is through being a member of the European Union. Of course, there are those here in the United Kingdom who are members of a number of research networks that operate as effectively but are nothing to do with the European Union. I can assure him that that is another aspect of the future implications that we are aware of and will be taking into consideration.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): There is a dangerous political crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which has seen 6 million people die in the past 20 years. There is a crisis, too, in Burundi with extra-judicial killings happening every week, and there is in effect a bloodbath in South Sudan. All these are of great interest and concern to the European Union and the United Kingdom. Were any of these subjects discussed at the summit?

The Prime Minister: No. The subjects on the summit’s agenda were Russian action in relation to Syria, migration and trade, so the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan were not discussed, but I am well aware of the concerns of my hon. Friend and others about what has been happening, particularly in South Sudan recently. This is a matter that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is looking at closely.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Earlier the Prime Minister assured us that she was looking to raise at an early stage the concerns of UK citizens living elsewhere in the EU and of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom. Can she tell us whether she raised those concerns at an early stage last week and if not, why not?

The Prime Minister: I have said on a number of occasions, including last week, that I hope to be able to address that issue at an early stage. I repeat my earlier comments in relation to our expectation for EU citizens, and I repeat once again that it is for this House not simply to ignore the interests of British citizens who are
[The Prime Minister]

living in European Union member states. We must ensure that their rights are guaranteed, as the rights of EU citizens living here will be guaranteed.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend's statement to the House. Last Friday evening I held a public meeting in my constituency for EU nationals concerned about the Brexit vote, and was heartened by a majority seeing the opportunities of the UK leaving the EU possibly leading to reform for their home countries in the future. Given Wallonia's effective veto on the Canada-EU agreement, what discussion was there among other EU leaders about the need for EU reform?

The Prime Minister: It is up to the 27 member states to discuss among themselves the future shape that they wish the European Union to take once the United Kingdom leaves. I have raised with other leaders the importance of their paying attention to the message that was given by the UK vote to leave the European Union, but I leave it to them to discuss the future of the EU without the UK.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Last week the Treasury Committee heard from the Chancellor. We were told that the Treasury is modelling the range of options and scenarios available to the Government to look at the economic implications of those options. Today the Prime Minister confirmed that the Government are looking at the regional impacts of those options. Given the Prime Minister's apparent commitment this afternoon to a series of debates in the House of Commons, she must surely agree that that debate will be better informed if we have the evidence before us, so will she give a commitment to publish the various options, so that debate will be better informed if we have the evidence before us, so will she give a commitment to publish the various options so that this House and the public may have an informed debate about the options ahead?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we want to ensure that debates that take place in this House are as informed as possible. There is, of course, a wide variety of pieces of work being undertaken, not just by Government, in relation to the implications of leaving the European Union in different sectors and different parts of the United Kingdom.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): My right hon. Friend was absolutely right to stress that we are not leaving Europe. Indeed, would she confirm that when we leave the European Union, we will continue to play a full and active part in the Council of Europe, working together on the basis of friendship and co-operation, not political union?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The UK will be continuing to play its role in the Council of Europe. I want us to continue to have a good relationship with the member states in the EU and with the EU itself—I think that is in all our interests.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Did the Prime Minister find time in her busy weekend to emphasise to European colleagues how much we value things such as the prisoner transfer agreement, Europol and the European arrest warrant? Will she confirm that, whatever negotiating she does, nothing will lead to the watering down of those commitments?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman will know my commitment to the relationship that we have with other member states of the European Union in relation to justice and home affairs matters. I have had a lot of questions this afternoon about the detail of the discussions that I had on Brexit at the European Council. Of course, the main topics that we discussed at the European Council were Russia, migration and trade. Negotiations and discussions on the detail of our negotiations will be for the future.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The people of Boston and Skegness voted more than any others to leave the European Union, and no constituency, I am sure, approves more of the Prime Minister's approach, but does she agree that what they deserve is the speedy triggering of article 50, the speedy commencement of trade negotiations, a speedy approach to taking back control over immigration and, while we are at it, a speedy roll-out of the controlling migration fund?

The Prime Minister: I note what my hon. Friend slipped in at the end of his question. What I would say to him is that it is absolutely right and, as I said in response to a couple of questions from the Opposition earlier, important that people see that we are committed to invoking article 50, because there are those, I fear, who wish to delay the invocation of article 50 as a proxy for not leaving the European Union. It is important that we give people certainty, and that is why I have set out that we will invoke article 50 by the end of March next year.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that discussing trade at the European Council was a topic for the future. In relation to lesser duty tariffs, her chief of staff, Nick Timothy, seems to know the Government's future. In relation to lesser duty tariffs, her chief of staff, Nick Timothy, seems to know the Government's hand very well and has, indeed, declared it. He says: "We do not have to accept 'dumping' by the Chinese steel industry" and we could impose retaliatory tariffs on Chinese steel", but it is the UK Government's policy "to oppose these measures." Do the Government not have their hands tied behind their back and, indeed, are they not tying the hands of British steelworkers as we speak?

The Prime Minister: No. The Government have, in a number of ways, been supporting steel production here in the United Kingdom, as the hon. Gentleman will know—both in compensation in relation to climate change and renewables costs, and by the ability to take social issues into consideration when deciding on the procurement of steel. There is a whole range of measures that we have taken. In relation to the action that is being taken by the European Union, we decided at the end of last week that we will modernise the trade defence instruments, but we will do that in a balanced way—balancing the interests of users, producers and consumers. As I am sure he will know, the application of the lesser
duty relief has actually meant that, for certain parts of the steel industry, imports from China have dropped by 90%.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of all the European laws and regulations that the Prime Minister wants to reincorporate democratically into UK law through the great repeal Bill, which does she want to abolish or amend first?

The Prime Minister: It will be for this Parliament to decide how we deal with the regulations and laws once they have been brought into UK law, but there are two points I would make to the hon. Gentleman. It is right to bring that EU law into UK law at the point at which we leave the European Union, to ensure that there is no legal gap and that everybody has certainty of the legislation that they will be operating under. The second important point is that, once that has happened, it will be for this Parliament to decide, and to be sovereign in determining, those laws.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister enlighten us on whether her discussions touched on the subject of higher education? Are there any clues about whether UK universities will retain access to EU research projects after we leave, and about the fees status of EU students in 2018 and beyond? On the first point, we have already heard anecdotal evidence that British researchers are being turned down for Horizon 2020 funds, and my written questions to the Government on both points remain unanswered.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady will, of course, get responses to her written questions in due course. A number of people have raised with me a concern that an approach is being taken, particularly in relation to the university sector, whereby, because we have decided to leave, we should be treated somewhat differently while we are still in the European Union. It is important that we emphasise and ensure that, while we are still members of the EU, we are still treated as full members and therefore have access to those sorts of projects.

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

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Martin Docherty-Hughes.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: And here was me wanting to save the best for last.

Recently the Secretary-General of NATO called the European Union “an essential partner for NATO”, and said that NATO has every opportunity to strengthen “our unity and practical cooperation even further.” Therefore, how can a newly confirmed Brexit Prime Minister deliver security without even closer military union with the European Union, as accepted by our NATO allies?

The Prime Minister: In the quote given by the hon. Gentleman, I think the Secretary-General was talking about NATO operating and working with any defence arrangements in the European Union; it was not about the UK being part of stronger defence within the European Union. We will continue to play a leading role in NATO, as we have done over the years. We will continue to have a close relationship with the European Union, and it will be in all our interests to ensure that we work together for the collective defence of member states and of Europe.

Gavin Newlands: Why is the Prime Minister in a position seemingly to offer specific assurances to Nissan Motors on the outcome of article 50 negotiations, but not to the 3.3 million EU citizens who make such a vital contribution to our economy and our communities?

The Prime Minister: I will repeat this yet again, as the hon. Gentleman does not appear to have heard the answer when it was given previously: I expect, intend and want to be able to guarantee the status of EU citizens living in the United Kingdom, but the only circumstance in which that would not be possible is if the status of British citizens, including people from Scotland, who live in the European Union is not guaranteed in return. It is a very simple position. We cannot abandon British citizens.
5.13 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on Calais.

The French Government today began the clearance of the migrant camp. I am clear that that is in the national interests of both the UK and France. It is the start of a challenging but necessary humanitarian operation and an important step in bringing to an end the difficult situation.

Our priorities are to keep our border secure, to tackle the criminal gangs that profit from the lives of the vulnerable, and to ensure that those in the camp in need of protection are moved to places of safety. Today’s camp clearance supports all those objectives.

On 10 October, I updated the House, having just met my French counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve. We had discussed, among other things, the importance of keeping all children safe during the camp clearance operation. My officials have been working with the French authorities to ensure that that protection is provided, and UK personnel are taking an active role on the ground today, helping to move all children to a place of safety. They will continue to do so for as long as necessary.

That meeting with Monsieur Cazeneuve was one of many over the past few months, and we have made good progress to speed up the process for transferring children with a close family link to the UK. More than 80 children with a family link to the UK were transferred from France in the first nine months of this year under the Dublin regulation, but I have been pressing to go even further. The House will recall that on 10 October I stated my absolute commitment to bring to the UK as many children as possible with close family links before the closure of the camp. I also made clear my intention to transfer unaccompanied refugee children from Calais who meet the criteria of the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Act 2016.

Since my statement, working in partnership with the French, we have transferred almost 200 children, including more than 60 girls, many of whom had been identified as at high risk of sexual exploitation. They are receiving the care and support they need in the UK. I want to make it clear to the House that the Government have sought every opportunity to expedite the process to transfer children to the UK. My officials were given access to the camp to interview children only in the past week and, similarly, we have only recently received agreement from the French Government that we could bring Dubs cases to the UK. Before that, we worked closely with the French behind the scenes, but without their agreement it was not possible to make progress on taking non-family cases from Calais.

In the past seven days, my officials have interviewed 800 children in the camp claiming to have close family in the UK, working in conjunction with non-governmental organisations and charities. Every child who presented as at high risk of sexual exploitation. They are receiving the care and support they need in the UK. I want to thank the French authorities for the additional protection they have provided throughout and to put on record my gratitude for the work done by my staff in what have been pretty challenging conditions.

Until a few weeks ago, the French Government requested that we did not transfer children outside of the Dublin regulation process. Again, that was due to their concerns that it might encourage more children to come to Calais. That is why, until recently, we focused our efforts under the Dubs amendment on children in Greece and Italy, where we have 50 cases in progress. It is only in recent weeks that that has changed. Looking ahead, we will bring more children from Calais to the UK in the coming days and weeks. As well as the remaining children with close family in the UK, we will continue to transfer unaccompanied refugee children from Calais under the wider criteria of the Dubs amendment. We will follow three guiding principles in determining whom we bring to the UK from Calais under the Dubs amendment. We will prioritise those likely to be granted refugee status in the UK; we will also prioritise those 12 years old or under; and we will consider those assessed as being at a high risk of sexual exploitation. In doing that, we will also establish whether it is in each child’s best interests to come here.

Throughout this process it is important that we do not encourage more children to head to Calais, risking their lives in the hands of traffickers. That is why we will consider only those present in the camps before the start of the clearance operation today. We will continue to do that quickly, but it is essential that we carry out the proper safeguarding, age assessment and security checks, working closely with local authorities and social workers in the UK to ensure that the children are eligible and that it is in their best interests to come.

I am pleased that my French counterpart has agreed to support minors in safe facilities in France during the weeks in which we need to carry out those important checks. It is important that on arrival in the UK the identity of those closely with local authorities and they are allowed to begin their life here with the support that they need. It is crucial that we ensure that local authorities can manage the numbers coming here. As part of our commitments under the Dubs amendment we have consulted local authorities on capacity. It is clear that there is capacity to support the children we intend to take from Calais, as well as continuing to meet our other commitments. The key now is to make sure that we get those places up and running as soon as possible. I pay tribute to the work and generosity of local authorities so far in providing both the temporary and permanent support that the children requiring. However, as more children arrive in the coming weeks we will need to identify further places, and we will work with local authorities over the coming days to ensure that that happens.

While responsibility for Calais lies with the French Government, the juxtaposed controls are a vital part of the UK’s border security, and are a valuable economic link. That is why the UK Government will contribute up to £36 million to maintain the security of the controls, to support the camp clearance and to ensure in the long term that the camp is kept closed. The funding will also be used to help to keep children safe in France. That contribution is not made unconditionally and we will continue to work with the French Government to ensure that the clearance operation is full and lasting.
Work in Calais is important, but the situation there is a symptom of a wider migration crisis. We are clear about our moral responsibility to assist those who are suffering, including by providing support in conflict regions, development work upstream and protection to those who need it.

The French authorities face a huge challenge over the coming days and weeks to move people out of the camp in Calais, but let me be clear—neither Government is prepared to allow people to continue to live in those conditions, and neither Government is prepared to allow people smugglers to continue to profit from risking the lives of the people there. We will continue to support the French Government in the operation and we will continue with our progress in bringing those children with a right to come to the UK as quickly and safely as possible.

Clearing the camp is not just about our legal and moral obligations; it is also in our national interest. The rise in the number of people in the camp has led some in France to question the Le Touquet agreement. That agreement has helped us better protect our borders and ensured strong trade links between Britain and France. By clearing the camp, we can help to secure the future of the juxtaposed controls, as well as playing our part to help those most in need in Calais. I commend this statement to the House.

5.21 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): As we speak, thousands of men and women are being bussed out of Calais—one more leg in a desperate odyssey that has taken some of them half way around the world. It is worth noting that the situation in Calais represents everything that is wrong about Europe’s response to the refugee crisis. There was not enough co-operation. The French claimed that, because the migrants said they wanted to go to the UK, they were somehow not their responsibility, whereas we refused, for far too long, to go into the camp and identify those who might have a legal right to come to the UK.

The men, women and children in the Calais camp were treated by the French and the UK like pawns, but these are real people fleeing war and economic devastation, living in appalling conditions. In addition, in the absence of any proactive action by either the British or the French, those people were at the mercy of people smugglers and criminal gangs, who were in and out of the camp, as I discovered when I visited the camp in January.

It was left to charities, church groups and individual volunteers to go across and provide basic support and services in the Calais camp. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to all those selfless volunteers. I thank the UK staff now working in the camp in difficult and dangerous conditions and I congratulate the local authorities that are providing temporary and permanent support.

I accept that the Home Office has accelerated the processing of child refugees in recent weeks, but it has known for months that the camp was to close. More should have been done to persuade the French either to process all the children themselves, or allow us in. The truth is that we should have made it clear to the French that the camp should not be demolished until we had processed all the children.

The media are in uproar about the supposed failings in the processing, and commentators are in a lather about whether some of these children are seventeen and a half, eighteen and a half or, God forbid, nineteen and a half—as if being a year over the legal definition of childhood makes them miraculously immune to illness caused by freezing temperatures and raw sewage in front of their tent, fear caused by violence and the deadly attentions of sex traffickers. If the commentators who are now suggesting that these young people should be treated like cattle and have their teeth tested had made as much noise about the Government’s slowness in processing these child refugees in the first place, we would not be in the situation we are in. We know that the last time there was an eviction, more than 100 children went missing because that eviction began before their safety was guaranteed. If children go missing this time, the fear must be that they will disappear into the hands of people smugglers and sex traffickers. Can the Home Secretary give the estimated timings for processing the remaining 1,000 children left in the camp? Will she note that the Opposition regret that any new children arriving at the Calais camp will not be able to access family reunion and Dubs transfers?

I am glad to hear that work is being done in Greece and Italy, because Calais is not the only refugee camp. I have visited the camps in Lesbos in Greece. I have seen the traumatised men, women and children there. They had already risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean. These children will have seen others, perhaps family members or friends, perish at sea. These children should not feel that they have no option but to make their way across France and attempt the dangerous journey to the UK. Will the Home Secretary therefore say more about her plans to create similar expedited family reunion and Dubs transfers in countries such as Greece and Italy? How long does the Home Secretary estimate the Dubs and Dublin children will be held in the temporary accommodation centres in the UK before being reunited with their families or placed into the transfer scheme? Will there be funding and support for the local authorities that are stepping up to play their part in helping these traumatised child refugees?

This House knows that from 1999 to 2002 there was a migrant camp near Calais at Sangatte. More than 2,000 men, women and children were living in appalling conditions. The camp was closed with great fanfare 14 years ago, but this new encampment that the French are attempting to close had four times as many people and the conditions were even worse. The French might be closing this camp now, but there is an urgent need for more co-operation Europe-wide on migration issues and, as the Home Secretary noted, unless we deal with the underlying issues of poverty, civil war and ill-conceived foreign interventions, this will not be the last time that this House has to debate encampments of desperate people in appalling conditions in Calais.

I am glad that we are moving to help the child refugees. I think more could have been done earlier, despite the Home Secretary’s attempts to hide behind the French, but let us remember that all those people in that camp—which I have visited—are human beings. We will do what we can do for the children, but we need a more considered and Europe-wide strategy to deal with the tragedy of refugees moving across Europe.
Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has raised some important points. I draw her attention to some of the comments that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made about the important work that the European Union is doing, some of which we are leading on, on upstream funding to ensure that the terrible tragedy of refugees moving, quite often from east and west African countries, is stopped. We do that by being one of the largest donors and by working in partnership arrangements, and I share her view that if we can stop the scale of movement, that deals with the most important element of why people come over to Europe and then make their way across France.

I do not need reminding by the hon. Lady about the scale of misery in the camp in Calais. That is why I have made it such a priority to work with my French counterpart to see the end of that camp and, I believe, the end of the misery that has taken place there. Protecting children has always been at the forefront of what we are doing.

The hon. Lady referred to the Dubs amendment and what else we are doing to take children according to Dubs, has always been at the forefront of what we are doing. As she points out, this camp is several—four and possibly even five—times larger than Sangatte ever was. I refer to the town, which is worrying. That points to a lack of adequate planning and preparation for the evacuation on the part of the French, which does not bode well for the vulnerable people and children in the camps, who are at serious risk of getting lost in the chaos.

Finally, removing the camp does not remove the need for a long-term solution to the migrant and refugee crisis. What plans does the Home Secretary have to create similar expedited family reunion under the Dublin regulations and under Lord Dubs’s scheme.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her questions. I agree that we should thank the NGOs and the volunteers, who have done great work in the camp to protect vulnerable children. They will be integral to protecting the children during the closure of the camp over the next few days and weeks, because there is sometimes a great lack of trust between Government agencies and the refugees or asylum seekers there. Their role will therefore be critical in trying to reach a resolution.

Amber Rudd: I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement, and the news that the UK Government have now brought unaccompanied children from the camp at Calais to the UK both under the Dublin regulations and under Lord Dubs’s scheme. I also welcome her confirmation that they will continue to do so.

I congratulate the Home Secretary on the fact that she has certainly got things moving in the last couple of weeks. There has been some delay in the past, but credit where credit is due—things are moving now. I thank her for keeping me informed of what she has been doing. I am very grateful to her for her acknowledgment of the contribution made to the preparations for the children by local authorities in Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities.

I join the Home Secretary in thanking the staff who are in the camp at the moment doing difficult work. I want to add my thanks and the thanks of the Scottish National party to all the NGOs and British and Irish volunteers who have worked in the camp during the past few years, when there were no official staff there.

A number of concerns remain. There have been reports today that the Calais police commissioner has told migrants there are not enough buses to transport them to the town, which is worrying. That points to a lack of adequate planning and preparation for the evacuation on the part of the French, which does not bode well for the vulnerable people and children in the camps, who are at serious risk of getting lost in the chaos.

May I press the Home Secretary to confirm what plans the UK and French Governments have made to ensure that unaccompanied children do not get lost in the chaos and are protected from falling prey to smugglers or going missing, as we know happened last time round? May I also press her to give estimates of the timings for processing the remaining children left in the camp?

Finally, removing the camp does not remove the need for a long-term solution to the migrant and refugee crisis. What plans does the Home Secretary have to create similar expedited family reunion under the Dublin regulations and under Lord Dubs’s scheme from other EU countries, such as Greece and Italy, to stop children feeling forced to make the journey across Europe to try to get to the UK?
On protecting children, I have repeatedly stated to the French that our priority is to ensure that those children are kept safe. They have agreed to transfer all the children into a secure area as the camp is cleared. Once the children are in that secure area we should be able to expedite our interviewing process and make sure that we can keep track of the children whom we would like to transfer to the UK; frankly, over the past few days, having agreed to transfer children, it has then sometimes been difficult to find them on the day to make sure that they get on the buses. I hope that, with the children held securely in that area of the camp, that situation will improve.

On other Dubs transfers, we have learned a lot and I hope we can speed up in other areas of the world, such as Italy and Greece.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Those relatively few Members of the House who have in the past accommodated young asylum seekers in their own homes are a position to confirm to my right hon. Friend that that cannot be undertaken lightly and proper preparation needs to be made. If this humanitarian exercise is not to end in tears it is vital that the Home Secretary sticks to her guns. Will she reassure the House that before any child is admitted, every receiving family will be properly screened, and that, in the interests of national security, every young adult admitted to the United Kingdom will be screened before they are allowed to come into the country?

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has housed asylum seekers in the past, and I value his experience in this area. I reassure him that we will always make the correct safeguarding checks and will always make sure that the families are prepared. We will not take any risks, either in terms of national security or on behalf of the children who are moving here.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I also welcome the progress that the Home Secretary has made since her last statement, and her commitment to take several hundred more child refugees. I join the tributes to all those, including charities and local councils, who are making it possible for Britain to do what it has always done and help those who are most vulnerable. She will know my concern that this has started so late, and that there are therefore risks of trafficking and of those left in the camp disappearing. Will she confirm that up to 1,000 children and teenagers are expected to stay in container camps overnight tonight and that Help Refugees has warned that it is concerned that the children are still being looked after and have not been retrafficked?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises such an important point. I know he has done a lot of work in this area. He is absolutely right that there is always a risk to accepting these young women, but it is because they are at risk that we have been so keen to prioritise them. That is why, to protect them from the sort of dangers he sets out, of the nearly 200 people we have taken over the past weekend, nearly a third have been young women. I can reassure him that we will be making constant safeguarding checks. I will write to him more fully to set out exactly what we are doing.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and advance sight of it, and for her work in recent days in trying to expedite the response to this crisis. However, we should step up to the mark and challenge the suggestion that human trafficking is the cause and the source of the crisis. Human traffickers are wicked people who exploit a crisis that is global and European.

Specific to Calais, many of the vulnerable children being brought to the UK will have family somewhere, even if they are currently separated. I understand that the United Kingdom is the only European Union country that does not allow unaccompanied children with refugee status the right to sponsor immediate family, including parents, to join them. Given the importance of keeping families together, will the Home Secretary ensure that unaccompanied refugee children are able to sponsor their parents, for the purpose of refugee family reunion, if and when they are found?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is right that traffickers are a part of the problem, not the whole problem. He and I know, as the whole House does, that there are many reasons why this takes place. It starts with the upstream problem that we are trying to address, supporting African countries where a lot of these refugees are coming from, with other countries internationally. On our immigration policy on asylum, there are no plans to change it.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I would like to add my thanks to the Home Secretary for her statement. In working to transfer eligible children from
Calais to the UK, will she confirm that this is being done through a proper process with the agreement of the French, and that all the children coming over will undergo appropriate security checks?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are initially making proper checks on every individual—every child or minor—who is brought across. We have to ensure that there is safeguarding and the interest of the child is served first before bringing them over to the UK. Those checks are always being done.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on her election as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee? She will do an excellent job.

Does the Home Secretary agree that the primary responsibility for the disturbing scenes we are seeing lies with the French Government? This is happening in France. I do not believe that we in this country would have allowed the development of the camp in this way. We want this to end as quickly as possible. My concern, while welcoming her strong commitments on child protection, is that the problem will be displaced to the Hook of Holland and to Denmark. There is already evidence that the people traffickers are moving away from Calais to other areas. Can she assure the House that our small ports and airports will receive the security back-up they need to protect them from this activity?

Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman is right that this is taking place in France and is largely a problem for the French to address. It is, however, in the UK’s interests that it is addressed, that the camp is dealt with in this way, that Le Touquet is maintained and that we play an active role. He is also right to point out the danger of displacement. We are alive to that. We are talking with our French counterparts, and with intelligence services, border forces and police forces, to make sure that we keep an eye on where that might happen. We will of course support our ports to address that.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary and her Department on the fact that 800 interviews have taken place so swiftly, in difficult circumstances. What is being done to prioritise the most vulnerable children?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right that we are committed to prioritising the most vulnerable, which means the youngest and minors at risk of sexual exploitation. We will always make sure that we do that. We are putting them at the front of the queue in terms of interviewing. Frankly, these are the ones who are most likely to qualify under the Dubs amendment, where it becomes clear that they are better served by being in the UK.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the comments of the new Home Affairs Committee Chair about the progress being made. I want to pick up what the Home Secretary said about the reports from the camp today and the chaos that we are seeing there as it is being closed. I have details with me of 49 children under the age of 13 who the voluntary agencies say could not register at the warehouse today. I would be happy to share those details directly with the Home Secretary and her officials. Will she give me a personal assurance that she will investigate the fate of those 49, including three who are under the age of 11? Will she give an assurance that any child brought here under this legal process will not be put in a detention centre here in the UK?

Amber Rudd: I am surprised to hear the hon. Lady talk about a detention centre. We are making sure that all the children who come over here are looked after in a way that we, as a proud and compassionate nation, can rightly call the best way. If she has any additional information, she is welcome to send it to me or to hand it to the Minister for Immigration at the end of this statement. We have 36 staff on the ground who have gone over during the past few weeks specifically to do this. They are engaged with the NGOs as well. There is no “them and us” feeling in the camp. We all have the same aims, and I would ask her to bear that in mind. We want to get the youngest children and the most vulnerable out. There is nothing but good will and good intent on this side to make sure that we can achieve that.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her comprehensive statement. It will not have gone unnoticed from media reports that a number of the children coming into the UK appear to be mature young men. Can she confirm how many people the Home Office has rejected on the grounds of age?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right that there have been reports about some of the children turning out to be older than 17. We do checks as thoroughly as we can—highly professional checks—on the ground in an environment that is incredibly challenging. I ask my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to bear with us while we try to deliver the best for the young people who need, sometimes in the interest of safety, to come to the UK. But no one should be in any doubt: we take all assessments very seriously, and we will continue to make sure that we prioritise the most vulnerable, which will always be the youngest.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I listened carefully to the Home Secretary and I am grateful for her comments about frustrating the misdeeds of the criminal gangs that prey on the most vulnerable. Le Touquet and displacement in Belgium or Denmark have been mentioned. Are we not dealing with the consequences of those people’s actions rather than frustrating them in the first place? Rather than talk about Europol or the relations between this country and France, will the Home Secretary tell us what work has gone on with Interpol outside or across the Mediterranean to stop people sending folk here in the first place rather than dealing with the consequences of their misdeeds?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. More work needs to be done upstream to stop people coming here in the first place, to stop these dreadful scenes where we see people arriving and not being able to get over to the UK, and to stop the dreadful scenes of people drowning in the Mediterranean as well. My right
hon. Friend the Prime Minister referred earlier to our work with the UN under UN Security Council mandate. We are working under Operation Sophia, with HMS Enterprise in place at the moment. That makes sure that we do our bit—play our leading role—in trying to stop the dreadful smuggling of people across from Libya.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I commend the Home Secretary for her statement. Notwithstanding the obduracy of the French, the situation is not being improved by the catastrophic decision of the German Government last year to disregard the Dublin protocol in respect of processing refugees. That said, I believe that the decision to close the camp is absolutely right, because it will save lives by stymying the evil work of people traffickers. Specifically, children aside, what efforts is the Home Office making to assist the 10% of the camp who are vulnerable women?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. He is absolutely right: the ending of that camp is in the interests of everyone in this country as well as in France. We believe that, as he said, only 10% of those in the camp are women, and we are prioritising them because they are the most likely people to be vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Currently, about a third of our intake are women, which is a positive result by comparison with the 10% figure.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I was pleased to hear the Home Secretary send a clear message about the recent media practice of photographing migrants who are coming into this country through Calais, whether they are children or young adults. Will she send that message and loud and clear, emphasising that this is reckless behaviour that puts people at risk? Will she also deplore the current media practice that appears to be identifying temporary reception centres for people coming from Calais, thus raising both security and safeguarding risks? Will she please urge caution and care in the reporting of these affairs?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady is quite right. It is essential that we maintain, as far as possible, the anonymity of the young people who are coming over here. One reason for that, which was pointed out to me, is that it is claimed by smugglers and traffickers that some of those young people—particularly the young women—owe them money, and if they see the pictures, they may come after them. We must keep them safe by keeping their faces discreet and their locations secret.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I raised the question of returns with President Ghani in May, he told me bluntly that his priority was his people who were taking the fight to the Taliban, and that only after considering them could he turn to the needs of those who had given up on his country and gone away. They were hard words, but will my right hon. Friend reflect on them when she attaches priority to the most vulnerable and the most deserving?

Amber Rudd: I agree with my right hon. Friend that returns are an important part of a strong immigration policy. We are constantly working with other countries to ensure that consent can be established, and demonstrating that that is in their interest as well as ours.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Much of what the Home Secretary has said is very welcome, but what has she instructed her officials to do if an unaccompanied English-speaking 12-year-old girl appears in Calais next week, a child whose best interests are clearly served by being resettled in the United Kingdom? In such circumstances, will her officials be permitted to be flexible with the cut-off date?

Amber Rudd: I would expect the girl, in all likelihood, to claim asylum in France, but of course I hope that that event never comes to pass.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the news that the French are closing the camp now, given that many months ago, in the Home Affairs Committee, we challenged the Calais mayor and other French officials to deliver comprehensive plans to clear it. No doubt my right hon. Friend will confirm that it is not possible for the British Government to do anything in Calais without French agreement, but I hope she will accept that we can take the lead in tackling the people traffickers. Can she tell me how many criminal gangs have been stopped thanks to the hard work of the UK security forces?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. We have been urging the French to take action for a while, and we have been working closely with them, but only in the past few weeks and days have we been able to really engage with them, and conduct interviews in a way that is quick and effective and has yielded results. My hon. Friend is also right in suggesting that that allows us to make more progress in arresting criminal gangs.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): In one of her earlier answers, the Home Secretary gave assurances about the importance of the safety of children. She said that the tracking of those children was paramount, whether the Dublin or the Dubs process was involved. I have learned of worrying allegations that the Home Office was aware that a number of children had gone missing. Will the Home Secretary commit herself to investigating the cases of those whom the Home Office had expected to take on, but who are now missing? Will she also commit herself to investigating and tracking down what has happened to those young people, particularly if their safety has been put at risk?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is welcome to send me any information that he has. However, over the past few days there have been cases in which we have expected children to be available to board the bus to come to the UK, and sometimes non-governmental organisations themselves have been surprised not to have been able to find them. The position is not quite as straightforward as we wish it were; but I hope that, following the changes in the camp whereby all the children will be in one secure area, it will be more straightforward, when we have made a commitment to bring a child here, for us to do so without its being impossible to find them on the day.

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. Will she tell us how much money the Government have invested in reinforcing the border at Calais?
Amber Rudd: The total package is £36 million, of which approximately £14 million is for security. The existence of security in Calais is very much in the UK’s interest. We need to ensure that we can protect tourists and enable truckers to maintain their economy and go about their normal business, which I hope will be much improved after the camp has been cleared.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary reassure us that local authorities will be adequately funded, and will she tell us exactly who will fund them and provide compensation? More importantly, will she reassure us that adequate accommodation will be provided for the children, and that they will not be institutionalised?

Amber Rudd: As the hon. Gentleman may know, the Dubs amendment can be implemented only if local authorities come forward and volunteer to take the children. We are fortunate in that enough local authorities have offered places, but we shall need more over the next few weeks, so if any Members wish to urge their local authorities to volunteer, they are most welcome to do so. Authorities are aware of the cost and the rate that the Government pay, and I hope they will consider the compensation adequate and volunteer to take the children.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s comments about the robustness of the process of checking that children are eligible to be relocated to the United Kingdom, because there are legitimate concerns about that. One of the reception centres is in West Sussex. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that the county council—which is the social care authority—will be given support, given that there are already pressures on its budget, to ensure that the process will be beneficial to the children without being detrimental to others in West Sussex?

Amber Rudd: We are always grateful for the generous way in which local authorities come forward, and for their positive response to our call for their support. I particularly thank West Sussex County Council for the good work that it has been doing, notably in hosting one of the dispersal centres. We will of course work closely with the council to ensure that that good relationship continues.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened carefully to the Home Secretary’s statement and the answers that she has given to a number of very serious questions about safeguarding. A social worker contacted me this week to say that for the children who have started to enter Britain, it has been a “bureaucratic shambles”: those are her words, not mine. She says that the social services have been given wrong addresses, wrong family contacts, and no forms or pro formas. How will the Home Secretary and her Department, as a matter of urgency, ensure that the correct provisions are in place to help social services throughout the country to ensure that once children are here, they do not fall through the cracks?

Amber Rudd: We do not always have all the information that we need. One of the reasons why the full cohort of nearly 200 “Dublin” children has not yet been brought over is that we have not been able to establish where their close family members are. It is possible—this is an issue to which the hon. Lady has particularly drawn attention—that the close family members who have been claimed, and have been contacted before the children have been brought over, are no longer quite as contactable once the local authority is trying to address the situation. As I have said to other Members, this can be a complicated process, and it is not always straightforward to follow up the contacts that we have been given. However, if the hon. Lady wants to send me a particular example, I will of course look at it.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her close attention to and compassion towards child refugees in Calais, and for her talk of a humanitarian operation. When I was there in February witnessing the partial demolition, it was far from humanitarian. Can the Home Secretary confirm again that the camp shelter will be sufficient to accommodate all child refugees if the French authorities do not accept the French Red Cross offer of a child centre? Will she truly be able to ensure that children who are dispersed across child accommodation centres across France will be accommodated, particularly those in respect of whom we have a legal duty under Dubs and Dublin?

Amber Rudd: The only reassurance that I can give my hon. Friend is the reassurance that I have been given by the French. We have particularly asked them to ensure that the children are kept in a secure area, and our request was that it should be, potentially, outside the camp. They chose to keep the children inside the camp, reassuring us that they could keep them secure there. We are in close contact: we now have a large number of Home Office representatives in the camp, as well as the hundreds of Border Force staff who are in the area. We are hopeful that we will be able to work closely with them to keep the children safe. Ultimately, however, this is a French responsibility, although we are giving the French all the support that we can.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I very much welcome what the Home Secretary has said today about children, but we should remind ourselves that it is not only children who require international protection. When I visited Calais with colleagues at Easter, we met Afghans who had interpreted for members of our armed forces and Kurds who had previously been granted asylum in the United Kingdom before returning home, who had had to flee for a second time and ended up at Calais. Will the Home Office look at cases such as theirs when considering who it is appropriate for the UK to take responsibility for?

Amber Rudd: In this case, while the camps are being demolished, we have made a commitment to take the most vulnerable children, and within that cohort of children, the ones who are youngest and those who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. On the question of other people who might be vulnerable, there might be one or two who qualify under the Dublin amendment, but otherwise people will need to apply for asylum in the normal way in France. We must stick to the generally accepted principle, which the UK supports, of applying for asylum in the first country of safety.
Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I commend the Home Secretary and her staff for the efforts they are making to accelerate the process of bringing unaccompanied minors, in particular, to this country. May I just press her on the challenges that local authorities are facing? My understanding is that local authorities that do not have sufficient foster places are calling the same limited number of independent agencies. Does she see a more central role for the Government in co-ordinating the availability of places in the independent sector?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and if that were the case, it would not be a successful outcome. Our information is that a lot of the local authorities are choosing to work together, and we have a lot of examples of good practice in which four or five local authorities are getting together to make a joint offer rather than competing with each other.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement. Prior to my election to this place, I regularly defended the Home Office in immigration and asylum cases. It is widely accepted by many judges and practitioners that age assessment of undocumented children is notoriously difficult and not an exact science. Indeed, the rise in the number of cases in the administrative court reflects that fact. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that dental checks are not an appropriate method of age assessment? Does she agree that considerable guidance exists in case law and as a result of the practices of the London Boroughs of Croydon and Hillingdon, which have now been adopted throughout the country, which suggests that listening to a child’s history, observing their behaviour and hearing their live evidence are much better indicators than physical maturity?

Amber Rudd: I know that my hon. Friend has substantial experience in this field, having acted as an immigration lawyer before coming into Parliament. She is absolutely right to say that the best way to assess age is to use experienced assessors, and we will continue to do that. The British Dental Association has said that dental checks are not the way to go, because they are ineffective and unreliable. The best way is to use the type of assessment that we are using, which is based on experience.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Would it not be in the best interests of the asylum seekers and local authorities if the asylum seekers, especially the children, were located more evenly throughout the country? My local authority copes with 500 each year, yet the constituencies of the present Prime Minister, the previous Prime Minister and the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer take none at all. My local authority is doing very well, but there are inevitably strains on local services, including the schools and the health service. The new asylum seekers will be especially vulnerable, and many will have lifelong health problems, so will the Home Secretary ensure that the money given to local authorities is adequate for the long years for which it will be required?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is probably aware that there is a national transfer scheme to ensure that unaccompanied children are fairly shared around the country. We are urging local authorities to step up, and we are getting a very strong response. This has gone to the heart of people in this country and of local authorities, who want to participate and help, and who believe in this as an endeavour to try to address the problem. However, we will always need more, and I again urge any Members of Parliament who think that their local authority could help to please urge it to step forward and do so.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I know that the situation is fluid and fast moving, and the Home Secretary has said that her officials have been hard at work in the past week. She says that they have conducted 800 interviews and that 200 children have been admitted to the UK. First, how far through the process are we, and how many more applications does she expect her staff to process? Secondly, is that ratio of one acceptance for every four applications a ratio that we are likely to see continue? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Somebody is chuntering about the fact that the hon. Gentleman has had two questions, but I have to say, in fairness to him, that it takes him less time to ask two questions than it takes a lot of people to ask one.

Amber Rudd: I have to say to my hon. Friend that that is not quite how it is working out. The 200 are largely made up of the Dublin regulation children, which means that they have a strong family tie in the UK. About a quarter of them are Dubs children. The balance of the additional children we will take will also be Dubs children. Not all of the 800 who have been interviewed will be coming to the UK; we are just processing their claims. There will be another 200 to 300 to interview, and we hope to reach a figure of a few hundred more over the next two to three weeks while the camp is being cleared. We will then have fulfilled our commitment to the French, which we hope will involve approximately half the children who were there.
Point of Order

6.6 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a point of order that I raise with the greatest reluctance, but it is a matter for you, and a matter of some urgency. You will recall that, in November 2015, the Conservative delegates to the Council of Europe were queried and there was a debate on the matter in this House. A report was produced about the selection of delegates. At the time, you rightly said that it was not your job to interfere with the decisions of parties on which delegates they sent to the Council of Europe. I believe that a decision that was made a few hours ago was not only improper but possibly illegal. I have sent you an email and a letter about what has happened. It might well have been a misunderstanding, and it might have been resolved, but in the meantime, can I ask you to repeat what you did in regard to the Conservative delegates, and to decline to send the delegates chosen by the Labour party to the Council of Europe until the matter has been resolved?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He did sit up to the Chair earlier to indicate that he had written to me about this matter, and I do not dispute that for one moment, but I have to say to him that I have not yet seen his email. It would be prudent for me to study it and to reflect carefully upon the matter and take advice before pronouncing on it. Of course I well remember the sequence of events to which he has referred. If memory serves me, it principally concerned Members from the governing party. In this instance, I think he is concerned about his own party's delegation. I do not interfere in the choice of members of the delegation. That is not a matter for me. If memory serves me, however, I do have a responsibility to notify the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of the decision made here, and of course I would not wish to do anything that was procedurally improper. I will have to satisfy myself that what I am being asked or instructed to do is procedurally proper. I will not be sending any letter until I have so satisfied myself. I hope that that is helpful. Of course, in the pursuit of that duty, I will study the letter from the hon. Gentleman.

Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill

Second Reading

6.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I beg to move, That the Bill be read a Second time.

This is a short and focused Bill which is vitally important not only for the NHS but for patients. NHS spending on medicines is second only to staffing costs. The Health and Social Care Information Centre—now NHS Digital—estimated that the NHS in England spent over £15.2 billion on medicines during 2015-16, a rise of nearly 20% since 2010-2011. With advances in science and our ageing population, those costs can only continue to grow.

Medicines are of course a vital part of patient care in the NHS, both in hospitals and in the community. Thanks to the research and development efforts of the life sciences industry—an industry which contributes £56 billion and tens of thousands of jobs to the UK economy every year—our understanding of diseases and the best way to treat them has improved dramatically over the past 20 years. Who would have thought for instance that UK work pioneering superconducting magnets would result in MRI scanners—scanners which would save hundreds of lives each year through the early detection of breast cancer—or that the remarkable research by our National Institute for Health Research into translational medicine would lead to scientific breakthroughs in areas such as gene therapy being taken from the lab to the clinic? In a six-year period this has led to 340 patents, generating over £80 million from intellectual property.

This Government are committed to ensuring that patients get access to innovative and cost-effective medicines as quickly as possible. I pay tribute to the work carried out by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who worked tirelessly in government to promote the life sciences industry, and who established the accelerated access review to provide clear recommendations on how the Government, the NHS and the industry can work together to ensure patients benefit from transformative new products much more quickly. That review was published today and is an excellent document which challenges everyone in the medicines system to up their game.

Our mission is to continue our progress in ensuring patients get rapid access to life-changing and cost-effective medicines. However, we also need to ensure that we are getting the best value for the NHS, which is why we have brought this Bill before the House.

The purpose of the Bill is to clarify and modernise provisions to control the cost of health service medicines and to ensure sales and purchase information can be appropriately collected and disclosed. These provisions will align the statutory and voluntary cost control mechanisms currently in existence, allow the Government to control the cost of excessively priced unbranded generic medicines, and ensure we have comprehensive data with which to reimburse people who dispense medicines. Taken together, these measures will enable us to secure better value for money for the NHS from its spend on medicines.
James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this effort. I recently received a written answer saying that last year GPs spent £85 million prescribing paracetamol. A packet of 500 mg paracetamol costs 19p in Asda, and I wonder whether this Bill will enable us to look those costs and whether such prescribing is appropriate.

Mr Hunt: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. Although the measures he mentions are not directly covered in this Bill, he reminds the House that the business of getting value for money from our drugs business is everyone’s business throughout the NHS. There is a huge amount of prescribing of medicines that is not strictly necessary. Indeed, we had further evidence of that from the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges this morning. My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point: this Bill is part of the effort to get better value for money from our medicines budget, but initiatives such as the one he talks about are equally important.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Further to that question, I can see how the Bill will deal with the issue of debranding, and that is very welcome, but I understand there are three other areas of concern. There is the question of price delay, which the Competition and Markets Authority has been looking at, and there are the problems of tying and bundling and so-called loyalty schemes, all of which act to inflate the cost of medicines to the NHS artificially. Will the Bill also deal with those areas?

Mr Hunt: It will deal with some of those concerns, and we will listen to all the concerns raised by hon. Members during the progress of the Bill. On the particular issue the hon. Gentleman raises, the CMA is already investigating the behaviour of pharmaceutical companies in certain situations, but it has become clear to us that there is a particularly unethical and unacceptable practice of drugs companies getting control of generic drugs for which they command a monopoly position and then hiking the prices. There was one product whose price increased by 12,000% between 2008 and 2016, and if the price had stayed the same as before the increase, the NHS would have spent £58 million less. The Government’s conclusion is that the simplest and quickest way to sort this out is through new legislation, but I will happily take the hon. Gentleman’s other concerns offline and look into them further.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the provisions of the Bill that will close a loophole and deal with terrible examples of where the NHS is in effect exploited, but can my right hon. Friend point to the future in light of the suggestion that the drugs bill will increase to £20 billion by 2020—a much more significant increase than can be afforded under the projected expenditure in the NHS? What bigger measures need to be put in place for us to deal substantively with that bigger problem?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right in that we see demand for NHS services, which includes treatment and drugs, increasing by a total of around £30 billion over the next five-year period, which is a huge amount and certainly more than we as a country can afford without changing practice. That is why we are implementing a very challenging series of efficiency reforms designed to make sure that we can afford to continue current levels of NHS service on the £10 billion increase this Government are putting in. Part of that is indeed measures such as those in this Bill to control the drugs bill. My hon. Friend is also right that going forward over the next 25, rather than five, years we will be seeing the bigger issue of the accelerating pace of innovation in science. That provides great opportunities for the NHS, but potentially great pressures for the budget, and I am sure we will continue to discuss those issues extensively in this House.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the impact this Bill might have on the parallel trade in pharmaceuticals, which he will know has both costs and benefits for the NHS and for patient care?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend obviously knows about these matters in a great detail of deal and should be reassured that this Bill should prevent people who are part of the current voluntary pharmaceutical price regulation scheme—PPRS—from parallel-importing through European subsidiaries, which currently under single market rules we are not able to do anything about. That loophole will be closed.

The first element of the Bill relates to controls on the cost of branded medicines. For many years the Government have had both statutory and voluntary arrangements in place with the pharmaceuticals industry to limit the overall cost of medicines to the NHS. Companies can choose to join either the voluntary scheme or the statutory scheme. Each voluntary scheme typically lasts for five years before a new scheme is negotiated.

The current voluntary scheme is the 2014 PPRS. The objectives of that agreement include keeping the branded health service medicines bill within affordable limits while supporting the availability and use of effective and innovative medicines. For industry, the PPRS provides companies with the certainty and backing they need to flourish both in the UK and in the global markets.

The current PPRS operates by requiring participating companies to make a payment to the Department of Health of a percentage of their NHS sales revenue when total sales exceed an agreed amount. So far the PPRS has resulted in £1.24 billion of payments, all of which have been reinvested back into the health service for the benefit of patients.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): The early part of the Bill appears incredibly tortuous, because it relates to whether something is under the voluntary scheme or the statutory scheme and to switching back and forth between the two. Is that because we have a voluntary scheme which started in 2014 and will run until 2019, and the Government intend not to renew it? If the Government are minded to consider renewal in 2019, why have parallel schemes making the whole thing much more complex than it needed to be?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It will be for this House and the Government to reflect prior to 2019 on whether it is worth carrying on with two schemes, which has been the arrangement for many years. Successive PPRS voluntary agreements have covered the vast majority of sales to the NHS and the statutory scheme has been a back-up for people who
do not want to participate in the voluntary scheme. Recently, however, there has been an element of gaming the system whereby more and more firms have been moving from the voluntary scheme into the statutory scheme. The Bill will remove the incentives for them to switch between schemes and will make the benefits to the NHS essentially the same whichever scheme people choose. It will be for this House to reflect on and for the Government to consider whether the dual structure is right going forward.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State tells us that £1.24 billion has come back through the rebate, but many are puzzled about where that money has been spent. Can the Secretary of State tell us?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. The money comes back to the Department of Health and is invested in the NHS. Indeed, it would be wonderful if it was more than £1.24 billion, because there is an awful lot of need on the NHS frontline right now; the funds are much needed. Our concern is that companies have been exploiting the differences between the voluntary and statutory schemes, particularly the loophole, which the Bill seeks to close, that if companies have drugs in both schemes, we are unable to regulate at all the prices of the drugs that would ordinarily fall under the statutory scheme. That is why the Bill is so important.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the Bill’s objectives, which I can see are admirable, does the Secretary of State accept that hundreds of millions of pounds could be saved in the drugs budget if there was better analysis of NHS prescription patterns? I have called before for the appointment of analytical pharmacists to look at the balance between prescription efficacy and cost and at trying to increase the use of biosimilars. Some of that £1.24 billion could be invested in that greater analysis.

Mr Hunt: Yes. My hon. Friend makes an important point. The third part of the Bill will provide for much better data collection to allow that analysis to take place. We are also seeking to break down the barriers between the pharmacy sector and general practice. During this Parliament, we will be financing 2,000 additional pharmacists to work in general practice so that we can learn exactly those sorts of lessons.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Further to that important point about biosimilars, and in welcoming this legislation and the opportunity to create savings for the NHS, will the Secretary of State also address the long-standing issues around Lucentis and Avastin? The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) updated the House about the barriers in both domestic and European legislation that prevent the use of Avastin—it is not licensed for wet age-related macular degeneration—but the scale of savings could be so vast that there is a case for introducing measures in the Bill to allow for such issues to be addressed.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to look into that—some of my own constituents have been affected by that issue. I am not aware that there is scope to consider that important point in the Bill, but we should reflect on what we can do to deal with some of the anomalies in the drug licensing regime that lead to the unintended consequences that my hon. Friend talks about.

We have a statutory scheme for companies that are not in the PPRS that is based on a cut to the list price of products, rather than a payment mechanism on company sales. Since the introduction of the rebate mechanism in the PPRS, the volumes of drugs going through it have been lower than estimated. At the same time, the statutory scheme has delivered lower savings than predicted. The inequity between the two schemes has led to some companies making commercial decisions to divest products from the PPRS to the statutory scheme, further reducing the savings to the NHS.

Last year, the Government consulted on options to reform the statutory medicines pricing scheme by introducing a payment mechanism, in place of the statutory price cut, broadly similar to that which exists in the PPRS. Our clear intention was to put in place voluntary and statutory schemes that were broadly comparable in terms of savings. Of course, companies are free to decide which scheme to join and may move from one to the other depending on the other benefits they offer, but the savings to the NHS offered by both schemes should be broadly the same.

NHS respondents to the consultation supported our position, but the pharmaceutical industry queried whether the Government had the powers to introduce a statutory payment system. Following a review of our legislative powers, we concluded that amendments should be made to clarify the existing powers to make it clear that the Government do have the power to introduce a payment mechanism in the statutory scheme. The Bill does that by clarifying the provisions in the NHS Act 2006 to put it beyond doubt that the Government can introduce a payment mechanism in the statutory scheme. The Bill also amends the 2006 Act so that it contains essential provisions for enforcement action. Payments due under either a future voluntary or statutory scheme would be recoverable through the courts if necessary. That would include the power to recover payments due from any company that leaves one scheme to join the other.

The powers proposed in the Bill to control the cost of medicines are a modest addition to the powers already provided for in the 2006 Act to control the price of and profit associated with medicines used by the health service. The powers are necessary to ensure that the Government have the scope and flexibility to respond to changes in the commercial environment. The intended application of the powers will, of course, be set out in regulations. We will provide illustrative regulations to reassure the House that we will be fair and proportionate in exercising the powers.

Rob Marris: I voted for the 2006 Act, but I have to say to the Secretary of State that profit controls are pretty draconian, particularly for a Conservative Government. The Government appear to be extending them when we have historically dealt with what society refracted through this House as excessive profits through taxation, such as the windfall tax on banks and so on. The Secretary of State now proposes to extend profit controls to a major part of the economy, which would no doubt be loved by the Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition. To a socialist such as me, a Conservative Secretary of State doing that seems a bit counterintuitive. Could he say a bit more about why he is extending profit controls?
Mr Hunt: Our march on to the centre ground carries on apace. [Laughter] In response to the hon. Gentleman’s fascinating point, I gently reassure him that our approach will be fair and proportionate. There is not about bringing in wide profit controls. It is important to say that we recognise—our view is shared across the House—the pharmaceutical industry’s incredibly important role in medical advances, and we want Britain to be its European centre of operations post-Brexit. Many Members have campaigned about dementia and we hope that we can get a cure—it could happen in this country—and we recognise that profits are what fund the research that makes such remarkable changes possible.

It is important, however, that we are able to see what profits are being generated from a company’s choice between the PPRS scheme and the statutory scheme as a clue to whether the company is being fair to the NHS, which is funded by taxpayers. That is why the Bill’s measures strike the right balance.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I hope that not only the Opposition but Government Members are reassured by those comments in response to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris). Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to emphasise the great contribution that the pharmaceutical industry makes not only in this country but as a global player? As he says, the profit motive is important to ensuring the competition that allows for reform and the new drugs that will transform our lives and the lives of future generations.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to give that reassurance. As I said, this industry contributes £56 billion to the UK economy, with tens of thousands of jobs. When the Prime Minister talks about where she sees our competitive advantage, she talks, first, about financial services, and life sciences is the very next industry she mentions. I completely agree with right my hon. Friend about its incredible importance, not just to this country but to the future of humanity. That is why we seek in this Bill to establish a fair relationship between the NHS, which we have to represent as we are funding it through the tax system, and the pharmaceutical industry. It is also fair to say that there have been times when some pharmaceutical companies’ practices have been disappointing, and because we want to make sure that that does not happen and that we can continue with a harmonious and productive relationship we are proposing this Bill to the House.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): We agree that this is not about profit controls—about having a fair return for investment made—but about tackling an emerging business model that could almost be seen as profitiering.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right about that. The nice way of putting it is that we are closing a loophole. If one were being less polite, one might say that it is a shame we are having to do that. None the less, it is important to do what we are proposing to the House.

We recognise that it has been some time since the Government consulted on the options, and I wish to reassure hon. Members and those companies in the statutory scheme that we will consult further on the implementation of a payment mechanism in the statutory scheme, including the level of the payment mechanism, before the regulations come into force. We estimate that 17 companies would be affected by the introduction of a payment mechanism, with the 165 companies that are currently members of the PPRS not being affected. Our proposals would save health services across the UK an estimated £90 million per year.

The second key element of this Bill amends the 2006 Act to strengthen the Government’s powers to set prices of medicines where companies charge unreasonably high prices for unbranded generic medicines. We rely on competition in the market to keep the prices of these drugs down. That generally works well and has, in combination with high levels of generic prescribing, led to significant savings. However, we are aware of some instances where there is no competition to keep prices down, and companies have raised their prices to what looks like an unreasonable and unjustifiable level. As highlighted by the investigation conducted by The Times earlier this year, there are companies that appear to have made it their business model to purchase off-patent medicines for which there are no competitor products. They then exploit a monopoly position to raise prices. We cannot allow this practice to continue unchallenged. My Department has been working closely with the Competition and Markets Authority to alert it to any cases where there may be market abuse and provide evidence to support this, but we also need to tackle it within our framework for controlling the cost of medicines and close the loophole of de-branding medicines. Although the Government’s existing powers allow us to control the price of any health service medicine, they do not allow controls to be placed on unbranded generic medicines where companies are members of the voluntary PPRS scheme. Today, most companies have a mixed portfolio of branded medicines and unbranded generic medicines. For that reason, all the manufacturers of the unbranded generic medicines mentioned in the investigation by The Times are able to use their PPRS membership to avoid government control of their prices.

It should be said that that practice is not widespread, but a handful of companies appear to be exploiting our freedom of pricing for unbranded generic medicines where there is no competition in the market, leaving the NHS with no choice but to purchase the medicine at grossly inflated prices or to transfer patients to other medicines that are not always suitable. Alongside the Government, many in the industry would also like to see this inappropriate behaviour stamped out.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I very much agree with the point that the Secretary of State has just made. He talked about collaboration with the CMA. Can he give any indication as to whether he expects action to be taken on abuse in the marketplace, given that a small number of companies have behaved appallingly?

Mr Hunt: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman the indication because, as he will know, the CMA operates completely independently, and I therefore do not know what its findings are going to be. Of course, I would support any action that it recommended. I do, however, think that this Bill can give us some security in the House that if the CMA is unable to find evidence in the specific cases it has before it, we will be able to take action as a Government, provided the House is willing to support the Bill.
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of how the prices of the drugs quoted in the article in The Times compare with those paid in other health services and by healthcare providers in other western European countries?

Mr Hunt: We have made some assessments of those things, but, in essence, our concern is that, even without comparisons with what is happening in other countries, we are talking about totally unreasonable behaviour. I mentioned one example earlier, but I can give another of a medicine whose price increased by 3,600% between 2011 and 2016. I just do not think we can justify that. Given that we want to have strong, harmonious, positive relationships between the NHS and the pharmaceutical industry, we need to eliminate the possibility of that kind of behaviour happening in the future.

This Bill therefore amends the 2006 Act to allow the Government to control prices of these medicines, even when the manufacturer is a member of the voluntary PPRS scheme. We intend to use the power only where there is no competition in the market and companies are charging the NHS an unreasonably high price. We will engage with the industry representative body, which is also keen to address this practice, on how we will exercise this power.

The final element of the Bill will strengthen the Government’s powers to collect information on the costs of medicines, medical supplies and other related products from across the supply chain, from factory gate to those who supply medicines to patients. We currently collect information on the sale and purchases of medicines from various parts of the supply chain under a range of different arrangements and for a range of specific purposes. Some of these arrangements are voluntary, whereas others are statutory. The Bill will streamline the existing information requirements in the 2006 Act relating to controlling the cost of healthcare products. It will enable the Government to make regulations to require all those involved in the manufacture, distribution or supply of health service medicines, medical supplies or other related products to record, keep and provide on request information on sales and purchases. The use of this information would be for defined purposes: the reimbursement of community pharmacies and GPs, determining the value for money that the supply chain or products provide; and controlling the cost of medicines. This will enable the Government to put the current voluntary arrangements for data provision with manufacturers and wholesalers of unbranded generic medicines and manufactured specials on a statutory footing. As the arrangements are currently voluntary, they do not cover all products and companies, which limits the robustness of the reimbursement price setting mechanism.

A statutory footing for these data collections is important so that the Government can run a robust reimbursement system for community pharmacies. I know that some colleagues have raised concerns about the implications of our funding decisions for community pharmacies, and today I want to reassure the House that this Bill does not impact on those decisions, nor does it remove the requirement for consultation with the representative body of pharmacy contractors on their funding arrangements in the future. However, the information power will give us more data on which to base those discussions and decisions, rather than relying on data only available to us under voluntary schemes and arrangements. The information power would also enable the Government to obtain information from across the supply chain to assure themselves that the supply chain is, or parts of it are, delivering value for money for NHS patients and the taxpayer—we cannot do that with our existing fragmented data.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): In this regard, will my right hon. Friend be giving consideration to asking pharmacies that can prepare their own medicines—aqueous cream and things—as tremendous sums could be saved for the NHS? Will he be considering that in the overall scheme of getting information on the medicines they are providing?

Mr Hunt: The information we collect might make it possible for us more robustly to analyse issues such as the one my hon. Friend rightly brings to the House’s attention. Even if it does not, we should consider the issue, and I am happy to write to her to see whether we can make more progress in that area.

I also wish to reassure the House about the application of the information power to the medical technology industry. More than 99% of the companies supplying medical technologies to the NHS are small and medium-sized enterprises. Their products may be less high profile than the latest cancer medicine, but they are no less innovative or vital for patients. We have no interest in placing additional burdens on those companies.

The 2006 Act already provides powers for the Government to require suppliers of medical technologies to keep and provide information on almost any aspect of their business. This Bill will clarify and modernise those powers, and I am committed to exercising them in a way that is fair and proportionate to companies, to the NHS and to taxpayers who rightly demand value for money from the supply chain. Companies are currently required to hold information on their income and sales for six years for tax purposes. We will work closely with industry to ensure that the requirement to keep and record data does not significantly increase this burden.

My officials have already been in discussion with all parties across the supply chain—for both medicines and medical devices—about these powers to ensure that their implementation is robust but proportionate. We will provide illustrative regulations to aid debate on these provisions. I also want to reassure colleagues that, following Royal Assent, a full and open consultation will take place on the regulations specifying the information requirements.

I thank Ministers and their officials in the devolved Administrations for their constructive input and engagement with my Department on the Bill. Although many of its provisions are reserved in relation to Scotland and Wales, some information requirements that currently apply to England only could also apply in the territories of the devolved Administrations.

We intend to propose amendments to the Bill to reflect the agreement between the Government and the devolved Administrations, so that information from wholesalers and manufacturers can be shared by the Government for the whole of the UK and shared with the devolved Administrations. That avoids the burden created by each country collecting the same information.
The Welsh Government have also asked me to enable them to obtain information from pharmacies and dispensing GPs—a power that the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive already have. The Government will therefore propose an amendment to the Bill to amend the NHS (Wales) Act 2000 so that Welsh Ministers can obtain information from pharmacies and dispensing GPs.

Medicines are a vital part of the treatment provided by our NHS. Robust cost control and information requirements are key tools to ensuring that NHS spending on medicines across the UK continues to be affordable. They also help to deliver better value for taxpayers and to free up resources, thereby supporting access to services and treatments. This Bill will ensure that there is a more level playing field between our medicines pricing schemes while ensuring that the decisions made by the Government are based on more accurate and robust information about medicines’ costs. It will be fairer for industry, fairer for pharmacies, fairer for the NHS, fairer for patients and fairer for taxpayers, and I commend it to the House.

6.43 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for outlining the overarching principles of this Bill, which, as we have heard, seek to allow the NHS to better control the cost of medicines and to close some of the loopholes, which have been the subject of blatant abuses in recent years.

I also thank the Minister of State for taking the time to meet me and other hon. Members last week to set out what the Government were seeking to achieve with this Bill. I only hope that this increased appetite for state intervention in the market that we have on display will spread more widely across Government. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) said, this kind of approach used to be called Marxist, anti-business interventionism. I never thought that I would say this, but, having heard what the Secretary of State said today, I believe that he is now a fully fledged Corbynista.

In all seriousness, it is clear that the market is not serving the patient or the taxpayer as well as it could. As we have heard, expenditure on medicines is a significant and growing proportion of the NHS budget, standing at £15.2 billion in England in 2015-16, an increase of more than 20% since 2010-11. One can only imagine where we would be now if the whole of the NHS had seen such an increase during the same period.

The incredible advances in science that we have seen in recent decades, often led by companies here in Britain, mean that people in this country are living longer, healthier lives than ever before. Although we celebrate that, it is also right that we work hard to secure value for money for the NHS to ensure that as many patients as possible can benefit from medical advances.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I declare an interest as a type 2 diabetic and chair of the all-party diabetes group? Ten per cent. of the expenditure of the NHS budget is on dealing with diabetes and complications related to it. Does my hon. Friend agree that there may well be a desire to prescribe more medicines, which will cost more, rather than providing diabetics with a structured education which, if appropriately used, can bring down the cost of diabetes to the health service? It is not just about pills.

Justin Madders: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and pay tribute to him for his great work on diabetes. It is a matter that he consistently raises in the House, and he is right to do so. Of course he is right that there are many ways in which the diabetes bill can be tackled, and some of the shocking statistics that I have seen on the level of take-up of education courses is something on which we can do much better.

We support the broad aims of the Bill and of what the Government are trying to achieve, but we have a number of concerns, which I hope the Minister will address when this debate is drawn to a close, both about what is in the Bill and about the Government’s policies more widely on access to treatments.

Historically, the technical mechanisms used by the NHS to control expenditure on medicine have not set the public’s imagination alight, but in June we were all appalled to read reports that a small number of companies were exploiting loopholes to hike up the cost of medicines. In the past few years, we have also seen headline after headline about one effective treatment or another being denied to patients in desperate need on the basis of cost. I will address each of those issues after briefly touching on the Government’s proposal to harmonise the statutory and voluntary schemes for price control and on the new reporting requirements.

As we have heard, there are currently two schemes for controlling pricing: the voluntary scheme, the pharmaceutical price regulation scheme, which applies to the vast majority of suppliers; and the statutory scheme, which, in 2014 covered around 6% of branded medicine sales in the UK.

The voluntary PPRS scheme is based on companies making payments back to the Department of Health based on their sales of branded medicines to the NHS. By contrast, the statutory scheme operates on the basis of a cut to the published prices of branded medicines. These different approaches appear to have produced different results. Since 2014, the statutory scheme has delivered significantly lower savings than those of the PPRS, partly as a result of companies either switching individual products or switching wholesale into the statutory scheme, which is one reason why we have seen a significant reduction in the level of the rebate. Therefore, we support the rationale behind aligning the two schemes, which will create a more level playing field between companies and also give us a better chance of delivering greater savings to the taxpayer.

However, as we have heard, this Bill extends beyond closely aligning the two schemes and adds a new provision, giving the Secretary of State the power to require all medicines manufacturers and suppliers to provide information relating to prices.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know—I am sure that we all know this—that there is a difference between the list price that is advertised and the price that the NHS actually pays. That is a very important point, and we have to be very careful that, in gaining all this information, we do actually bring down the cost for the NHS. Those companies may well charge other people higher amounts, and we need to put that in context.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is one reason why we must tread carefully, and hear what regulations the Government produce for consultation.
Some of the measures did not form part of the initial consultation, and there is a feeling that they have been added to the Bill at the last minute. Given the damaging cuts to the community pharmacy sector that were announced only last week, there is an anxiety about what costs could be created by any additional administrative burden.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that pharmacists often know their patients much better than over-stretched GPs do? They can also advise on the prescription of appropriate cheaper drugs. Does he also agree that, instead of putting further pressure on the pharmacy sector, the Minister should be supporting it to reduce the burden on GPs and to help the NHS save money?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There was real concern about the announcement last week. From the surveys that have been taken, we know that approximately one in four people who currently use the pharmacist would go to their GP if they were unable to seek advice from the pharmacy. We know the pressure that GP surgeries, and indeed the NHS, are under. We will have to watch carefully the impact of these proposals, which I hope will not be as serious as a number of Members fear.

The impact assessment does not offer many clues. It states that the additional costs that could be incurred “have not been quantified, as their magnitude will not be known until after consultation on subsequent regulations.”

We need to tread carefully. The Secretary of State is asking us to give him new powers before setting out exactly how he will use them. That is a far from perfect state of affairs. I hope that we will get some further clarity when the Bill reaches Committee.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman has been fair in his broad analysis of the problems that we face between the statutory and voluntary schemes. It is a salutary lesson that whenever a statutory scheme is put in place, it can easily be gamed by anyone in the industry. Is he encouraged by the fact that the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry supports the Government’s proposal and wants to work with the Secretary of State so that we can, hopefully, reach an agreement that will work for the future, rather than a draconian recommendation being issued by Richmond House?

Justin Madders: I agree that it is important that we keep the dialogue open with industry. We are proud of what the pharmaceutical industry can deliver for this country. It is a world leader and we certainly do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

The Government will be aware that concern has been expressed by the medical technology sector that medical supplies are to be brought within the scope of a regime designed ostensibly to tackle a problem in the pharmaceutical industry. The medical technology sector has expressed concern that the Bill’s measures will put additional burdens on that sector and could lead to higher costs overall for the NHS. We welcome the assurances given by the Secretary of State today that the 99% of businesses in this industry that are small or medium-sized will not be unduly troubled by onerous additional reporting requirements. We hope to discuss that in further detail.

The former Minister for Life Sciences reported in February 2016 that the estimated income in England from PPRS payments in 2016-17 would be £518 million. That is considerably less than the amount received in 2015, at a time when the overall drugs bill is increasing, so that tells us that the scheme is not going according to plan. The Government have stated that the measures would save the health service around £90 million a year, so let us consider what has been going on and whether this Bill can address the issues that have arisen.

One of the benefits we have heard about is that the Bill will help to close the loophole I referred to earlier which has led to extortionate prices being charged for a number of generic medicines. This occurs, as we heard, when a small number of companies purchase off-patent drugs for which there are no competitor products or there is a dominant supplier. They then remove the brand name, which takes the drugs out of the current pricing controls, allowing the companies to hike up the costs by many hundreds or even thousands of per cent. It is clear that some of these companies have made this strategy a key part of their business model.

In the past few months we have seen this House expose some of the worst excesses of capitalism, from Mike Ashley and his employment practices at Sports Direct, to Philip Green, but there should be a special category of obloquy for those who make themselves extremely wealthy by using loopholes in the law to prey on the sick and vulnerable and to extract obscene profits from our health service. An investigation in The Times highlighted how a small number of companies including Amdipharm, Mercury, Auden Mckenzie and Attunahs raised the cost of medicines by £262 million a year through this practice.

When a US pharmaceutical company hiked the price of HIV medication, people across the world were united in their condemnation, but it is less well known that at the same time the price of over 200 medicines more than doubled in this country, with 32 rising by more than 1,000% and in one case, as we heard, an unbelievable increase of 12,500%. An indication of how central to the business plan of some companies this practice has become can be found just by looking at their websites. The company Amdipharm boasts that it was sold to a private equity company for £367 million and talks of acquiring and commercialising niche generic medicines. Another of these companies, Concordia International, which now owns both Amdipharm and Mercury, is quite open about the fact that it “specializes in the acquisition, licensing and development of off-patent prescription medicines, which may be niche, hard-to-make products.”

This may sound like a noble pursuit, but we know that it can in fact be code for establishing and then abusing a dominant market position to the detriment of vulnerable patients and the taxpayer.

Rob Marris: My hon. Friend speaks of the abuse of a dominant market position, and this Bill extends the powers of the Secretary of State effectively to confiscate profits, rather than acting through taxation. Does my hon. Friend agree that the same approach may be worth
considering in the case of a company such as Google? It has 85% of the world mobile phone market for Android operating systems, and people use Google for 85% of the searches in the United Kingdom. That is a dominant market position and there are questions about the tax paid by Google. Perhaps profit confiscation might be considered.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend tempts me a little way outside my brief. I note, though, that our health service is entering into partnerships with Google, so I hope that questions are being asked by Ministers about the taxation arrangements.

We know that the vast majority of the generics sector is well controlled by competition and delivers value for money to the taxpayer, and we welcome the extension of pricing controls where competition has failed. Is the Minister confident, however, that the steps taken in the Bill are adequate? We have seen, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West mentioned, how adept international companies can be at moving figures around to avoid taxation, and we clearly want to ensure that the system that we develop is not vulnerable to the gaming that we have seen elsewhere. I do not think for a minute that given the vast sums of money at stake, the companies will just shrug their shoulders and take the hit if they can avoid it.

I was more than a little concerned when I read a section about this Bill in a Concordia investor presentation, which said that in the past the Department of Health “would seek informal negotiations with manufacturers where it believed there were pricing issues. We believe this step will remain.”

The notion of informal talks with officials brings up uncomfortable memories of the sweetheart deals between multinationals and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Although I am happy for chains of communication to be open with such companies, can the Minister reassure us that in all cases prices will be regulated through a transparent, formal process and not through behind-the-scenes talks?

Steve McCabe: Where the advertising budgets of pharmaceutical companies dwarf their R&D budgets, is there not an argument for the Government to look again at the tax position of those companies, as well as at the price of their products?

Justin Madders: We will not get very far with this Government on corporation tax. They have been going in a direction that we would not have chosen. They have decided on the measures in the Bill as the best way to control prices and we will see how they get on. Will the Minister confirm that if it becomes clear in a few years that we have opened up another set of loopholes, we can expect the Department to take the lead and to be proactive in its investigations, rather than relying on a team of journalists to expose the problem?

We know that in Scotland the rebate that has been generated has been used to create a dedicated fund to give patients access to new medicines. Will the Minister consider investigating similar models and ensuring that the benefits of the scheme are used for the purpose of improving our frankly poor record in allowing patients to benefit from new medicines? We accept that there will always be differences in matching funding to new drugs, but there is at least a degree of logic in allowing savings made in the drugs bill to be reinvested to enable new products to reach patients more quickly.

We welcome today’s report by the Accelerated Access Review, which sets out an ambitious plan that could see patients accessing new lifesaving treatments up to four years sooner. We hope the Minister will take this opportunity to give financial backing to the aims of the review by committing to using future rebates from the pharmaceutical sector to improve access to treatments. I ask the Government to seriously consider this, as there are growing concerns about access to new drugs and treatments in this country, and particularly about the widening gulf between the UK’s record on developing new drugs and the ability of the NHS to ensure that all patients benefit sufficiently.

The “International Comparisons of Health Technology Assessment” report published in August by Breast Cancer Now and Prostate Cancer UK shows that NHS cancer patients in the UK are missing out on innovative treatments that are being made available in some comparable countries of similar wealth. This is at the same time as a number of medicines have been delisted by the Cancer Drugs Fund after it overspent its budget, and the failure to extend this scheme to innovative treatments as well as medication. There was a report in The BMJ in July entitled “A pill too hard to swallow: how the NHS is limiting access to high priced drugs”. It came to similar conclusions when looking at new antiviral drugs that held out a real prospect of eliminating hepatitis C but which were very expensive.

Mark Tami: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have to be careful not to discourage drug companies from doing research, particularly into those rarer illnesses, because they would not see a financial return?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We must be careful of the law of unintended consequences with this piece of legislation. Commercial decisions will be taken on investment if the return is not sufficiently high, so we have to get the balance right between encouraging investment and getting value for money for the taxpayer.

The BMJ report showed how NHS England, having been unable to budget for broad access to the drugs I mentioned, sought to alter the outcome of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence process and, when it failed, defied NICE’s authority by rationing access to those drugs. There was also widespread controversy over attempts by NHS England to avoid funding anti-HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis by passing on responsibility to local authorities at the same time as cutting the public health budget allocated to councils. If we are to strive to create a level playing field for drugs companies, we should look to do the same for patients and their ability to access treatments.

Labour established NICE to speed up the introduction of clinically proven and cost-effective new medicines and procedures. An order was made by Parliament in 2001 to mandate the funding of healthcare interventions approved by NICE through its technical appraisal process. They were intended to be available to patients three months after publication of the appraisal. However, subsequent orders have chipped away at that, culminating in the current consultation by NICE and NHS England, which will again potentially delay or deny access to important treatments. Therefore, as well as looking at ring-fencing the payments received under this scheme, will the Minister look more widely at access to medicines? Successive studies have demonstrated that there is relatively
low take-up of new medicines by the UK compared with other high-income countries. Not only does that let patients down, but it could impact on the future of the pharmaceutical industry in the UK, particularly given the sector’s concerns about the relatively small value of sales in the UK, compared with other countries, and given the uncertainty surrounding the future of the European Medicines Agency following our decision to leave the European Union.

I am sure Ministers are aware of the concerns that have been raised about that and of the need to ensure that the country is still seen as a leader in the research sector. The Prime Minster has said:

“It is hard to think of an industry of greater strategic importance to Britain than its pharmaceutical industry”,

and the Opposition agree, but we cannot be complacent about the state of UK pharma, particularly as investment decisions are often made by parent companies based in other parts of the world. I hope the Minister will take seriously the interrelationship between decisions about access to treatments and the future of pharmaceutical research and development in the UK, particularly when we know that other countries across Europe are using the current uncertainty as a result of Brexit to eye up opportunities to steal a march on our own industry.

To conclude, the Opposition support the broad aims of the Bill and what the Government seek to achieve in terms of better controlling the cost of medicines. In Committee, we will seek to explore in more detail the new information powers and the details of the impact of those new powers on the supply chain. We will also continue to hold the Government to account and ensure that patients are able to access the best available treatments without any unnecessary delay.

7.3 pm

Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): As any constituency MP will know, the pressures on the NHS grow year in, year out, partly because of our ageing population and partly because of developments in medical procedures—advanced drugs that can help to overcome illness, to continue a patient’s recovery or to stabilise their condition. That is why it is a constant battle for the NHS to root out waste and increase efficiency in the delivery of patient care without compromising that care.

The Nicholson challenge, launched in 2010, sought to save £20 billion over the last Parliament. As my hon. Friend the Minister of State said at Health questions, the NHS managed to achieve £19.4 billion—not £19.4 billion of savings that then went back to the Treasury, but £19.4 billion that was reinvested in front-line services and the NHS.

At the same time, though, we have great pressure, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State alluded to during his comments, on the ever-increasing drugs bill. In England, the drugs bill was £15.2 billion in the last financial year—£11.2 billion on branded medicines and £4 billion on unbranded, generic medicines. That represents a 20% increase since 2010 and a 7% year-on-year increase. With an ever-increasing, ageing population, those figures will continue to go upwards in future years.

We also see more and more new drugs being developed to combat illness. How may illnesses that were killers even during our lifetimes can now be cured or stabilised because of research and the work of pharmaceutical companies in developing the drugs that provide those results? Anyone will accept that the research involved in developing the drugs to tackle illness and disease is phenomenally expensive for the companies involved and sometimes takes many years. Therefore, we have to have a balance. The pharmaceutical companies, which have to invest horrendous amounts of money to find a new drug—a new cure or stabilising medicine—for medical conditions, obviously have to benefit from the horrendously large investments they make, but that does not mean that that should be a licence for them to simply charge what they like, for as long as they like, for the largest profits possible. There is a median between the two situations.

That was highlighted by the Times investigation a few months ago, in which one saw some of the price increases made by pharmaceutical companies that had, in effect, a monopoly on a drug because there was no competition. Let me give one or two examples to show the scale of the problem. Between 2008 and 2016, the price per packet of hydrocortisone tablets rose from 70p to £85—a 12,000% increase. With certain antidepressant tablets, one sees a 2,600% increase. With certain tablets for insomnia, there was a 3,000% increase. Frankly, even if it is with a relatively small number of drugs, it is totally unacceptable and extremely difficult to justify.

I accept that the cost of drugs to the NHS is extremely complicated. As hon. Members will know, branded medicines are controlled through the voluntary pharmaceutical price regulation scheme, which was agreed from 2014 to 2019. For those companies that choose not to join the PPRS, the Government operate a statutory scheme for branded medicines. The PPRS is based on a payment mechanism whereby companies make payments back to the Department of Health based on their sales of branded medicines, whereas the statutory scheme operates on the basis of a cut to the published list price of branded medicines. As a result, the statutory scheme has delivered significantly lower savings for the NHS, and that is clearly not satisfactory.

I welcome the Bill as a means for the Government to secure better value for money for the NHS and taxpayers. The first important change it will introduce is to clarify the law to allow, beyond any doubt, for the power of the Secretary of State to require a payment mechanism in the statutory scheme to limit the cost of medicines. That clarification will enable the Secretary of State to combat the current situation, whereby manufacturers and suppliers are allowed to choose the scheme by which they are controlled. That has led to numerous companies being covered by the statutory scheme rather than the voluntary scheme, because the statutory scheme makes less effective savings to the NHS and thus benefits them disproportionately.

In effect, the Bill will allow the Government to require companies to reduce the price of an unbranded generic drug, even if the company is in the voluntary scheme. The Government intend to use that power to limit the price of unbranded generic medicines when competition in the market fails and companies charge the NHS unreasonably high prices for them, as highlighted by the investigation by The Times.

Rob Marris: According to the Library briefing, since the Bill’s publication the share price of Concordia International, which has been playing that game and owns AMCo, has gone down by 28%. That is good news.
Sir Simon Burns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for sharing that information.

Equally important, the Bill will improve and enhance information collection so that we are better informed on a more consistent basis. That will ensure a better basis for assessing whether the supply chain as a whole, or a specific sector, provides value for money for the NHS. We cannot underestimate the importance of having more consistent, viable and useful information gathering because information is power in so far as it helps to effect decisions and judgments. If one does not have consistent information collection or sufficient ranges of information, that leads to problems in rectifying issues where pharmaceutical companies are behaving not in the best interests of the NHS, but disproportionately in their own interests.

That is why the Bill’s impact and importance far outstrip the fact that it is modest in size, with only a few clauses. I am pleased not only that the Government have decided to take action, but that the Bill, subject to its Committee stage and to the consultation processes about which the Secretary of State has given assurances, commands the widespread support of Members on both sides of the House. I look forward to it reaching the statute book and, as the regulations are developed and the consultations ensure that we get it right, to it stopping some of the abuses that have cost the NHS so much. That needs to be done, however, without unfairly penalising the pharmaceutical companies, because, as I said earlier, they spend a considerable amount of time and a massive amount of money on developing drugs. For instance, in the past 30 years they have made considerable strides for patients with HIV/AIDS and improvements in care for cancer patients. I welcome the Bill.

7.13 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Like the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns), I pay tribute to some of the research and development that has been done by the pharmaceutical industry. Europe has become the biggest research network in the world, and the biggest beneficiary of that has been the United Kingdom, through Horizon 2020 funding, in collaboration with others, and the European Medicines Agency. As others have said, however, both of those are going to change, so the pharmaceutical industry in this country will be rather nervous and anxious about its future.

Obviously, every new drug that the industry discovers creates an additional cost pressure for the NHS, hence the reason for the pharmaceutical price regulation scheme, which has existed since the 1950s. The current scheme has been in existence since 2014 and has brought significant benefits, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), has said. In Scotland it directly funds our new medicines and rare diseases fund. Ours is not a cancer drugs fund, so it gives us greater flexibility to treat very rare diseases. The patient’s condition does not need to be cancer, so we are giving Sofosbuvir for hepatitis C and Everolimus for tuberculous sclerosis.

It is necessary, however, to have some form of management over the cost pressure, so the Scottish Government and my colleagues welcome the way in which the Bill tidies up the situation by closing some of the loopholes faced by the NHS. We have heard in particular about those who have a monopoly over generic medicines, whereby companies that are part of the PPRS can charge what they like for them. There needs to be much greater alignment and it needs to apply to all drugs, not just all companies.

The Secretary of State also mentioned the collection of data. As someone who has worked in the NHS, I have to say that it has struggled with that, and I have concerns about how it will work across the entire NHS, the entire pharmaceutical industry and medical technology and other supplies. We need to make sure that data collection is relatively simple and straightforward, and I also hope that we will bring together and use data that have already been collected.

I speak as a representative of one of the devolved nations and it is important that our Government are able to access those data easily. The Bill states clearly that the data gathered will be shared with Scottish Ministers, but on what basis? Will it be down to Scottish and Welsh Ministers to request data when they want them, or will they have to wait for an annual return, which might not happen when they want it to happen?

The Secretary of State said that there had been consultation, but I hope that that will continue, because the devil will be in the detail when it comes to the extension to all medical supplies. Scotland already uses a lot of central procurement to keep costs down, so it is important that the Bill enables, rather than interferes with, that.

Rob Marris: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, as ever. May I pick her medical brains, as it were, on the question of medical supplies? They are defined by the National Health Service Act 2006 as “surgical, dental and optical materials and equipment”.

Would she, as a clinician and a surgeon, include a CAT or an MRI scanner, as a piece of surgical equipment? It is certainly not dental or optical. It seems to me, as a layperson, albeit a lawyer, that it is not surgical equipment, but investigative equipment, and MRI scanners, as she and many other Members will know, start at about 2 million quid.

Dr Whitford: That is an area that needs to be looked at. A narrow definition that covers only blades and swabs and that does not take into account our hugely expensive infrastructure would not make sense. When we buy those kinds of machines in Scotland, we tend to consider central procurement and assessment, which opens up the potential for massive savings. A lot more work will have to be done in Committee and then in regulation to make the process function in the way that everyone wants it to function.

We need something much more radical. That aspiration may not happen with this Bill, so it will have to come later. Patients in the UK face a delay of about five years to access new medicines. If we compare cancer survival rates, we will see that we are often ahead when it comes to patients with early disease. We are one of the earliest nations doing population screening for breast cancer. However, we start to fall behind when it comes to people with more aggressive or advanced disease. I think that is where our poorer outcomes and survival rates by comparison with European countries come from, because it
is palpable on the ground. Part of that is sometimes the eye-watering initial prices of new drugs. Yes, we can set methods to try to control that, but a lot of those drugs do not get through the system introduced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence because they are expensive. In my interactions with some of the major pharmaceutical players since I have been in the House, I have discovered an appetite for a different way of doing it. Prices could be much lower but there could be a guaranteed number of patients before a drug became generic. We might need to look at risk sharing, because at the beginning we often do not know whether a drug will really be as good as it is cracked up to be. If the price starts, like some cancer drugs, at £100,000, we will struggle to get it through any of our pricing systems.

Something else we have to deal with is the question of how we expect pharmaceutical companies to make a profit on drugs that we never intend to use. We need new antibiotics, but any brand-new class of antibiotics—we have not had such a class for 30 years—will have to be left on the shelf. The existing system will simply not fund research for such a drug. While such a Bill tidies up some of the issues that we face now, we need to do much more blue-skies thinking on equipment, drugs and the way in which we develop different things. Otherwise we will have interminable debates, such as those in which I have participated in Westminster Hall: in one debate, we say that we want more research on, for example, brain tumours, but the next week we have a debate on the fact that we cannot access a brand new drug that has been developed by the pharmaceutical industry in the UK.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an informed and impassioned speech. Does she agree that we are entering a new landscape, and some drugs that have been discovered can be used for multiple treatments for different cancers, or even for other diseases? We therefore need an even more flexible approach so that we can benefit from those drugs and optimise patient outcomes.

Dr Whitford: Absolutely. We have entered the realms of using immunotherapies such as Herceptin for cancer. Equally, in the mid-2000s, people went to court to try to access that drug, which halves the risk of metastatic disease—and we end up spending much more on patients with that stage of the disease. We give Sofosbuvir in Scotland for hepatitis C because it is almost curative, so we have fewer new hepatitis C patients. We need a much more rounded way of looking at the costs and benefits of new drugs. The genetic drugs that we are likely to use in future will be even more eye-wateringly expensive, but then again, they may have a bigger impact.

The Bill tidies up loopholes, but I have concerns about the involvement of the devolved Administrations in the design of the schemes, access to data and ensuring that the funding for PPRS, which we use for our new drugs fund, is maintained. There is a call for us to do something much bigger and much more blue skies in future.

7.23 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the extremely well informed speech given by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). I hope that Ministers will continue to study what happens in Scotland, as they do elsewhere around the world so that we can share information and copy best practice, whether in Scotland or elsewhere. I am aware of Scotland’s fine medical tradition and what it contributes to the United Kingdom.

I pay tribute to The Times for the investigation that it began on 3 June. We often have cause to complain about the press in Parliament. We are often the subject of their inquiries, which we may find unwelcome, and from time to time the press are irresponsible, and should be more responsible. In this case, we can all thank The Times for shining a spotlight on unacceptable practice in the pharmaceutical industry in the UK, which has huge implications for the NHS, which we all love and have been sent here to protect and improve.

Rob Marris: The hon. Gentleman is extolling the work that The Times did in a series of articles this June. May I remind him and the House that in discussing the earlier adoption of drugs, we should bear in mind the work that The Times did in the 1960s to uncover thalidomide as a terrible drug? It was never licensed in the USA because of concerns that testing was not adequate. Yes, we want things to go to market earlier when that is possible, but we have to be extremely careful.

Andrew Selous: If memory serves, it was a team of investigative journalists from The Sunday Times that focused on that issue. However, the hon. Gentleman is right: we should pause and reflect, and be thankful for the tremendous tradition of British investigative journalism, which helps us and is our ally in Parliament. It is important to put that on the record. What The Times did contributed to the Secretary of State launching the Competition and Markets Authority inquiry. I am pleased that that happened.

A number of speakers have made a valid point, with which I strongly agree, that it is absolutely vital that we continue to have a strong pharmaceutical industry in the UK. In the months before she was appointed, the Prime Minister said:

“It is hard to think of an industry of greater strategic importance to Britain”

than the pharmaceutical industry, and she was absolutely right. The briefing from the House of Commons Library says that the output of the pharmaceutical industry in 2015 was £12.7 billion, which amounts to 8% of the UK’s entire manufacturing output. Let us look at one or two of the larger players.

GlaxoSmithKline is active in more than 150 markets around the world, and has 110,000 employees globally. It has 80 manufacturing sites, and it is the largest vaccines business in the world. Of particular significance is the fact that it conducts all its research in two research hubs: one in Philadelphia and the other in Stevenage in the United Kingdom, where a number of my constituents are proud to work. AstraZeneca is another large pharmaceutical company that is active in the UK. It has 6,700 UK employees, and supports a further 35,000 jobs in the UK. It operates across seven sites, including one in Luton, close to my constituency. Again, a number of my constituents are rightly proud to work there.

As the Secretary of State said, the medicines bill for NHS England, at £15.2 billion in 2015-16, is the second largest cost for the organisation, after staff costs, so it is
absolutely vital that we secure value for money in this huge area of spend. It is a concern that the CMA has spoken of “excessive and unfair prices” and has referred to companies that have “abused a dominant position”. There have been incidences of no competition or insufficient competition, so it is right that the Government have stepped in to deal with the issue. That touches on a broader philosophical point. We had a brief exchange on this earlier. In a response to me only a couple of days ago on the morality of business behaviour, the Prime Minister wrote: “we need to ensure that the free market has an ethical basis”. I absolutely agree.

The Library briefing for the debate looks at the top 11 medicine price increases, ranging from ascorbic acid, with an eye-watering 1,012% price rise, right up to Doxepin, which had a 5,281% price rise. In some cases—if some of the ingredients and some of the raw material for a particular drug are suddenly in short supply—a price increase such as that may be justified, but the Department knows that, in the majority of cases, there is no valid reason for the huge increases. That is why the Government have, properly, acted. Therefore, I welcome the Bill’s powers to reduce prices, to impose price controls and, importantly, to gather information. However, I have a couple of questions for my hon. Friend the Minister on gathering information.

Getting information is vital, and I am pleased that the Government have included measures in the Bill to obtain complete information. Is the Minister satisfied that there is sufficient analytical ability in his Department to really know what is going on? I ask that for this reason. I have had the huge privilege of working with members of the senior civil service in a different Department in the past two years, but sometimes we expect civil servants to have a range of skills that it is not fair of us to expect them to have. Is there the necessary commercial expertise in his Department to really work out what is going on with the additional information that he and his officials will have at their fingertips? Is there a scheme for secondments between pharmaceutical businesses and the Department of Health, so that his officials really know how the market works and any particular games that might be played? That is important.

I am aware that one permanent secretary in post at the moment had a secondment earlier in his civil service career to Diageo, but it is important that the Minister and the permanent secretary ensure that there is that capability in their Department. If it is not there, I hope that he and the ministerial team will take steps to ensure that it is. I say that because, if we look at some of the emails that came into the public domain as a result of the investigation by The Times—some were brought to light through freedom of information requests—it seems that there was not quite the level of serious analysis, probing and inquiry that we would all, including the Minister, have liked to see.

The Government have introduced the Bill because they care passionately about the future of our NHS. They will do everything necessary to protect it and that very much includes getting value for money from the drugs that the NHS pays for. On the Conservative Benches, we value and care about the role of the free market. We know that it is the greatest economic mechanism in the history of mankind for creating wealth and for relieving poverty. It is because we care about it that we will act to reform where that is necessary, whether that be in the interests of the NHS or any other part of our country.

7.33 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): This is an uncontroversial set of measures and I confirm my support for the Bill as it stands. The great strides in medical science over the past decade and beyond are obviously to be celebrated, with cutting-edge new treatments for life-threatening and life-shortening conditions, including a number of rare diseases and cancers, offering many people the hope of improved health, longer life and a quality of life that in the past would not have been possible. As well as the enormous benefits it brings to patients, the life sciences industry makes an incredibly valuable contribution to the UK, and it is only right that we acknowledge that today. However, there is an inevitable cost attached to the triumph of modern medicine, and the challenge is to ensure patient access to new treatments as quickly as possible, while ensuring value for money for the NHS.

The Bill seeks to address some of the shortcomings. It addresses clear abuses of the current system and I think that it will bring greater consistency to the existing arrangements for controlling the cost of medicines new and old. As I have said, I find myself in agreement with the proposals.

It is good that so many companies recognise their responsibility for keeping the branded medicines bill in check by signing up to the pharmaceutical price regulation scheme. Under the scheme, manufacturers pay a rebate to the Department of Health to cover expenditure on branded medicines above agreed limits. It is a responsible approach, helping to ensure that patients can benefit from access to novel drugs in a way that is sustainable for the taxpayer. However, I agree with the Secretary of State on the need to address the current disparity whereby the statutory medicines pricing scheme delivers lower savings than the voluntary scheme. Those differences are expected to widen, which is clearly not in keeping with the spirit of either arrangement, so it makes sense that they should be more closely aligned. As he said, we have to remove the incentive to shift from one scheme to another.

I particularly welcome the proposals to strengthen the authority of the Secretary of State to intervene where unbranded medicines are priced excessively. The NHS and patients benefit immensely from medicines, which were once available only at great public expense, becoming available far more cheaply after the patent expires and generic products come on to the market. We should recognise the great value that the competitive market brings, saving the NHS more than £1.3 billion every year, according to the British Generic Manufacturers Association, but we also know that the overall cost of generic items is increasing at a faster rate than branded items, and that there have been some outrageous increases, to which other hon. Members have referred, in the price of some individual generic drugs in recent years when there is only a single company producing that drug. It looks like a clear case of profiteering, where the NHS is being ripped off.

Let us be clear what the implications are when a particular company makes an excessive profit from increasing the price of a drug in that way. It means that
other NHS patients, particularly those in more marginal areas that do not get the attention that they deserve, lose out. There is less money to spend on, for example, teenagers with mental health problems or learning disabilities. There is a price to be paid for that excessive profiteering. It is utterly unethical behaviour. I hope that the Competition and Markets Authority can find a way to take action against these companies, which appear to have constructed a business model to exploit the loophole.

As hon. Members have said, a number of generic medicines increased in price by more than 2,000% in the last decade. The most horrific example I have come across is a medicine that increased in price from £13.98 in 2005 to £632.96 in 2015, a rise of more than £600 per item dispensed. It is utterly despicable for any private company to think that it can do that. The Government are right to take action to end that outrageous practice.

Generics account for three quarters of prescription items dispensed in the community. In those cases where competition fails to deliver value for money, it is important that there are measures at our disposal to control prices and to tackle abuses that could place intolerable pressure on NHS budgets. It makes little sense that generic medicines can be controlled through the statutory scheme, but that the Government are currently prevented from stepping in when a company’s branded products are regulated through the PPRS. It seems clear that we should remove that anomaly. I should add that, in using these powers to introduce price controls, the Government should of course exercise caution and guard against any unintended consequences that may impact on the viability of smaller companies. I am sure that the Government will be alert to that.

The aims and provisions of the Bill are admirable, but it is only part of a much wider debate about how we can sustain access to groundbreaking new treatments when the NHS is in the middle of the longest financial squeeze in its history. One intervention from a Government Member on the Secretary of State drew attention to the fact that the total bill for drugs is rising at an unsustainable rate. The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) also raised this question, and we have to address that because the NHS will not be sustainable at the current rate of increase in cost.

It is no secret that the NHS has struggled to adapt to modern medicines, particularly those that carry a large budgetary impact. Both NICE and NHS England have had great difficulty in figuring out which medicines to approve and how those medicines are to be afforded and brought to patients. Recently, NHS England has delayed funding for the new hepatitis C treatment, so I was interested in the points made by the SNP representative, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford).

We also have the ongoing and deeply unsavoury case of the PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis treatment. Not only is NHS England taking its legal challenge to the bitter end to avoid having to pay for the drug, but there have been reports of it pitting patient groups against each other by saying that patients could miss out on vital treatments for cancer or rare diseases for children should PrEP be funded. We do not want to get into comparing the rights and interests of one group of patients against those of another in that way.

Earlier this month, NHS England and NICE launched a consultation on proposals to change the way some drugs are funded when there is a high cost involved. NHS England and clinical commissioning groups are legally required to fund drugs recommended by NICE as being clinically and cost-effective, normally within three months of the guidance being issued, barring unique circumstances. Under the new proposals, if NICE recommends a drug that will bring an estimated cost to the NHS above a certain amount—£20 million is the suggested figure—NHS England can go back to NICE and ask it for longer to roll out the medicine if it is unable to agree a lower price with the manufacturer. Surely that is precisely the opposite of what we ought to be trying to achieve as regards speedier access to new drugs that are coming on stream. Ignoring questions about how that somewhat arbitrary cost threshold was arrived at, there is a concern that this is a creeping step towards the rationing of approved treatments in the NHS. It seems to me to be an admission that the NHS cannot afford to pay even for the drugs that are found to be cost-effective by NICE; similar concerns have been raised by Nicholas Timmins, that highly respected observer who is a senior fellow at the King’s Fund.

The great worry is that opening up the debate on how quickly or slowly approved treatments can be adopted will put us on a slippery slope to a new discussion about whether approved treatments should be adopted at all, and at the very least UK patients will be further disadvantaged—the SNP spokesperson has already made the point that we compare very badly with other countries—and there will be more delays in getting access to new cost-effective treatments.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that we are one of a tiny handful of OECD countries that allow that opening price to be set completely by the pharmaceutical industry and to be set as high as it likes?

Norman Lamb: I note that point. I suppose my overall point is that given the unsustainable increase in the total drugs bill and given the actions that NHS England and NICE appear now to be taking, it seems that we will be in a more difficult position in getting speedy access to new drugs that can be life-saving. The Government need to reflect on that. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire made the point in her speech that this Bill tidies up things that have to be tidied up, but there is a much bigger debate about how on earth the NHS can afford vital treatments that in other countries patients are getting access to much sooner.

If we are approaching a situation in which we are unable to cope with new treatments that have been judged by an arm’s length expert body, NICE, to be clinically effective for patients and cost-effective for the NHS, it is yet more evidence that the NHS needs more resources, and I repeat again to the Minister—he will be sick of hearing me say it—that at some point the Government must recognise that they are simply drifting towards a crash with the NHS. We face an existential challenge that this evening’s debate has highlighted and that has to be confronted at some point. I urge the Government again to consider a cross-party approach so that we can ultimately achieve, in discussion with the public, a long-term and sustainable settlement for the
NHS and care that recognises both this dramatic increase in the cost of drugs and that all our loved ones want to have access to those drugs in their hour of need.

We should also be mindful of the potential impact of Brexit on the life sciences industry and the additional challenges we face in keeping the NHS medicines bill under control. If trade between the UK and other EU countries becomes subject to customs duties, import VAT and border controls, thereby increasing costs to the life sciences industry, that might in turn drive up the costs of new medicines to the NHS, and impact on access for UK patients to the most innovative new treatments.

Finally, we also need to make sure that evaluation processes and methodologies are fit for purpose. Traditional appraisal methods and notions of cost-effectiveness are unsuitable for many modern medicines, especially for drugs of immense scientific innovation that target just a small number of patients, but the NHS has been slow to respond to that. The Cancer Drugs Fund is a case in point—established as a sticking plaster after a cluster of promising drugs were judged not to be cost-effective. While it is almost certainly the case that many of those treatments came with too high a price to be routinely funded, few would deny that they were being evaluated under outdated processes that could not fully capture their value. Many rare disease treatments suffer from the same problem.

Companies have a duty to ensure that their medicines are fairly priced, but NHS England and NICE also have a duty to make sure that their evaluation processes and decision-making criteria are fit for purpose, so that new medicines are given a fair hearing without some of the processes and methodologies are fit for purpose. Traditional treatments.

The loophole involves old generics that are usually available via one manufacturer or supplier that also has two children of her own. The Department of Health Board, is understandably concerned, as are other parts of the NHS in the UK, and it has looked at withdrawing the drug. That makes Eira feel very anxious. She is worried about the impact on her colleagues if she is unable to work, and about the impact on her pupils with special educational needs and other needs. She also has two children of her own. The Department of Health has asked the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate this issue. That may or may not result in a good outcome, but it is not a sustainable way forward: it will not close the loophole or stop the same thing happening again. That is one reason why we need this Bill.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Bill, which affects my constituents in north Wales as it applies UK-wide. It is an example of the Government responding reasonably quickly to issues that have been brought to their attention, and they deserve some credit for that.

My principal reason for supporting the Bill relates to the vast increase in the costs of certain off-patent drugs, as we have heard today, and its impact. I first had contact with constituents in June about a loophole in existing regulations resulting in some old generics being hiked up in price by up to 12,000% over the course of eight years. This followed the investigation in The Times in which 50 drugs were identified as costing the NHS about £262 million a year. To put that into perspective, it is equivalent to 7,000 junior doctors. I believe that there have not been similar price increases in mainland Europe, interestingly, which tends to suggest that we have some failures in our regulations. We also discussed this matter in the Health Committee and we saw evidence of correspondence that had highlighted it for at least one year.

We should not refer just to costs, of course. There are also big impacts on patients when their drugs are withdrawn. That issue hit home when I met a constituent, Eira Roche, at one of my constituency surgeries in the summer. She has given me permission to talk about her story. She was diagnosed with hypothyroidism—an underactive thyroid—in 2006. She had the typical symptoms of weight gain, thinning hair and brittle nails. She was tired all the time, she had pain all over and she had a low mood. She was prescribed T4—thyroxine—which is the usual treatment in such circumstances. She was also given a cocktail of other drugs, because the T4 simply did not work. She was on quite strong medication for an extended period.

Eira saw her endocrinologist at Glan Clwyd hospital in my constituency in 2014, and she started her on a drug called T3—liothyronine—which she describes as an absolute revelation. In fact, she said that she was much better than she had been for years: her brain fog lifted and her energy levels soared. When she tried to reduce the dose of the drug, she found that her symptoms began to return and she had to have some time off work. She is now a teaching assistant and caretaker at Ysgol Bodfari.

The drug Eira is taking, liothyronine, was acquired from GlaxoSmithKline in 1992 by Mercury Pharma, which is now part of AMCo. To put the costs into perspective, a packet of the drug cost £34.65 in 2011, but this year the cost is £258.20, which is a 645% increase. Shockingly enough, that increase is relatively insignificant compared with some other examples, but it is still quite significant. I understand that drugs costing £4.3 million a year in 2010 now cost the NHS over £20 million a year.

My local health board, Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, is understandably concerned, as are other parts of the NHS in the UK, and it has looked at withdrawing the drug. That makes Eira feel very anxious. She is worried about the impact on her colleagues if she is unable to work, and about the impact on her pupils with special educational needs and other needs. She also has two children of her own. The Department of Health has asked the Competition and Markets Authority to investigate this issue. That may or may not result in a good outcome, but it is not a sustainable way forward: it will not close the loophole or stop the same thing happening again. That is one reason why we need this Bill.

The generics market is generally competitive, with fair prices for all. I believe it accounts for £4 billion of the £15.2 billion spent by the NHS on drugs per annum. However, the £4 billion figure represents a 20% rise during the past five years. There is a statutory system, which can in theory control the prices of both branded and generic drugs, but there is the loophole I have mentioned.

The loophole involves old generics that are usually available via one manufacturer or supplier that also happens to market branded drugs and is a member of the voluntary pharmaceutical price regulation scheme in relation to them. Their membership of the PPRS means that, under existing legislation, they cannot currently be subject to the statutory scheme, even for their generic drugs. There are concerns that this loophole has been actively exploited by some. Indeed, it has been a deliberate business model to purchase off-patent medicines for which there are no competitor manufacturers—in other
words, where there is no competition. Hon. Members might ask why other drug companies have not sought to manufacture such drugs if they are sold in such large quantities. Introducing new competition is not always feasible, however, because of the time it takes to obtain a rival licence from the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, and because the size of the market is often small once such medications are produced and the manufacturing process is often difficult.

I support a change in the primary legislation—the National Health Service Act 2006—to allow the Government to consult on and bring forward the enforcement of statutory controls on all generic drugs to require companies, if necessary, to reduce the price of the drugs or to impose other controls. This amounts to an extension of the existing deterrent powers that the Secretary of State has not yet used to direct the prices of drugs that already fall under the statutory scheme. Assuming the Bill receives Royal Assent early in 2017, we would need investigations and discussions with the companies concerned where issues have been raised. It is important to be fair not only to the taxpayer but to such companies. If not, there remains the ultimate risk that such products are taken off market.

Where does that leave my constituent, Eira? I am sure she is hoping that the Bill will go through. She will be looking to the CMA to come forward with some good news. She may be tempted to purchase the liothyronine from abroad or online. Interim prescriptions to allow patients like her to continue to receive her prescription need to be considered. If the Government feel that the drugs can be acquired at a much better rate—from abroad, for instance—such people would very much appreciate assistance in doing so. For everyone, the routine and systematic monitoring of drug costs will clearly be important.

I will briefly mention the two other principal elements of the Bill. The first is the proposed change to the statutory scheme. In autumn 2015, the Secretary of State issued a statutory consultation on strengthening the statutory scheme. The Bill proposes to bring the statutory scheme in line with the voluntary 2014 PPRS for all manufacturers or suppliers that are not PPRS members. There are 166 companies currently represented in the PPRA, and £8 billion is currently spent through that mechanism. Interestingly, £647 million is brought back to the taxpayer each year when the agreed cap is exceeded. There are just 17 companies in the statutory scheme, through which £1 billion is spent. There is evidence of companies switching from the voluntary to the statutory scheme for financial reasons, meaning that there is an £88 million annual loss to the taxpayer. It should be borne in mind that these companies are mostly small and non-UK domiciled ones.

Changes to the statutory scheme will require companies to make payments back to the Department of Health based on their level of sales to the NHS—this can be in addition to other mechanisms—whereas the existing statutory scheme operates via a cut to the published list price, which is currently set at 15%. The existing statutory scheme therefore brings in less money, but also results in inequity to companies, risks to supply and uncertainty of financial outcomes for complex reasons that, fortunately for hon. Members, I will not go into. The Bill also proposes new penalties for non-compliance and for the recovery of payments owed through the courts. Ultimately, the Bill creates a more level playing field between companies in the two schemes. It merely extends what is in place for the vast majority of companies, so it is not in any way unreasonable. I do not believe there should be major concerns with regard to the impact on research and investment.

The other element of the Bill involves information powers. The Bill brings together the information requirements for NHS medicines and other supplies in one place in the 2006 Act. It will enable the Government to make regulations to obtain information on the sales and purchases of medicines and other medical supplies from all parts of the supply chain—from the manufacturer to distribution to the pharmacy—for defined purposes. This will improve the data that inform reimbursement arrangements for community pharmacies and GP practices. We hope that it will help to ensure value for money for the NHS.

These are positive proposals, but it is important that they are not overbearing on the companies concerned. In particular, I want to make the case for medical technology and devices businesses, which have not been subject to such data collection in the past. The Secretary of State has given us some reassurances about that today, but we need to recognise that a large proportion of them—99%, I think—are small or medium-sized enterprises, so we need to work with the industry to develop appropriate regulations. We need to avoid onerous and certainly routine data collection beyond what is already required by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

In summary, I support the principles of the Bill—in fact, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry largely supports the Bill as well—but the detail will be subject to consultation during 2017. I look forward to scrutinising the progress of the Bill over the coming months.

7.59 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and to hear many of the points he made. He spoke of the NHS spending £262 million a year on 50 drugs; that is actually £262 million extra that we are spending on those drugs courtesy of the greatly increased prices. That really brings home the problems here and why the Bill needs its Second Reading.

As many hon. Members have already focused on a range of issues, I will focus in particular on generic drugs and some of the huge price increases we have seen. It is right to say—and this was perhaps touched on by the Secretary of State in response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris)—that it is not unreasonable for a pharmaceutical company to make a profit in exchange for investment in developing a new drug and bringing it to market. But that is what our patent system is for. The patent is there to protect for a period of time the ability of the company to charge a reasonable price to reflect the risk it took in its investment.

The key point is that the drugs we are considering are now out of patent. The company has had a reasonable period of time to make its investment back. The issue is that there is only a very limited supply of them. It is
only right that we deal with what is an emerging business model. There can be no two ways about it. Some of the names on the list of companies, such as AMCo and Atmabs, seem consistently to have unusually high increases in prices, in the thousands of per cent. It is clear that a business model is developing to take advantage of a loophole in the legislation and ultimately not to make a profit but to profiteer; at the expense of the NHS and people who need those treatments. I am sure we can all think of instances where drug company lobbying points to patients who are unable to get treatment; this is exactly the sort of thing that means people cannot get treatment.

It was highlighted earlier that it is slightly ironic that here we are, as Conservatives and under a Conservative Government, arguing for price controls. But this is not about intervening in a market but about intervening to deal with market failure, where the normal procedures of competition are not producing a fair or reasonable outcome either for the NHS or for the patients on whose behalf we are providing products.

I went to see the amazing work being done on brain tumour research at Plymouth University recently—the skills and the groundbreaking research that will bring real benefits. But that is not the business model of the companies the Bill deals with. Their model is to look for a drug that needs to be prescribed and has only one supply, then buy it, get hold of the supply and jack the price up. That is nothing to do with delivering new and innovative products. The Bill is therefore very welcome, as it looks to intervene in that situation.

It is also right that to be able to tackle the problem we need information. Let us be blunt; if a company is looking to put its product price up by 12,000% it is not going to be particularly co-operative with an inquiry into whether that is fair, so it is right that the Secretary of State will have powers to require that more information be supplied.

Rob Marris: I am grateful to my new friend, another socialist, for giving way. May I tempt him to suggest some other areas of the economy where he and what I must now call his Christian Democrat fellows would be prepared to address the issue of profiteering, as we on the Opposition Benches would?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but I see you are now in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker, and you are very tough on any irrelevant points or points off subject, so that could be very dangerous territory.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): And you shall not be tempted.

Kevin Foster: That is good to know.

We have seen work the Government have done in other sectors, for example, on information in the energy sector. The Bill deals with a particularly unique practice; there where there is, in effect, only one customer, the NHS, and only one supplier. I am struggling to think of many other industries where that is replicated. That is why these price rises are so disgraceful. This industry is about profiteering from illness and pain. There is nothing else like that.

Rob Marris: May I suggest another industry it might be worth looking at, where this situation obtains, namely the defence supply industry—not all of it, but parts of it?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee I have spent plenty of time looking through examples of defence procurement that went wrong. The Minister might be new to the Department of Health but he certainly is not new to defence procurement. It is noticeable that much of what now makes its way to the PAC for a review of what went wrong concerns legacy issues—for example, the military flying contract—rather than modern procurement. But I am conscious that with Mr Deputy Speaker in the Chair I need to get back to the price of drugs for the NHS.

Looking through the evidence it is clear that the current system of regulation is not effective. Companies can, in effect, put their branded products into the voluntary scheme and use that as a way of jacking up costs for their generic products. That is just not right. As other Members have touched on, we are facing demands and pressures on the NHS. I have no problem with companies that give a good service charging a fair price and making a fair return on their investment.

That is clearly not what is going on with this business model. We can see numerous examples, in particular in the chart put together by the House of Commons Library, which shows increases of thousands of per cent. across a number of products. It is impossible to believe that such increases are going on for any of the input materials for those products. As we have said, this is flagrant racketeering and profiteering at the expense of patients and of people in pain. Even if the drug is still provided, that money should have been spent on other NHS services.

I am therefore pleased at the almost unanimity breaking out in the House on the proposals. They will clearly need to be discussed in more detail in Committee. But it is the right time for the Bill. It is not about tackling fair and legitimate profits but about getting rid of profiteering, which is why it has my full support.

8.6 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster).

From what I understand, the Bill will close the loopholes and gaps that so obviously exist in the current powers attributed to the Secretary of State; hon. Members who have spoken before me highlighted many of those. The measures are important, to ensure that we have value for the taxpayer across the medicines budget, but I take issue with the inclusion of medical supplies and “other related products” in clause 6. The clause introduces a new information power for the Secretary of State. Although I welcome that in principle, I fear it may prove quite onerous for the many small and medium-sized enterprises that supply this side of the business and dominate the medical supplies industry.

I am sure that much of the required information is already collated by each company, but it is important that it can be transmitted easily and in a timely fashion. I listened carefully to the Secretary of State. He implied that he does not want these measures to be burdensome, but I seek the Minister’s assurance on that. As my hon.
Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) highlighted, the ability to use the data effectively is also important. There is no point in collecting lots of data and not being able to use them.

Rob Marris: Coupling those two points together, does the hon. Lady agree that it might be advisable for the Government to look at some sort of threshold—say, a turnover threshold for a company—below which the information would not have to be supplied or might instead be supplied to a lesser extent or in a lesser quantity? That would address the issue of how onerous the requirement might be, but could also address the issue of whether the Government have the capacity to crunch the figures thereby generated.

Maggie Throup: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. There is already a cut-off for some of the data collection of, I think, a turnover of £5 million. Perhaps we could have clarification on that.

What concerns me more is who will define what is classified as medical supplies and other related products. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) alluded to earlier, how long is that piece of string? Proposed new section 264C to the National Health Service Act 2006, which is inserted by clause 6 and supplements proposed new sections 264A and 264B of that Act, requires the Secretary of State—I quote from the explanatory notes to the Bill—

“To consult any body (such as the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry) which appears to the Secretary of State to represent manufacturers, distributors and suppliers of health service medicines, medical supplies or other related products required for the purposes of the health service in England or the United Kingdom before making any regulations under section 264A or 264B.”

That is quite a mouthful.

If the definition of “medical supplies” is unclear, how will the Secretary of State know who to consult? He indicated that he has already had discussions with medicine and medical devices suppliers, but I fear that there might be many more product areas out there that have been missed out of the initial discussions. I therefore ask the Secretary of State to provide clear guidance on what he understands as “medical supplies and other related products”.

For example, do they include in vitro diagnostic products? This is an area of medical supplies with which I am very familiar. If they include IVDs, will he agree to consult the British In Vitro Diagnostics Association, the trade association that represents this industry across the UK? This is an important area of the life sciences industry, with nearly 900 million pathology tests performed every year and approximately 70% of every clinical decision being made using some form of IVD. If they are to be included in the Bill, it needs to be around the table to participate.

I conclude by saying that in general terms I am in favour of the Bill, as it will ensure good value for money for the taxpayer and, ultimately, the patient. At the end of the day, we need to be thinking about the patient. Clarification is required on various parts of the Bill, but I am sure that that will be sorted out in Committee, and I am happy to support it.
trials, we need to be mindful that they are not new drugs; and just because the target is, for example, prostate cancer and not breast cancer, these drugs should still be costed accordingly.

Dr Philippa Whitford: I wonder whether the hon. Lady remembers the time we spent in the House last November debating the Off-patent Drugs Bill. I flagged up the concern that a doctor prescribing a drug with a licence for a use takes precedence over an off-patent drug that may actually be the same. With the sort of gaming we have seen, there is a real concern that drug companies will tweak a drug in the slightest manner and then start selling it to the NHS at hundreds and thousands of pounds, when in actual fact an off-patent drug would do the same job. That has still not been dealt with.

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Lady for making the point so succinctly. I am also grateful to the Secretary of State for his clarification and the comments that have been made about the medical technologies industry, which I believe needs looking at. I would be grateful if we could know whether the savings made are likely to be reinvested in patients, particularly given my position as chair of the all-party group on personalised medicine, and in the latest medicines and treatments.

The Bill is designed to stop individuals making vast sums of money and taking advantage of a loophole. I back the Government’s aim of value for money and fair prices for optimum patient outcomes. I am heartened by the cross-party support for the Bill and look forward to it making positive progress.

8.16 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I thank all Members who have made contributions to the debate. We find ourselves in a situation where we have some time available, which is amazing.

Let me refer to the interventions we heard in the early part of the debate, because a range of interesting points have been raised. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) made the point that the Bill provides the opportunity to look at drugs that have not been licensed, such as Lucentis and Avastin, which is not licensed for age-related macular degeneration but is so needed by that group of people. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State say that he would look at that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris), in a number of amusing interventions, talked about policy on profit control of the pharma sector and found that the Conservative party is marching on to the centre ground—or has perhaps gone past the centre ground.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) talked about the proportion of the NHS budget spent on dealing with diabetes. He was concerned about the increase in the drugs bill and suggested the use of structured interventions, not just more drugs, because such a large proportion of the NHS budget is being spent on diabetes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Alyn and Deeside (Mark Tami) made the important point that we need to ensure the measures in the Bill do not act as a disincentive for pharma companies to conduct research into rarer conditions. I think that hon. Members who have contributed know we are walking the line in terms of making savings but making sure there are not disincentives.

The right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) welcomed the Bill. He talked about our ageing population—we returned to that with our last speaker—and the increasing drugs bill. He talked about the importance of new drugs, but also the need to deal with unacceptable profiteering, something referred to by a number of Members.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) talked about the UK having the biggest research network in the world. She talked about change and the fact that the pharma companies would be nervous and anxious. She welcomed the tidying up aspect of the Bill and I think the general view of Members in all parts of the House was to welcome that. Like a number of hon. Members, she talked about not just enabling the management of cost pressures but doing something more radical. That has been a real flavour of the debate: using this as an opportunity to do something different. I agree with her concerns about the data collection aspects of the Bill and I will say more about that. I also agree that we need to do something more radical. She talked about tackling the five-year delay to access new medicines and rightly pointed out that that is probably where our poorer survival rates are coming from.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) commended The Times for investigating this issue. He also talked about the information powers and questioned whether the Department of Health had the analytical ability to use the data being gathered. That is an important question. If new data needs to be gathered, what are we going to do with it?

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) acknowledged the value of the competitive market, but talked about the sometimes outrageous increases in the price of generic drugs—and we have heard some staggering examples today. He gave the example of a rise of £600 per item dispensed in one particular case, and he hopes, as other hon. Members do, that the Competition and Markets Authority will take action. That has been a key theme in tonight’s debate.

The right hon. Gentleman also talked about not wanting to pit the needs and interests of some patients who need drugs such as PrEP against those who need other drugs. I agree, and I do not think that we should go there in our debate. He spoke about the slippery slope when we get into debating whether to delay adopting even approved treatments. In his view, that provides more evidence that the NHS needs more resources.

The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) talked about the impact on his constituent of a drug prescribed to her that helps her to work and increases her energy levels, the cost of which has increased by 645%. We must maintain a focus on the impact on individuals of the decisions that we make. She has found a drug that suits her, and it would be dreadful for her if it were withdrawn. The hon. Gentleman also talked about the difficulties of introducing new competition into the market. His constituent is hoping that the Bill goes through, as are many others here tonight, and wants action on competition and markets. Let us all hope this goes through.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) talked about intervention to deal with market failure. In his view, we need to separate out the companies that are
doing good research, such as the brain tumour research that he has recently seen, and those that have nothing to do with producing new and innovative products, but are just making money.

**Rob Marris:** I would like to cite for my hon. Friend the House the Library briefing, which shows that it is not exactly as cut and dried as the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) seemed to think. It tells us that the Competition and Markets Authority took action against pharmaceutical companies with regards to generic pricing, and that GlaxoSmithKline and a number of other companies were fined £45 million when it was found that payments had been made in order to prevent the antidepressant medication Paroxetine being offered on the generics market. GSK is a great pharma company for coming up with new drugs, but it crossed the line in this case, according to the Library briefing, so it is not always either/or when it comes to these pharma companies.

**Barbara Keeley:** No, but I think the hon. Member for Torbay was talking about companies that are not doing any research, but just buying up generic products and profiteering from them. There has been general condemnation of those sort of companies on all sides.

**Kevin Foster:** I want to be clear about this point. I think the shadow Minister would probably agree that certain names keep on popping up, particularly in *The Times* investigation, of companies that seem to be regularly involved in some of the most eye-watering price increases and involved in the mixed model. This Bill is about tackling anyone else who might be thinking of following that kind of business model as a way of exploiting the NHS for money.

**Barbara Keeley:** Very much so.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) welcomed the Bill and talked about the fact that individual CCGs could save £1 million on unused repeat prescriptions. A number of different forms of savings could clearly be made. She talked about the pressure on social care, and I join her in my concern about that. The right hon. Member for Chelmsford spoke earlier about an ageing population and the need for drugs, but older people also do not want to be isolated. It is worrying that 16,000 cases of malnutrition were found last year with an average age of 64 among those cases. People need social care, and I hope that the new Chancellor will listen and bring forward funding for social care in the autumn statement, because people need more than drugs.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made clear earlier, Labour supports the broad aims of the Bill and what the Government are seeking to achieve—better control of the cost of medicines. However, as my hon. Friend also outlined, we have a number of concerns, and I hope that the Minister will address them in his closing speech.

As well as taking the understandable measures to collect pharmaceutical data and manage costs, the Bill also introduces provisions to manage the purchase of other medical supplies. I was glad to hear the Secretary of State raise in his opening speech the issue of the impact on the medical supply sector, but I have heard concerns expressed that the medical technology sector sees the new information measures as “onerous”. The hon. Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) mentioned that, too. There is a concern that measures in the Bill fail to take into account the unique characteristics of medical devices and the medical device industry. I hope that they will start to be taken into account as the Bill progresses. There is seen to be a danger that the measures will put additional burdens on that sector and the NHS, and lead to higher costs. I hope that that is not the Government’s intention; it would be ludicrous if costs were increased by a Bill that is designed to manage them.

We need to bear it in mind that the medical technology industry employs around 89,000 people in the UK, has an annual turnover of over £17 billion and has seen employment growth of around 11% in recent years. Some 99% of the UK’s 3,310 medical technology firms are SMEs, with 85% of them having a turnover of less than £5 million. The cap levels at which data could be collected were mentioned earlier. We should bear it in mind that we are talking about an awful lot of small companies.

The Bill imposes a regulatory burden on all companies in the supply chain. The reporting requirements will affect all firms producing medical supplies, including the very small organisations. The issues we have extensively discussed on pharmaceutical pricing bear no relation to the pricing of other medical supplies. The example of a particular type of product was mentioned earlier, but they are or seem to be treated the same way in the Bill.

On the scale of the burden being imposed, the Government’s impact assessment is not much help. It says:

“The main costs will be on manufacturers, wholesalers and dispensers. These costs have not been quantifyed, as their magnitude will not be known until after consultation on subsequent regulations.”

Measures seem to have been bolted on to this Bill, as Members have mentioned, at the last minute, but because they could have a negative impact on the medical technology sector, we need to be very aware of them. The new information powers proposed by the Government are being put forward at a time when manufacturing firms are going through the uncertainty surrounding this country’s leaving the EU. These measures can only add to that uncertainty. As I said, 99% of the medical technology firms are SMEs, with 85% of them having a turnover of less than £5 million.

Notes on the financial implications of the Bill put forward a curious position that “no policies will be directly implemented as a result of these changes. Their implementation would require additional future changes to secondary legislation and additional Impact Assessments to assess their cost effectiveness.”

Ministers are asking us to change primary legislation to give the Government new information powers, but the details and impact of those new powers on the supply chain will emerge only in future. That level of uncertainty is unacceptable, and we will seek to amend the relevant clauses in Committee if we feel that this still needs to be resolved.

Importantly, the information powers will also impact on dispensing GPs and pharmacists. I note that the BMA was not represented at the workshop held by the Department of Health on the information powers. We wait to hear, but I would find it unusual if our hard-pressed
dispensing GPs would welcome the additional work required of them to provide and disclose information to the Government.

The other part of the supply chain affected by the new information powers will be pharmacists. The Government have just imposed punitive cuts on pharmacists, which we discussed in the House last week. I am still deeply concerned about those cuts. Ministers do not seem to understand what they are doing to the sector. On Friday, an independent community pharmacist in my constituency told me that he estimated that the Government cuts would cost him £86,000 a year, and that he envisaged an average cut of £60,000 for many pharmacies. That will certainly mean staff cuts, but it also means potential bankruptcies for the pharmacies that will be hardest hit.

In relation to that, and the new information powers that the Bill imposes, Pharmacy Voice told me that “small volume pharmacies are the hardest hit by the proposals and many face a funding cut of around 20% in 2017/18 from the imposition of cuts announced...They do not have teams of administrative staff who can respond to demands for information, and the likelihood is that the NHS would insist on information being provided in a specific format.”

It could be information that they do not currently analyse. For example, when a pharmacy buys stock for dispensing, it may also include purchases of medicines for sale over the counter. The overall discount the pharmacy gets on the order is not allocated to each item, and pharmacies could not provide the actual price paid per item.

On behalf of the pharmacists that it represents, Pharmacy Voice wants to ensure that the cost of meeting the Government’s information requirements is fully funded by the NHS. It feels that the imposition of cuts has already jeopardised the future of the pharmacy sector, and that of small pharmacy businesses in particular. Can the Minister assure me that the cost of the information that must be gathered under the new information powers will not impose an additional burden on pharmacists?

The Labour Opposition support the broad aims of the Bill and the measures to control the costs of medicines, but, as I said earlier, we are concerned about the information powers that the Government want to take, which are considered to be “onerous” by the medical supplies sector. We want to be reassured that they are not. The work and the costs involved could deal yet another blow to the pharmacy sector, which, as I have said, is still counting the costs of the Government’s imposition of funding cuts amounting to 12% for the rest of this year and over 7% next year. We will table amendments in Committee relating to the work and the costs involved in information-gathering.

We also ask Ministers to give serious consideration to using all future rebates from the pharmaceutical sector to improve access to treatments for patients. A number of Members have referred to the need to examine that, and I hope that Ministers will take the opportunity to do so as the Bill progresses.

8.30 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): What a great pleasure it is, Mr Deputy Speaker, to stand before you after this important debate, with a little time in which to satisfy as many Members as I can, while recognising that the Committee stage will begin shortly and we shall then have an opportunity to discuss points with which I cannot deal today. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. We have heard a number of excellent contributions, some of which showed a surprising knowledge of the intricacies of pharmaceutical pricing but were none the less very welcome.

The Bill deals with a treasured national institution, our national health service, and with the need to secure the best possible value for the taxpayer. Medicines represent the second largest cost to the NHS, after staff, and it is important that we do not pay over the odds. The level of interest and the quality of the contributions that we have heard today have shown how important that is to all Members. I find it refreshing that a debate involving the NHS should feature the degree of consensus that has erupted across the House today. I am led to believe that—as has been pointed out by other Members—this is a relatively unusual occurrence, so I shall enjoy it for as long as I can.

The debate reinforces the principles of securing the best possible value for the NHS, making decisions on the basis of good-quality information, and supporting this country’s innovative pharmaceutical industry, to which several Members have referred. Those are principles on which we can all agree. However, the debate has raised a number of other issues, some of which I hope to clarify for the benefit of Members who have commented on them. In one of her closing comments, the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) sought to link last week’s announcements about community pharmacy funding with the Bill. I can reassure her that there is no link whatsoever between the Bill’s provisions on information collection and the announcement about decisions on community pharmacy funding. The funding changes will come into effect in December and are not reliant on any of the provisions in the Bill, and the provisions in the Bill will not change those decisions.

Barbara Keeley: Perhaps I was not clear enough, but I was not making that point. I was making the point that the cuts imposed by the Government will mean that some community pharmacies—the smaller ones; the independent ones—will not have the necessary staff. If the Government are imposing a new information-gathering requirement, who will carry out that task? As I said, there may be staff cuts amounting to between £60,000 and £80,000, and people will simply not be able to absorb a new requirement.

Mr Dunne: Just to reassure the hon. Lady, I can tell her that the establishment cost for each pharmacy is currently £25,000, and there will be a reduction in that cost rather than a much larger cost. She must be referring to companies that have several establishments, rather than to individual ones. I will touch on the points that she has raised about information gathering in a moment.

We have heard a number of allegations during the debate, starting with those made by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who I am sure will be joining us shortly, that the Conservative party appears to have broken out in a rash of Corbynism. I can assure the hon. Gentleman categorically that that is not the case. What we are seeking to do through the Bill is address points, which have been made by hon. Members on both sides of the House, about the potential for exploitative pricing, particularly of unbranded generics that are of low volume, in circumstances where there is
no competition from an alternative supplier in the market. I believe that there is considerable agreement on that across the House.

I welcome the support for the Bill from the Labour Front Bench, from the Front Bench of the Scottish National party and from the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). They all support the principles behind the Bill. I look forward to what I hope will be a rapid conclusion to proceedings on this short Bill in Committee. Doubtless hon. Members will be raising important points in Committee, but I am sure that we will continue to have constructive contributions throughout.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston mentioned difficulties of access and funding for new medicines. These points were also raised by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). The NHS is investing in innovative medicine and, in the first year of the current voluntary scheme, medicines covered by the innovation scorecard saw an increase of more than 18% compared with growth of about 5% in medicines not on the scorecard. That illustrates that we are prepared to fund patients’ use of innovative medicines under the existing scheme. However, we recognise the need to continue to ensure patient access to new medicines. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State referred earlier to the accelerated access review, which was announced earlier today. That will accelerate the speed at which 21st-century innovation in medicine and medical technologies can be taken up by patients and their families through the NHS. That will present a real advantage—bringing forward innovations from pharmaceutical companies, not only in this country, and driving them through for use in the NHS.

A number of hon. Members have referred to the investigative work of The Times in helping to highlight the problems with unbranded generics. I would like to add our welcome to the investigation that was undertaken by those journalists, but gently to point out that the Government were already aware of some of the problems. Indeed, we published a consultation in December last year raising that issue, and I think it was partly in the light of that that The Times decided to do its work. I do not wish to decry that work in any way, however. It was clearly helpful.

We have referred cases to the Competitions and Markets Authority, as the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West (Rob Marris) mentioned. The CMA has imposed fines in one case, as he said, and it is expecting to reach a final decision on another in the coming months. Two more cases were opened in March and April this year. We are looking to refer examples of bad practice to the relevant authorities when we come across them.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire asked how the data collection would work. That point was also raised by other hon. Members. We already collect significant data from the supply chain for medicines under the voluntary scheme and the statutory scheme. We collect data from manufacturers and wholesalers of generics, and from pharmacies themselves. As part of developing the regulations, and of the consultation that will take place before we introduce the scheme, we are looking to identify as many automated data collection solutions as possible, in order to minimise the burden to which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South referred. In particular, we recognise that some of the medical products companies are small companies, and we want to make their burden as light as possible.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire referred to the devolved Administrations and how we will work with them. Our intention is that they would be able to access data not on a timing of our choosing, but as they require, and that, again, will be undertaken in a manner that we hope to capture in a memorandum of understanding so that there is clarity between each Administration and ourselves as to how that will work.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk asked in particular about how we intend to control the medicines bill overall, and a number of Members have mentioned that. The cost of medicines across the NHS is rising quite rapidly. That is a concern, and it gets to the heart of why we have sought to introduce this legislation.

We are looking in the first place to align the statutory and the voluntary cost control schemes for the supply of medicine. At present, companies may decide to join either scheme depending on the other benefits they perceive in the schemes, but we believe that the financial benefit to the NHS of each scheme should be the same. Our proposals will put beyond doubt the Government’s powers to amend the statutory scheme to achieve this objective, which the impact assessment has indicated should save the taxpayer some £90 million a year. Draft regulations of these provisions will be available at the Committee stage.

The second element of the Bill strengthens the Government’s powers to set prices of medicines where companies charge unreasonably high prices for unbranded generic medicines. In most cases, competition works well to keep prices down. However, when it does not, and when companies are making excessive profits, the Government should be able to take action. This Bill closes a current loophole in the legislative framework. We are all agreed across the House that we cannot allow profiteering at the expense of the NHS.

Thirdly, the Bill will strengthen the Government’s powers to collect information on the costs of medicines, medical supplies and other related products from across the supply chain. Putting existing voluntary provision of information regarding medicines on a statutory footing will enable the Government to set more accurately and fairly the reimbursement arrangements for community pharmacies and dispensing GPs. In addition, the power will provide vital data to underpin the reformed statutory scheme for controlling medicine pricing, and will give us more evidence about whether companies are making excessive profits at the expense of the NHS.

I want to reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in his opening remarks to assure the House about the impact of the information powers on the medical technologies industry. It may surprise Members, and in particular Opposition Members, that the powers to require information from suppliers already exists in section 260 of the National Health Service Act 2006—[ Interruption. ]—which the hon. Member for Wolverhampton South West says from a sedentary position he remembers bringing into effect, but we think that those enforcement powers are draconian and wish to make them more proportionate. The Government have never in fact used the powers under the 2006 Act,
and we want to marry powers for information gathering with those we will have for medicines, so that there is no confusion in future about which information regime applies.

Rob Marris: First, may I say in passing that it does not sound very draconian if the powers have never been enforced? Section 260 of the 2006 Act refers to medical supplies and defines them, as I said earlier, as “surgical, dental and optical materials and equipment”.

Will the Minister look at that definition, because it seems to me that it is not as wide as many people think, and therefore there is a way to get around it if certain technological companies wish to do so, such as the manufacturers of MRI scanners, which I do not think is the intention of the House. Will he look at that definition?

Mr Dunne: I think the hon. Gentleman may be making a pitch to the Committee of Selection and I would be delighted to see him committing his considerable intellect to this topic. I think we will spend much of our discussion refining the definitions of what information is appropriate and how it will be gathered.

The Government intend to table amendments to the Bill to reflect how the information-power provisions will apply in the devolved Administrations. The amendments will ensure that the Government can collect information that relates to devolved purposes and share it—with appropriate safeguards relating to confidentiality—with the devolved Administrations, enabling them to use the information for their own purposes. To avoid duplication, we have agreed with the devolved Administrations that the Government will collect information from manufacturers and wholesalers for the whole of the UK while each country will collect information from the pharmacies and GPs in their territories.

The degree of consensus and the support that we have received from across the House, for which my colleagues and I are extremely appreciative, has made this a remarkable debate. Medicines are a vital part of the treatments provided by our NHS. Robust cost control and data requirements are key tools to ensure that NHS spending on medicines across the UK continues to be affordable while delivering better value for taxpayers and freeing up resources, which supports access to treatments provided by our NHS. Robust cost control and data requirements are key tools to ensure that NHS decisions are based on more accurate, robust information on medicine costs. This will be fairer for industry, for pharmacies and for the NHS, patients and the taxpayer. I am pleased to commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

HEALTH SERVICE MEDICAL SUPPLIES (COSTS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill:

Commital

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 17 November 2016.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

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

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS WITHOUT DEBATE

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 to 5 together.

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

CONTRACTING OUT

That the draft Contracting Out (Functions relating to the Royal Parks) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 21 July, be approved.

DANGEROUS DRUGS

That the draft Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 20 July, be approved.

LEGAL AID ADVICE

That the Civil Legal Aid (Merits Criteria) (Amendment) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 781), dated 20 July 2016, a copy of which was laid before this House on 21 July, be approved.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Ordered, That the Motions in the name of Mr David Lidington relating to the appointment of Sir John Holmes and Dame Susan Bruce to the Electoral Commission shall be treated as if they related to instruments subject to the provisions of Standing Order No. 118 (Delegated Legislation Committees) in respect of which notice has been given that the instruments be approved.—(Michael Ellis.)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered, That, at the sitting on Thursday 27 October,

(1) notwithstanding paragraph (4) of Standing Order No. 14, the motion in the name of Mr David Lidington relating to privileges shall have precedence over the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee;
(2) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Mr David Lidington not later than one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion; and such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved;

(3) notwithstanding sub-paragraph (2)(c), as applied by paragraph (4), of Standing Order No. 14 (Arrangement of public business), the backbench business set down for consideration may be entered upon at any hour, may be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours or until five o’clock, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(Michael Ellis.)

NHS Provision (Brighton and Hove)

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

8.47 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): This debate is intended to highlight the ongoing NHS crisis affecting my constituency and the city of Brighton and Hove and to outline solutions to what is far more than a purely local problem. The concept of a publicly funded national health service is at risk, and the situation in Brighton and Hove reveals a whole host of systemic problems that stem in large part from the Health and Social Care Act 2012. Patients and staff are being let down in my constituency and elsewhere, and it is more than likely that the additional strain of the winter months will further exacerbate the crisis.

The picture I will paint of the situation in Brighton and Hove is deeply worrying. It encompasses our hospital, our GP provision, our ambulance services and our community care. Those services are held together by incredibly dedicated staff, who often work well beyond the hours for which they are paid to keep things going. I want to thank and pay tribute to each and every one of them. Despite their tireless efforts, however, the overall picture of health and social care in Brighton and Hove is chaotic, not because of a lack of hard-working staff, but mainly as a result of two things: harsh funding cuts and an increasingly fragmented structure based on marketisation and the increasing commercialisation and privatisation of our NHS.

I will provide a quick overview. Our local hospital, the Royal Sussex, is in special measures for both quality and finance. As of July, over 9,000 people had been waiting for more than 18 weeks to start treatment—the worst recorded among 185 providers and the 208 clinical commissioning groups that submit data nationally. Over 200 people have been on a waiting list for more than a year.

While I am talking about the hospital, let me quickly put on the record the fact that I am very grateful that we are soon to have a brand new building—we certainly need it. The hard-working staff in that hospital are operating in a building that stems from before Florence Nightingale; it is the oldest estate in the whole NHS. At the same time, it is undertaking increasingly complex work for the whole of Sussex as a major trauma centre for the wider region.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): My neighbour mentions that we are constructing a new wing to the hospital and a bunch of other services locally. Does she agree that the fact that this is going to create an additional administrative burden and challenges for staff, including clinical staff, means we have to get this situation in Brighton and Hove right now, otherwise the additional burden could just be too much for the system locally?

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as he anticipates exactly what I am going to say. Of course we need new bricks and mortar, but we also need finances for the services inside them. We desperately need a central funding settlement that recognises the unique pressures on our hospital, so that the systems can be updated. For example, we need a computerised records system—this is not rocket science but we desperately need it. We need increased capacity, particularly for
That is just one example, but there are plenty of other examples of what is going wrong in the health service in Brighton and Hove. Patients in the city have seen six GP practices close so far this year alone. When The Practice Group announced that it was walking away from its contract to run five surgeries in the city, the decision was largely a financial one. With almost 11,500 patients registered, the disruption and uncertainty was widely felt, and other nearby surgeries were simply expected somehow to manage increased patient numbers. NHS England was not required to step in to help because of the terms agreed with The Practice Group. The fact that this type of contract is no longer permissible was of little comfort to the patients forced to find a new GP with whom to register. I particularly recall the constituent who contacted me after a sixth surgery, Goodwood Court, was closed and who was unable to visit the emergency drop-in clinic at Brighton station for an urgent inhaler prescription because of a disability. That is just one individual, among many, who has experienced unnecessary, unhelpful anxiety and distress as a result of the Government’s NHS policies.

Our emergency ambulance service was placed in special measures on 29 September following a Care Quality Commission report that rated it as “inadequate”. The inspectors praised front-line staff, but identified unsafe levels of staffing, as well as poor procedures and leadership. The city’s mental health services, especially those serving children and young people, are overstretched and underfunded. Adult social care services in Brighton and Hove face ongoing cuts, despite the cost to individuals and the NHS. That means that over the next four years the city council is looking at potential cuts of £24 million and the complete privatisation of the remaining council adult social care, day centres, carers and so on.

I have lost track of the number of times that Ministers assert they are investing record amounts in the NHS, yet conveniently fail to mention the record amounts they are simultaneously cutting from local authority budgets that are supposed to cover essential care services for vulnerable people.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The hon. Lady is my near neighbour, and I refer back to some of the comments made earlier by my neighbour, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). She is painting a gloomy picture, and I acknowledge the severe problems within Brighton and Hove. Does she also acknowledge that, next door, the Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust is one of only five hospital trusts in the whole country rated “outstanding”, yet we face the pressures of having one of the most elderly populations in the country and having increasing pressures placed on us because of people coming from Brighton and Hove to access NHS services across the county boundary? Why is Brighton and Hove in such a parlous state at the moment, yet a few miles down the road we are able to run a rather good hospital service?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and congratulate him on the performance of his local hospital trust. I recognise what he is saying about the extra pressures put on the surrounding area when there is a particular problem as there is in Brighton and Hove, but I contest the implication of what he is saying, which is that there is something particular to Brighton and Hove. If we look around the country, we see that, sadly, a great many hospital trusts are in severe difficulties. Only a few months ago, the Public Accounts Committee was absolutely saying the same thing, and I shall refer to that shortly. If I am asked specifically about Brighton and Hove, I would say that we face some issues—for example, the fact that we are working in the oldest building in the whole NHS. There are particular problems when that is combined with the demographics. There are particular challenges in Brighton and Hove that come from having a number of older people and people with lots of complex problems, such as mental health problems and homelessness problems. I do want to challenge the idea that, somehow, this might be a problem simply in Brighton and Hove, because it is not.

Tim Loughton: Fortunately, we have lots of time to debate this matter. The hon. Lady must acknowledge that, certainly recently, the average age of a patient in Worthing hospital—taking out maternity and paediatrics—is 85. That places considerable extra pressures on our hospital system. The average age in Brighton and Hove, the city, is considerably younger. The average age of people accessing health treatment in her city is considerably younger and therefore less demanding, so why is there such a contrast in the performances of our respective hospital trusts?

Caroline Lucas: That would be a very interesting issue to debate. The hon. Gentleman can get his own debate on Worthing hospital, but what I know about are the particular problems that are facing Brighton and Hove, and I will point again to the particular complex needs that come together when one has a city full of young people as well as very elderly people, a lot of people with mental health problems, homelessness problems, vulnerability problems and so on. If he will give me a little more time, I will set out for him what some of the problems are in Brighton and Hove and also, crucially, what some of the answers are.

I was talking about adult social care and about the fact that, unfortunately, the Government are cutting yet more money from local authority budgets that is supposed to cover those essential care services for vulnerable people.

The Government know that social care in places such as Brighton and Hove is on its knees, and that that has very direct knock-on effect on the NHS that no amount of financial smoke and mirrors can conceal. Brighton and Hove National Pensioners Convention has begun a valiant campaign to protect adult social care services from cuts, with unions such as the GMB fighting alongside it. I really hope that the Minister is listening, because this is a crisis that lets down everyone and there is no hiding from it. Where should responsibility for this catalogue of troubles lie?

What has happened to the city’s non-emergency patient transport service goes some way towards answering that question, and I wish to look at this in a bit more detail. It also demonstrates what can only be described as an utter dereliction of duty on the part of the Secretary of
State for Health and I want to repeat my call for his Department to step in and for him personally to resolve an unacceptable and untenable situation.

I am referring to a service that takes people to essential non-emergency appointments—kidney patients going for dialysis, and cancer patients going to and from chemotherapy and radiotherapy since April, it has been run by a private company called Coperforma and a number of subcontractors. Coperforma faced intense criticism from the outset, with patients saying that they had experienced delays reaching appointments and subcontractors reporting that they had not been paid. Two of those subcontractors, Langfords and Docklands, went bust in September, leaving some ambulance drivers with up to six weeks’ worth of wages unpaid. In early October, drivers for another Coperforma subcontractor turned up for work only to be sent home again.

Last week, the Patient Transport Service was plunged into a fresh controversy after an investigation by our local paper, The Argus, revealed that one subcontractor may not even have been licensed to operate a fleet of 30 ambulances. I have the headline from the local paper, which Members can see very clearly. It says that ambulances are now in a total shambles—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Do you want to put that paper down on the Bench? Thank you.

Caroline Lucas: I am sure that The Argus will be sad to see itself relegated to the seat behind me. The subcontractor is a company called Docklands Medical Services Ltd. This is apparently a phoenix company for the aforementioned Docklands. As I understand it, the new company seems to be suggesting that it was acceptable for it to operate under the Care Quality Commission licence that was issued to its predecessor, the bankrupt Docklands. The application process for a licence is carefully designed to ensure that standards for vehicles and other safety checks and safeguards have been met. Just allowing a new successor or phoenix company to inherit a licence is setting the stage for the future worst, instead of ensuring that it is carefully designed to ensure that standards for vehicles and other safety checks and safeguards have been met.

As a result of this debacle, our struggling hospital trust—yes, the one in financial special measures—has incurred £171,000 of private ambulance costs so far this year to plug the gap left by Coperforma and its subcontractors. To recoup this cost, the trust has, quite rightly, invoiced the clinical commissioning group, which appointed Coperforma. No doubt other trusts similarly affected will have done the same, with serious consequences for the CCGs’ budgets and, therefore, for the money available for other services. Whichever part of the Department of Health ends up footing the Coperforma bill, it represents an unforgivable waste of money and resources, and their diversion away from patient treatment and care.

I trust that the Minister will agree that patients in Brighton, Pavilion or anywhere else should not be paying the price for the failure of private companies that are profiting from NHS contracts. Will he therefore ensure that the CCG is not out of pocket in turn as a result of Coperforma’s mismanagement? I would also like his Department to step in to pass the buck when it was his

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[Caroline Lucas] Government who passed the legislation that required services such as non-emergency patient transport to be put out to tender. It is unacceptable for no one in the Department of Health to know whether a fleet of 30 ambulances were properly licensed to transport Sussex patients for three months over the summer. When the Minister responds, will he tell us whether he agrees?

Peter Kyle: Is it not extraordinary that the contract was awarded in the first place? Coperforma and the whole underlying supply chain have underperformed and failed patients from the very first day that they took over the contract, and they continue to do so today. The service cannot be returned to where it was before, because the ambulance trust that it was taken from is also in special measures and now no longer has the capacity to take it over. Is not the lesson from this experience that if such a contract is outsourced, the Government must make sure that due diligence is done correctly so that patients do not suffer in this way?

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and entirely agree. When I have talked to staff of the CCG, they have acknowledged that they are using an off-the-peg contract that is not suitable for such a service, and that there have therefore been problems in the system as well as with the company, which is not providing the service that people in our city deserve.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I can see that in this case due diligence was not done in the contract, but is there not an underlying principle that when a piece of NHS service is outsourced the NHS version ceases to exist? Therefore, at some future date, if the service is not good enough or other circumstances change, it is not possible simply to take it back in-house.

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention—someone who knows a great deal about these issues. I absolutely agree. Once the service has been outsourced, the ability to do a convenient U-turn is taken away. That is failing patients in Brighton and Hove.

The Department has said that allegations of ambulances operating illegally warrant investigation by the CQC. I have written to the Department of Health to demand that that happens and I have written to the CQC as well. Will the Minister go further tonight than admitting the severity of the problem, and let us know what he thinks he can do about it? Specifically, will he provide assurances that the Department of Health is no longer content to leave patient safety in the hands of private companies such as Coperforma, and that it intends to step in, bring the service back in-house and at the very least check that the sub-contractors’ contracts meet the requirements?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the privatisation of the ambulance service, were there health and safety criteria that the contractor had to meet, in the same way as the NHS does? Were there ever occasions when the contractor’s work fell below the required level of service?

Caroline Lucas: That is a good question. When I have asked the CCG that very question, the answer has not been clear. I have been told that the performance of the company was not such that the contract was breached,
but one of the difficulties is that so much of the contract is not in the public domain. For example, if the CCG wants to see the sub-contracts between Coperforma and the various companies it is working with, the CCG does not have access to those contracts so it cannot assure us what is in them. We have a very opaque system that makes it extremely difficult to say where accountability lies. That is why I say that this is a failed model.

I said earlier that the Coperforma example goes some way to illustrating some of the underlying causes of the NHS crisis that we are experiencing. Trying to get to the bottom of the contracts, sub-contracts and who is responsible for which bit of what is like grappling with a Gordian knot. The CCG admits that one of the biggest challenges is identifying responsibility when things go wrong. When, for example, people providing the service are not being paid, it is not clear where responsibility lies. Was it with Coperforma or with the sub-contracting companies?

That lack of transparency is deeply concerning. It is also a serious example of the problems and risks associated with this outsourcing of so many of our key NHS services.

As we know, the driving force behind all this is commercialisation—commercialisation made worse by the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which has not only exposed patients to unacceptable risks but engendered structures and terms and conditions that appear to protect profit-led companies at all costs. I do not think that is the NHS the public want or deserve; it is not even an NHS that is effective. The model is failing. Contracts such as the one with Coperforma do not work and need to be brought back in-house. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who has done very good work on this issue, on which I think my constituents want, and it has to go hand in hand, crucially, with adequate levels of funding. According to the King’s Fund chief economist, the annual average real increase in UK NHS spending over the last Parliament was 0.84%. That is the smallest increase in spending for any political party’s period in office since the second world war.

From local ambulance drivers caught up in the Coperforma debacle to junior doctors, NHS staff are universally respected—except, it seems, by this Government. Our nurses should not have to fight for a measly 1% pay rise after years of pay freezes. That does not only have consequences for the individuals involved. Healthwatch Brighton and Hove points out that staff retention is a specific problem in the city, with poor morale and high housing costs as contributory factors. I am particularly worried about the impact of the EU referendum on NHS staffing.

Brighton and Hove is set to benefit hugely from a major new county hospital redevelopment thanks to capital investment secured as a result of a long-standing cross-party campaign, and I am grateful for that. However, I would like to extend the logic of public provision to the services that will be based in the new hospital. In the meantime, as Ministers know well, the big issue is running costs, with the NHS funding settlement during the last Parliament the most austere in its history—that is according to the House of Commons Library.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady is straying into the area of the ideology of NHS funding, but she might like to mention an example from her city. Brighton—I declare an interest as the chairman of the trustees—works to promote the “1001 Critical Days” agenda to help children and their parents before the children are born and in the two years after they are born. That is an excellent example of the NHS working with the independent and charities sector to provide a much needed service, which I am sure the hon. Lady wants to promote in her constituency. So it is not all bad if it just happens to be outside the NHS.
Caroline Lucas: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening carefully, he would have noticed that I am talking about private companies that are taking over and cherry-picking key NHS services. He and I worked together on Brightpip, and I am incredibly proud of what it has achieved, but he will know that it does not work for profit. It ploughs money back into the services it provides. It is a wonderful example and there are many others, including the wonderful Martlets hospice in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle). There are plenty of examples of the charitable sector doing amazing work, and the NHS reinstatement Bill absolutely made provision for them as well. What I am criticising is when the private sector comes in and cherry-picks services, which are then lost from the NHS and work for profit.

Tim Loughton rose—

Caroline Lucas: I am going to make some progress, because I want to finish making my case about funding. Last week the Prime Minister claimed that NHS funding was being increased by £10 billion. In doing so, she ignored a plea from the respected Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), for Ministers to stop using such a misleading figure, when the correct figure is less than half the amount claimed.

The chief economist of the Nuffield Trust argues that even that is overstating the case, highlighting King’s Fund research that found that NHS-specific inflation means that the real increase is about £1 billion—about a 10th of the figure that the Secretary of State and others repeatedly use. It is certainly not £350 million a week. I would be very surprised if any Ministers repeated that blatant lie again, but anyone who claims that the investment is £10 billion is playing hard and fast with the truth. Indeed, the NHS chief executive admitted to the Health Committee that the spending review settlement would actually deliver “negative per person NHS funding growth” in 2018-19, with “very modest” increases in the other years.

On top of that, Ministers expect the NHS to find £22 billion in efficiency savings by 2020-21. No one with expertise thinks that that is possible. In a scathing report in March, the Public Accounts Committee found that all three Care Quality Commission inspectorates agreed in practice for both patients and staff. The Sussex and East Surrey STP area, which includes Brighton and Hove, faces a financial funding gap of literally hundreds of millions of pounds by 2021, and it is not at all clear how our STP will bridge that financial gap or whether acute services will be cut.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the hon. Lady agree that the principle of STPs going back to place-based planning could actually help reintegrate the NHS, but that, if it is done on the basis of budget-centred care instead of quality and patient-centred care, we will get the wrong answer?

Caroline Lucas: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. I agree that place-based planning is potentially a very useful tool, but I fear that it is being used as a back-door way of making yet more cuts. I am also worried that that is happening in an untransparent way, which is giving rise to concerns among my constituents about exactly what is being set out. Winter is coming and the crisis already playing out in Brighton and Hove is likely only to get worse if the NHS continues down the path on which the Government have put it.

Specifically, we spend 2.5% less of our GDP on health than countries such as France and Germany. I am prepared to say what few others will say, which is that, if we want an NHS that meets our complex health and social care needs, we do not need privatisation and competition; we need those who can afford it to pay more in tax. This is something we can put a price on, whereas the cost of the worry, misery, pain and sheer uncertainty for many of my constituents is incalculable. Whole families have to live with the agonising wait for a loved one’s treatment. It often falls to them to act as carers during that time. The knock-on effect of NHS delays cannot and should not be dismissed. Concerns about delays and cancellations at our digestive diseases unit, for example, come up repeatedly. Operations are repeatedly cancelled, with patients in distress. There is the amazing mum fighting tooth and nail for adequate care and support for her severely disabled son. For her, the system is a battleground. She has to co-ordinate equipment in four different places and put up with repeated delays. She told me: “It’s this that pushes people beyond despair and to breaking point.”

Breaking point is exactly where we are. A perfect storm caused by decades of chronic underfunding and privatisation has met the consequences of fragmentation and ramped-up marketisation. Terms and policies manifest themselves in grave and very real problems of the kind that I described when I opened this debate. Those problems are not unique to my constituency or city, but Brighton and Hove has an unusual demographic profile, with many younger people, as I have said, with complex needs, mental health problems, drugs and alcohol addiction, homelessness and long-term conditions. It also has some very elderly people.

That means that the array of services to support people using the NHS may need to become more complex, more tailored and more multi-agency, including police,
voluntary agencies and so on. We need an ecosystem of healthcare, in which each part complements other parts as well as the whole, and which is achievable locally and nationally if we strip back the unnecessary, ineffective and damaging complexity that currently infects the NHS; if we reinstate the basic principle of a publicly funded and provided national health service that is free at the point of access; and if we give patients, staff and the public a voice from the outset and not just as part of a box-ticking exercise. I believe that is the way to bring us back from the brink.

I have raised a number of questions, and I will repeat them for the Minister before I give the floor to him for his response. Will the Department of Health step in to bring back accountability and stability to the non-emergency transport system in Brighton and Hove? Will it bring that service back into the public sector as a matter of urgency and pick up the Coperforma bill? Can the Minister promise that the STP plans will not mean cuts to services and closures? Will our hospital trust and mental health trust get the money that they need to address the staffing and other crises that they face without having to impose cuts dressed up as efficiency savings?

Will the Minister and other Ministers stop using inaccurate figures when they talk about investment in the NHS and use the autumn statement to announce a genuine step change when it comes to funding social care via local authorities and NHS services in the routine, taking full account of NHS-specific inflation? Will he petition the Home Secretary to immediately guarantee EU workers the right to remain and protect the NHS from yet further instability and uncertainty? Finally, will he take a really honest look at the knock-on effects and inefficiencies of a healthcare model that is jeopardising accountability, transparency, standards and patient care?

9.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I congratulate the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) not just on securing this debate but on doing so on a day that enabled her to get through her entire speech and take interventions from the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—a considerable achievement.

The hon. Lady has a long-standing interest in health outcomes for her constituents, as we all do in the House. I would like to join her at the outset by highlighting the excellent work carried out every day by all those who work in the NHS, not just in her constituency but equally in my own and across the country. Before addressing the specific points that she made, I should like to give the House an overview of the NHS in her constituency. Brighton and Hove clinical commissioning group covers a geographical area of approximately 34 square miles, with a patient population of some 300,000. It commissions a wide range of healthcare services including from the main local acute trust, Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust, with a regional teaching hospital working across two sites in Brighton and Haywards Heath. I understand that the trust treats over three quarters of a million patients every year, and it recognises its growing role as a developing academic centre.

The hon. Lady has asked, not for the first time, for more funding to improve services and facilities in Brighton. I am pleased that she recognised the capital investment of more than half a billion pounds under way at the Royal Sussex County Hospital, replacing some very old buildings, as she said, and supporting the service quality improvements planned by the trust. I was a bit disappointed that, in his intervention, which came around the time that she referred to that capital investment, the hon. Member for Hove did not acknowledge that that is a significant investment in the facilities at the heart of health provision in Brighton.

The Government created the Care Quality Commission to shine a light on good and bad healthcare up and down the country. Its independent inspection teams provide a vital function on behalf of patients and everyone in England in challenging how hospitals, GP surgeries, care homes and all other healthcare providers are delivering to the standards we should all expect.

The CQC has identified that the local NHS in the hon. Lady’s constituency faces some challenges. I acknowledge that the confluence of inspection reports—they have come at around the same time to several of the different providers and commissioners in her area—is an unusual challenge to correct for the benefit of local residents. In stark contrast, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, next door, there is the outstanding-rated Western Sussex Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, which serves residents of West Sussex. As she pointed out, Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust was rated inadequate earlier this year by the CQC. To support its recovery, NHS Improvement placed the trust into special measures.

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way so early in his speech. He mentions that there has been an unusual confluence of reports. I would suggest that the unusual thing is that each of the reports indicates extreme failure in many different parts of our health system in Brighton and Hove, from the ambulance trust and six GP surgeries, as was brilliantly outlined by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), right through to the hospital trust—all in special measures. I suggest the health economy in Brighton and Hove is now bankrupt.

I suggest to the Minister that he does not do his thinking on his feet now, but would he consider arranging for his Department to appoint someone to our city who can take an overview of what is right and what is wrong in our city, of the funding and of the relationship between the different health bodies and the local authority? Let us bring together all the health systems, figure out what is wrong and how we can bring them together to solve all the problems. The fractures have got too much.

Mr Dunne: I will not take up the hon. Gentleman’s invitation to think on my feet, but I will refer later to the sustainability and transformation plan, to which the hon. Lady referred, which is providing a forum for much closer collaboration across the NHS within an area. Clearly, it is a much larger area than Brighton itself, but it is going some way towards meeting the kind of analysis that he is looking for. I will also touch on the individual trust support that is being offered by wider NHS groups to provide additional qualified medical and managerial support to help to solve the problems.
Caroline Lucas: I want to put this on record. The Minister referred to the fact that up the road there is a more successful trust. Not only are we operating in a very old building, but that when the hospital is becoming a major trauma centre. That is a massive change in Brighton and Hove. I re-emphasise the points that my honourable colleague, the hon. Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), made. We need real finance and I do not think that the STP is going to do it. It needs some money.

Mr Dunne: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I am going to move on, but I acknowledge her point. I hope that, in part, the STP will focus the attention of the wider area to support the new trauma centre that is being established. That is part of the purpose of the STP, although, like her, I have yet to see the full details.

I think we all recognise that patients deserve the highest quality care and we expect the trust to take action to ensure the root causes of the CQC concerns are addressed. NHS Improvement has confirmed that the trust has developed a recovery plan and as part of a package of support for the trust for being in special measures, NHS Improvement has appointed an improvement director and a board adviser.

We should also acknowledge along with the trust’s challenges the fact that there are good things going on in Brighton. We should praise the team that delivers services for children at the Royal Alexandra children’s hospital in Brighton as the CQC rated them as outstanding for being innovative and well led.

Emergency care services at the trust are not as we would expect, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion identified. With support from the national emergency care improvement programme, a clinically led initiative that offers intensive practical help to trusts looking to improve their emergency services, NHS Improvement is working closely with local clinicians to make a difference for the people of Brighton and Hove seeking emergency care. The trust is also developing plans to create capacity to support delivery of the planned care standards.

As the hon. Lady said, on Monday of last week NHS Improvement announced that the trust has entered financial special measures, a programme launched by the regulator that provides a rapid turnaround package for trusts and foundation trusts that have either not agreed savings targets with local commissioners or planned to make savings but deviated significantly from this plan in their quarterly returns. As part of financial special measures, the trust will agree a recovery plan with NHS Improvement. The trust will also get support from and is held accountable by a financial improvement director.

The hon. Lady also referred to the challenges faced by the ambulance services in her constituency and the area. In addition, South East Coast ambulance service was recommended for special measures by the CQC in its inspection report published last month. NHS Improvement acknowledges that there are wide-ranging problems across the trust, including in governance structures and processes, culture, performance and emerging financial issues. NHS Improvement has agreed a support package for the trust, which was formalised on 9 August this year, and includes a formal peer support relationship with a neighbouring ambulance trust that is rated good by the CQC.

As part of the support package, NHS Improvement has also appointed an interim chair and will appoint an improvement director in due course.

Peter Kyle: For the second time, I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. We focus the onus for improvement on the delivery bodies in the Brighton and Hove area. NHS Improvement and the CQC have been outlining plans and their responsibility is to instigate this improvement, but does he accept that NHS Improvement is also under scrutiny in how it unfolds this improvement programme and that if improvements do not happen fast enough it will also be culpable? Some of the dates for improvement have already passed without the improvements being made.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman will recognise that NHS Improvement only came together in April of this year when the two previous regulators, Monitor and the NHS Trust Development Authority, were combined. It is to a degree finding its feet in working out how best to assist trusts that get into difficulty. It has introduced a number of different schemes for different types of challenge, and we have touched on the care challenge and the financial special measures challenge. It is also undertaking a five-point A&E improvement plan to focus particularly on challenges in emergency care. It is fair to say that it is early days in seeing how NHS Improvement undertakes its functions, but we have every confidence that it will be able to assist trusts in dealing with these challenges.

Finally on the South East Coast ambulance service, NHS Improvement is also undertaking a capability and capacity review and will provide the trust with support with its finances. The hon. Lady mentioned the problems with the non-urgent patient transport service provider. This has clearly been a very difficult time for its staff and for some patients, as she has highlighted. My understanding is that the High Weald Lewes Havens CCG has overseen the implementation of plans to ensure continuity of service, and has recently appointed a specialist transport adviser to look into the resilience of the contract and to explore options to strengthen this further.

The provision of the services is, quite rightly, a matter for the local NHS. The hon. Lady asked who is responsible for monitoring contracts. The reality is that the CCG is the statutory NHS body with responsibility for the integrity of the procurement, as well as for managing the contract. It has powers within the standard NHS contract to intervene where a contractor’s performance falls below what is expected.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: I will give way for the last time.

Caroline Lucas: The Minister says that the CCG has such a power, but the CCG told me that it could not see the contract between Coperforma and its subcontractors, because that was not for the CCG to see. It therefore cannot have such a degree of oversight.

If this is the last time the Minister gives way, will he say if he will step in on the issue about whether the Docklands phoenix company is properly licensed to provide the service it is providing? Right now, we do not know whether it is, and our patients may be at risk.
Mr Dunne: On the first point, it is down to the CCG to undertake a contract that gives it visibility on subcontracts. If that failing has emerged, the CCG needs to be able to get to see them in subsequent contracts, and I am sure it will learn from that message. On the regulation of the provider, that is a matter for the CQC to look at. I undertake to inquire of the CQC what the status is of the current provider to ensure that it is properly regulated.

For much of her speech, the hon. Lady talked in rather familiar terms about her understanding of the impact of the so-called privatisation of the NHS. I gently remind her that the Health and Social Care Act 2012 did not introduce competition into the NHS. Previous Governments have used patient choice and competition as part of their reform programme. Independent sector providers have provided care and services to NHS patients under successive Governments ever since the NHS was founded. In particular, in the area of non-emergency patient transport, that has happened across many areas of the country. In the last year for which financial data are available, NHS commissioners purchased 7.6% of total healthcare from the independent sector. In 2010, that was about 5%. The rate of growth has been steady. In particular, in the area of non-emergency patient transport, that has happened across many areas of the country. In the last year for which financial data are available, NHS commissioners purchased 7.6% of total healthcare from the independent sector. In 2010, that was about 5%. The rate of growth in the use of private providers under this Government is lower than it was under the previous Labour Government.

Tim Loughton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Dunne: I will give way, for the final time, to my hon. Friend.

Tim Loughton: This is the first time I have intervened on the Minister, and we do have about an hour left in which to carry on this debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have no problem with the principle.

Tim Loughton: Perhaps you will therefore indulge me on this intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As ever.

Tim Loughton: I have no problem with the principle of outsourcing. The Minister is absolutely right that the level of outsourcing may go up and may go down, because it should be based on the quality of an alternative provider that is able to provide a quality service at an affordable price and is best placed to do so at the time. Will he acknowledge the whole issue with Coperforma? It has been a major issue for all of our constituents. Vulnerable people relying on regular treatment have just been left at home or dumped elsewhere, and have not been able to access services. This has been going on for so long that, when we put a contract to such organisations, much better due diligence needs to be done. There also needs to be a fall-back plan, because given that the ambulance service, which declined to take on the contract in the first place, is clearly not in a position to take it on anyway, there is little option for somebody else to take on the service urgently and provide the level of care that our constituents desperately need and that has just not happened in this case.

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful case. As I have already undertaken to do for the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion, I will take up the issue with the CQC and ask it to give me some reassurance about both the regulation of the entity and, to the extent that it is relevant to the CQC, the procurement. I accept that we should look at the due diligence for such activities.

I will close, without taking any further interventions, by saying a brief word more, as I promised to earlier, on the sustainability and transformation plans. These were submitted to NHS England by 44 regions across the country during the course and by the end of last week—by last Friday. As I said earlier, the intention is that the plans build on the work already undertaken to strengthen care. They will help deliver the NHS’s own plans for its future, set out in the five-year forward view, by encouraging providers and commissioners within an area to work more collaboratively—without the barriers of stovepiping that in the past have led to conflict between them—and co-operate to try to come up with the best plan for patients; that must take into account the increasing integration with social care providers in the area, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion has mentioned, so local authorities are also integral to the plans.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister take one final intervention?

Mr Dunne: I am afraid I really do not think that I can.

We expect most areas to undertake public engagement from now until the end of the year, building on the engagement they have already done to shape thinking. But we are clear that we do not expect changes to the services that people currently receive without proper, full local engagement and, where appropriate, public consultation. There are long-standing processes in place to make sure that happens.

Caroline Lucas: Will the Minister give way? This is on a serious point.

Mr Dunne: I have been very generous and have spoken for substantially longer than I normally would in winding up an Adjournment debate.

In closing, I emphasise that it is the responsibility of local NHS organisations to determine how local services are delivered. They are best placed to understand the needs of the people they serve, and we must ensure that changes are led locally, in some cases with improved local management where there have been management shortcomings. Changes need to be focused on the needs of the local population and not driven by central Government. This Government recognise the importance of ensuring that the NHS is held to the highest standards of care, in the hon. Lady’s constituency and across the UK, and we will continue to work to ensure that services are high-quality, safe, appropriate and affordable.

Question put and agreed to.

9.37 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Hammond: That is a matter on which my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office leads, but I have a considerable understanding of the problem, as my own constituency was subject to serious flooding in 2013-14. I will talk to my right hon. Friend and make him aware of the hon. Lady’s concerns.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing Nottingham to begin to take over Parliament today? My right hon. Friend the Chancellor knows of the great benefits of the queen of the east midlands, because he used to work in Nottingham, and he believes in the huge value of infrastructure projects. Is he minded, as he prepares his autumn statement, to bring forward HS2, making sure that the east midlands hub is in Toton in my constituency, and the electrification of the midlands main line, all of which will help the great city and county of Nottinghamshire?

Mr Hammond: Nottinghamshire is, indeed, a part of the country that I know well and have a great deal of affection for. The Government are completely seized of the need for infrastructure investment to support the productivity performance of our economy. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will look at the priority to be afforded to different specific projects and will make statements in due course.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the east and west midlands together could generate significant growth for our economy if they got the right road, rail and skills infrastructure, and given that today is Nottingham in Parliament day, will the Chancellor acknowledge that the autumn statement should bring forward those ambitions for the midlands engine?

Mr Hammond: The Government are committed to the midlands engine. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the midlands conurbation overall has a weight of population and economic activity that allows it to be a rival to the hub of London and the south-east. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), announcements about specific projects will be made in due course by the relevant Minister.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): One of the most important ways in which the Chancellor could boost economic growth outside—and, indeed, in—London and the south-east is by energising small business. Will he consider reviewing the small enterprise investment scheme, in the hope of simplifying it and of thereby seeing a wall of private cash invested in starting and maintaining small businesses?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right. Ensuring the supply of funding to start-ups and smaller enterprises as they grow is a key to the future of our economy. I assure him that all schemes, taxes and other such structures will be reviewed in the run-up to the autumn statement, and I will let him know my conclusions on 23 November.
Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Chancellor of the Exchequer aware that his predecessor introduced a scheme that was based on robbing Derbyshire County Council of £155 million in cuts and promising to give it less than 20% of that money back? No wonder the people in Bolsover marketplace do not call it the northern powerhouse; it is the northern poorhouse.

Mr Hammond: I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will want to look at the allocation of funding to local authorities, including Derbyshire County Council. As the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) will know, there are many powerful advocates for Derbyshire on both sides of the House.

Mr Speaker: I wish the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) a speedy recovery. He may ask his question from his seat.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Chancellor will be well aware that the west midlands has a trade surplus with China, thanks to Jaguar Land Rover in Solihull and wider manufacturing. On their visits to BRIC nations, previous Chancellors have been keen to trumpet business in the northern powerhouse. Will this Chancellor help the cogs of the midlands engine to turn by taking west midlands businesses with him on future visits?

Mr Hammond: Indeed I will. It is an important part of the role of a Chancellor to act as a champion for businesses in the north and the midlands, and to draw the attention of inward investors such as the Chinese and the Indians, who are already heavily invested in the west midlands, to the opportunities that exist in the UK beyond London and the south-east. Such opportunities are not always as obvious to foreign investors as those that exist in London.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): In order to boost growth outside London and the south-east, there should be a laser-like focus on manufacturing and its associated innovation research and development, but the UK’s record on R and D spending is lamentable compared with that of our international competitors. May I ask the Chancellor how he intends to remedy that? Will he take the opportunity of the autumn statement to reverse the decision to convert innovation funding from grants to loans?

Mr Hammond: We have supported £22 billion of R and D spending across the UK through the tax credit system. The hon. Gentleman is right; the UK’s productivity performance is weak compared with that of its principal competitors, and our investment in R and D is significantly less than that of many of our principal competitors. I promise him that we are acutely aware of that challenge, and I will address that challenge in the autumn statement on 23 November.

Stewart Hosie: I will take that as a veiled good news story at some point to come. In order to boost growth we need to take exports more seriously, including to the EU, given that our trade balance has gone into reverse over the past two years. To effect that, what efforts is the Chancellor making to rule out a hard Brexit, with visas, tariff barriers and an end to the customs union, all of which the Treasury says could lead to the loss of £66 billion of revenue, a reduction in GDP of around 7.5% and a threat, estimated conservatively, to half a million jobs?

Mr Hammond: I know that the SNP does not like a good news story, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will have been able, by 23 November, to think up a suitable response just in case there is such a story on that day.

On the wider issue of managing Britain’s exit from the European Union, the Prime Minister has been very clear. We understand the instructions that we have received from the British people, and within our obligation to deliver those we will seek to get the very best deal we can with the European Union that maximises the amount of trade in goods and services between our companies and the markets of the European Union, and between European companies and the UK market.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Financial services are one of the sectors most exposed to Brexit, but it is not just jobs in Canary Wharf and the square mile that are at risk; it is jobs throughout the UK, in Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Edinburgh and beyond. The messages that the Government have sent so far have been incoherent and counterproductive. Firms need assurance that they will get comparable access to the single market and the ability to retain EU nationals who work for them. Will the Chancellor help finally to put an end to his Government’s chaos today and make a promise to deliver both?

Mr Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right to identify financial services as one of the areas that is particularly concerned about the way in which the exit from the European Union is managed, because the industry is particularly dependent on the passporting regime that is in place. He is also right to draw attention to the often overlooked fact that 75% of financial services jobs are outside London. This is an important UK-wide industry.

On the specific points that the hon. Gentleman makes, I have certainly sought to reassure financial services businesses that we will put their needs at the heart of our negotiation with the European Union. We understand their need for market access. We also understand their need to be able to engage the right skilled people. I have said on the record—I am happy to say this again today—that I do not believe that the concerns the British people have expressed about migration from the European Union relate to those with high skills and high pay. The problem that people are concerned about relates to those taking entry level jobs. I see no likelihood of our using powers to control migration into the UK to prevent companies from bringing highly skilled, highly paid workers here.

Double Taxation Treaties: Developing Countries

2. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What his Department’s objectives are in negotiating double taxation treaties with developing countries.

4. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What outcomes his Department seeks to achieve when negotiating double taxation treaties with developing countries.
The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): In negotiating double taxation treaties, the UK’s objective is to reach an agreement that allocates taxing rights on a basis that is acceptable to both countries.

Patrick Grady: Restrictive tax treaties inhibit the ability of developing countries to spend money on public services, such as schools and education. Research from ActionAid shows that, along with Italy, the UK has the highest number of such treaties. Is the Minister willing to work with the Department for International Development to change that?

Jane Ellison: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. In fact, double taxation treaties help developing countries. They often remove uncertainty about the way in which businesses choose to make investments, and they open up the route to fairer and more open trade. The majority of the UK’s double taxation treaties are based on the OECD model double taxation convention, and we work very closely with countries to reach mutually acceptable treaties.

Mr Sharma: What plans does the Minister have to carry out assessments of the impact of the UK’s tax treaties on developing countries, and will her Department offer poorer countries the opportunity to renegotiate treaties that do not do enough to support their development?

Jane Ellison: As I have said, there is a rolling programme of renegotiation to make sure that treaties reflect modern standards. More broadly, the UK has a very proud record on capacity building in this area. We lead international efforts to support developing countries in tax capacity building. One example is that DFID funds the Global Forum, the World Bank and the OECD to provide technical assistance to partner countries. We can be proud of that record.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): In negotiating double taxation regimes with developing and advanced nations, will the Minister look at transfer pricing in terms of establishment provisions so that we can broaden the tax base and stop the likes of Apple, Amazon and Google gaming our tax system?

Jane Ellison: The UK is committed to ensuring that UK companies pay a fair share of tax in the countries in which they operate. On all the wider aspects of international tax fairness, I reiterate that the UK has taken a very strong stance across the board on a number of issues. I am always happy to speak to my hon. Friend about this issue because he is very much an expert, and I would welcome his views on all such issues.

Manufacturing Industry

3. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What fiscal steps is he taking to support the manufacturing industry.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Government have taken steps to maintain a world-class business environment that helps UK manufacturers to thrive. That is why we have cut corporation tax from 28% to 20%—it will fall further, to 17%—and why we have supported £22 billion of research and development through tax credits for UK companies. This environment helps our manufacturers to grow as innovative, competitive companies.

Gordon Henderson: I welcome the Minister’s response, but what message is he sending to international manufacturing companies with operations in Britain about this country’s future international competitiveness as we leave the European Union?

Mr Gauke: Our message is straightforward: Britain is open for business. As the Prime Minister has said, we are and will continue to be a confident, outward-looking country.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Manufacturing depends on long-term investment. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of our potentially leaving the European Investment Bank, and what progress has there been in any discussions about us maintaining our stake?

Mr Gauke: I agree that removing distortions in the economy results in a more efficient economy. The UK Government have a record of doing that, by, for example, reducing corporation tax.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Apart from lowering corporation tax what other steps will the Chancellor and his ministerial team take to incentivise manufacturing industry in Northern Ireland?

Mr Gauke: The freedom for Northern Ireland to set its corporation tax rate is an important measure in itself. We look forward to further progress on that. Of course, there will be an autumn statement next month in which the Government will set out their economic policy. I have mentioned corporation tax and R and D tax credits, which we have made more generous. Those measures will have helped manufacturing businesses in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the Government’s ongoing commitment to the northern powerhouse given the impact that that can have on manufacturing, in particular in my constituency, and the allocated funds for the A64 at Hopgrove. Does the Minister agree that such investments must seek maximum economic benefit? The current proposal from Highways England will simply kick an existing pinch point down the road if we do not see the dualling of that carriageway on the A64.

Mr Speaker: That had an extremely tangential relationship with the matter of manufacturing industry, therefore meriting an extremely pithy response.
Mr Gauke: I look forward to examining the case for dualling the A64 and the benefit that would provide to manufacturing industry.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Last month, the Chancellor proudly dismissed his predecessor’s plans to cut corporation tax to 15%. This week, however, we hear of plans hatched by senior Government figures to cut corporation tax as low as 10% as part of a so-called Brexit nuclear option, despite the fact that both the British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors have stated that cutting corporation tax would not be at the top of their wishlist. Will the Minister put an end to his Government’s reign of chaos and confirm his long-term position on corporation tax, so that businesses have the stability they deserve?

Mr Gauke: I am not sure whether I would use the phrase “reign of chaos” if I was a Labour Front Bencher. Let me be very clear. The UK Government have rightly reduced corporation tax from 28% to 20%. We have legislated for it to go down to 17%. If there are any further announcements they will be at a fiscal event, whether an autumn statement or a Budget.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I am afraid that the Government’s plans to cut corporation tax have seen on corporation tax is sadly replicated on investment. The Chancellor promised to tear up his predecessor’s Budget and develop an industrial strategy, before denying he was planning a spending splurge. A recent Ipsos MORI poll showed that almost two thirds of Britons agree that the country is not doing enough to meet its infrastructure needs, and the Opposition agree. Will the Minister end his Government’s chaotic record and confirm his long-term position on corporation tax, so that businesses have the stability they deserve?

Mr Gauke: On the subject of corporation tax, I point out that it was not that many months ago that on one day the shadow Chancellor condemned the reduction to 17% while in Committee the Labour party voted for it. I will be clear that it is no good coming forward with incredible plans to spend £500 billion on infrastructure without any idea of how those plans will be paid for. The Chancellor will make a statement on 23 November to backfill with second-rate private finance initiative buildings?

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): Given the £180 million overrun on phase one, will the Government be tempted to backfill with second-rate private finance initiative buildings? What role will PFI have in the programme?

Mr Gauke: Let me address our record. We have spent £18 billion since 2010 on the school estate and we are committed to a further £23 billion so that pupils can be taught in facilities that are fit for the 21st century. We of course want to ensure that that is funded in the most appropriate, value for money and sustainable way.

Regional Infrastructure Development

6. Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development.

7. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development.

12. Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development.

14. Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): What steps he is taking to support regional infrastructure development.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): World-class infrastructure is central to raising our country’s productivity. About 3,000 infrastructure projects have been delivered across the UK since 2010, with another 600 projects worth over £480 billion in the pipeline. We are investing over £13 billion in transport across the north, with £5 billion in the Midlands. Nationally, we are making the largest investment in roads across the UK in a generation, and rail is experiencing a level of investment not seen since Victorian times.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Chancellor for that answer. Will he ensure that the Lower Thames Crossing option C, preferred by the Highways Agency, is quickly taken forward? That will enhance the investment in Medway and the whole of the Thames Gateway area, facilitating house building, encouraging business growth and supporting existing infrastructure in the Kent area.
Mr Hammond: I commend my hon. Friend for the way he has campaigned on this issue. We recognise the importance of this crossing to supporting the economy on both sides of the Thames, particularly given the constrained capacity at Dartford. It will produce significant benefits locally, regionally and nationally. The Government will be making a decision on the location and route in due course.

Sir David Amess: Conservative-controlled Southend-on-Sea Borough Council was very disappointed that it was unsuccessful in its bid to the coastal communities fund. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, the leader of the council John Lamb and others, so we may share with him why we need investment in infrastructure, particularly as Southend is the alternative city of culture next year?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend makes a good point. The Government recognise the ongoing growth potential of Southend. The Government’s substantial investment to date in Southend includes over £40 million through the South East local enterprise partnership growth deal and the 2014 city deal. The Government announced last year that the coastal communities fund would be extended over this Parliament. At least another £30 million of further funding is available to promote sustainable economic growth and jobs in the UK’s coastal communities. I strongly encourage Southend-on-Sea Borough Council to apply to this fund.

Karl McCartney: Given my right hon. Friend’s welcome commitments on regional infrastructure and my plethora of conversations with his Cabinet colleagues, Ministers and the leader of Lincolnshire County Council over the past few days and years, will he now commit to working with us all to secure the funding for the dualling of the eastern bypass around my constituency of Lincoln, which will greatly support not only the further development of the city but the whole of Greater Lincolnshire?

Mr Hammond: I recognise my hon. Friend’s commitment to his preferred version of this project. Funding has been made available for the provision of the Lincoln eastern bypass, in the county council’s preferred version of single carriageway road. As my hon. Friend will know, the county council is not in favour of restarting the process from scratch and introducing further delays, so I am afraid I cannot give him any confidence that additional funding will be made available to adopt a dualling solution.

Kelly Tolhurst: I was pleased that in the last Budget statement, the previous Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), announced a new Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission to focus on delivering essential infrastructure development for this crucial region. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that this commission, which is led by Lord Heseltine, will continue to be supported?

Mr Hammond: Yes. I am glad that my hon. Friend has raised this point. The Thames Estuary 2050 Growth Commission has been asked to develop an ambitious plan for north Kent, south Essex and east London. I am grateful to Lord Heseltine and his fellow commissioners for leading this important work, and I look forward to receiving the interim report ahead of next year’s Budget, when I will respond to it.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): When the Chancellor came to the Treasury Select Committee last week, he was unsure whether analysis of the effects of leaving the European Union was being done by region. He has had a week to find out, so will he now give us an answer?

Mr Hammond: If the hon. Lady checks the video, she will find that I was not unsure. I was advising my civil service colleague that I understood that we were doing such regional analysis. We are carrying out regional analysis, which will help to inform the Prime Minister’s negotiating strategy.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Does the Chancellor agree that energy efficiency should be a priority for infrastructure development, both nationally and regionally? To that end, will he seriously consider earmarking the proceeds of the shale gas sovereign wealth fund for energy efficiency measures so that we can not only save on bills, but create jobs and encourage innovation?

Mr Hammond: I am not necessarily in favour of earmarking or hypothecation of funds for that specific purpose, but the right hon. Lady makes an important point. We have a serious challenge on this country’s energy capacity over the next 20 years, and we are going to have to invest eye-wateringly large sums of money—perhaps £100 billion—just to ensure that the lights stay on. Of course it makes sense to look at ways of reducing demand for energy through energy conservation measures alongside the demands for new energy generation plants.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Last week, the Infrastructure Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive announced that a major infrastructure project in Belfast would be stopped because it was unlikely to be completed before we leave the EU so the funding would be lost. Has the Infrastructure Minister had any discussions with the Chancellor about this project, and will the right hon. Gentleman assure the Northern Ireland Executive that any funding gap for any project started before we leave the EU will be bridged by the Treasury?

Mr Hammond: I am not aware of the project to which the hon. Gentleman refers. As far as I am aware, the Northern Ireland Executive has not been in touch with the Treasury about it. We have, in fact, made two announcements. I announced that all projects signed in the normal course of business before the autumn statement would be guaranteed, irrespective of whether they continued to be funded by the EU after our exit. I subsequently made a further statement saying that after the autumn statement any new EU-funded projects would, provided they passed a UK value-for-money and strategic priorities test, get the same guarantee: however long they last, they will be funded by the UK Treasury once EU funding stops.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): This Government continue to be in chaos over their flagship so-called northern powerhouse. I live there, and I see it every day: they have no long-term industrial strategy. Meanwhile,
notwithstanding what the Chancellor said earlier, regional economies are suffering from a lack of sustained investment in their infrastructure, and particularly transport infrastructure, by comparison with our major European partners—a problem now compounded by Brexit. What plans does the Chancellor have to end this uncertainty and finally bring about a rebalancing or an enhancement of regional transport infrastructure expenditure?

Mr Hammond: I urge the hon. Gentleman not to talk down the north and the significance of the northern powerhouse. The northern powerhouse is an important part of the Government’s strategy, and the new Prime Minister has made clear her commitment to it. The hon. Gentleman is, however, right to draw attention to the shortfall of infrastructure investment in the United Kingdom overall, by comparison with our principal competitors. That is an issue that we must address at national level. We must look for the best value for money—the projects that will make the greatest contribution to closing the productivity gap across the UK—and that is what we will do.

EU Budget: UK Contribution 2017-18

8. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What the UK contribution to the EU budget is expected to be in 2017-18. [906789]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): The Office for Budget Responsibility is responsible for forecasting contributions to the European Union. It will update its forecast in this year’s autumn statement, but the forecast for the UK’s gross contribution in 2017-18 was £12.6 billion at the time of the Budget.

Mr Robertson: Notwithstanding all the spending pledges that have been made today and recently, hospitals, schools, police and roads in my constituency certainly need a spending boost. Does the Minister agree that the sooner we leave the European Union, the sooner that money will be available to them?

Mr Gauke: The amount of any money saved will depend on the overall fiscal situation and the broader economic environment. Decisions on spending will be made in the round in autumn statements and Budgets, but while we remain members of the European Union, we must of course comply with the requirements to pay into it.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): May I press the Chief Secretary on this point? On the day of the referendum, I met an NHS worker who had voted to leave the European Union precisely because she thought that more money would be available for the NHS, thanks to the “£350 million a week” that was emblazoned on the Vote Leave bus. When we leave the European Union, will we get that money?

Mr Gauke: It is certainly not for me to justify or explain the pledges that were made by the leave campaign, but I will say that public spending decisions must be made in the context of the economic and fiscal situation.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I appreciate that getting back some of our EU contribution was a factor in the decision to leave the European Union, but will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Government are, at least at this stage, open to the idea of making some contribution in the future if we are to secure some sort of access to the single market for financial services, or, indeed, making some contribution in relation to passporting and equivalence?

Mr Gauke: What is important is for the United Kingdom to secure the best possible deal in our negotiations with the European Union. I do not think that it makes sense to bind our hands and close down options at this point; nor do I think it right for us to provide a running commentary on the matter.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Wales will continue to receive convergence funding while we are in the EU, but will the Treasury nevertheless honour the Prime Minister’s pledge to electrify the Great Western Railway line all the way to Swansea in order to make it part of the pan-European network and stimulate manufacturing and exports?

Mr Gauke: That is a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, but, as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made clear, the Government are committed to improving our infrastructure.

Economic Growth: Midlands

9. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth in the Midlands. [906790]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Government are committed to helping the Midlands to unleash its economic potential and make it a powerful engine for growth. We are backing skills and innovation. We are supporting the automotive and aerospace industries. We have made investments, and we are putting power in the hands of local people by devolving budgets from Whitehall to a new mayor for the Midlands. I hope that it is in order, Mr Speaker, for me to mention our excellent candidate, Andy Street.

Edward Argar: Earlier this year, a Grant Thornton report suggested that the east Midlands could contribute £53 billion to the UK economy by 2025, reflecting the central role that Leicestershire and the east Midlands continue to play in driving the country’s growth. Does my hon. Friend agree, however, that if we are to sustain that record of success, it is vital for us to continue to deliver on investment in Leicestershire’s road, rail and broader infrastructure?

Mr Speaker: Order. May I remind colleagues of the merits of the blue pencil?

Simon Kirby: Good advice, Mr Speaker, as ever. I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in the east Midlands. I agree that improving transport between and within our major cities is vital to help them fulfil their productive potential. As the Chancellor has said, we are investing over £5 billion in transport infrastructure to put the Midlands at the heart of a modern transport network.

Mr Speaker: Pithiness personified.
Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I press the case for the continued electrification of the midland main line and that there be no further delays to this excellent project?

Simon Kirby: Yes, he can.

Tax Credits (Concentrix)

10. Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): What steps his Department is taking to compensate people affected by incorrect withdrawal of tax credits as a result of errors by Concentrix. [906791]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): If anyone feels their tax credits have been incorrectly withdrawn owing to errors by Concentrix, they should urgently contact Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which will review all complaint cases and will, and indeed does, pay redress where appropriate.

Christina Rees: Labour welcomes the cancellation of the Concentrix contract and the fact that it will be administered in-house by HMRC staff. Will the Minister reassure the thousands of single parents and families, many in my Neath constituency, that their tax credits erroneously stopped by Concentrix will be reinstated immediately so their children can be kept safe and warm and not go unfed as winter approaches?

Jane Ellison: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw the House’s attention to the importance of prioritising vulnerable claimants. HMRC held a further drop-in for colleagues recently, on 19 October; it was attended by 15 Members, and a number of complaints and issues were raised, which we are on the way to resolving.

On restarting claims, the key is to get the right information. HMRC has taken back a vast number of cases, and I will say more about this tomorrow. The priority is to get the right information, to get claims started again as soon as the facts are established.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): When the Minister wrote to me after I asked a previous question, she said:

“Amounts to be paid to the supplier are reduced if actual performance fails to meet standards set in the contract.”

Does that include penalties for withdrawing tax credits when they should not have been withdrawn?

Jane Ellison: The terms of the contract between HMRC and Concentrix are obviously in the public domain, and it is right that when performance is not as per the contract there are associated deductions, but I will be in a position to give the House more information about the contract in tomorrow’s Opposition day debate.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): A number of my constituents have been affected by this issue, not least a frontline police officer who had her benefits withdrawn, which meant her childcare could not be paid and she was potentially not going to be able to go to work. Luckily, my office intervened and we were able to get her benefits, but what is the Minister going to do to compensate people for upset and unjust treatment?

Jane Ellison: There are two points here. First, as I have said, if people feel their tax credits have been incorrectly withdrawn because of errors they should contact HMRC, which will review that and redress can be made. Secondly, customers can ask for mandatory reconsideration if they do not feel that their circumstances have been correctly identified. Sometimes that is because people do not send through the right information.

Single Market

11. Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the potential effect on the economy of the UK no longer having access to the single market. [906792]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The UK will leave the European Union and will introduce control of migration between Britain and the EU. Working with officials across Government, the Treasury continues to undertake a range of analyses to inform the UK’s position for the upcoming negotiations and we have made it clear, I am afraid, that we are not going to provide a running commentary, but we do want the best outcome for the UK and that means pursuing a bespoke arrangement that will allow our companies maximum access to the European market.

Shabana Mahmood: The Chancellor’s predecessor had many a failed target and plan, one of which was a target of £1 trillion in exports by 2020, a target that is nowhere near being reached even with full access to, and membership of, the single market. Meanwhile other countries such as Germany currently export more than we do to China and other growth markets. Does the Chancellor agree that the failure of the Government to improve the UK’s export performance has left us unable to take full advantage of opportunities outside the EU and more vulnerable to—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Lady should leave a full version of her question in the Library of the House.

Mr Hammond: The Government can of course support and enable exporters, but we cannot do their job for them. It is for British exporters to make their businesses competitive and to go and sell their wares around the world, but we will do everything we can to support them in that endeavour.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that unless, bizarrely, the European Union were to impose trade sanctions on the UK, there would be absolutely nothing to prevent us from having access to the single market when we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend is right in the sense that every nation that is a member of the World Trade Organisation, as we are, has the right to access other members’ markets on WTO terms. However, WTO terms would be quite challenging for some of our industries. For example, in the automotive industry, WTO terms imply a 10% tariff on cars entering other markets.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor will know that West Yorkshire is the beating heart of the manufacturing economy in this country, but my manufacturing leaders, and the EEF, feel left out of the loop in relation to their future after Brexit. Can he reassure them, because they are very disturbed about the future?

Mr Hammond: I can certainly reassure the hon. Gentleman that manufacturing industry is very much in the forefront of our thinking as we approach these negotiations. I am sorry that I have not had a chance to set out their concerns so that we can take them properly into account.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): In welcoming my right hon. Friend’s robust stance on this matter, may I suggest that as there is a large balance of payments deficit with Europe, specifically in the automotive sector, it would be in the EU’s interest to strike a decent deal with us, as he intends to do?

Mr Hammond: Our intention is to get the very best deal we can with our neighbours in the European Union to allow access for our companies to trade their goods and services into the EU. However, I would just caution my hon. Friend: to look at the economic arguments alone is to miss an important point. There is a political debate going on here in Europe, and European politicians are very conscious of the impact of Britain’s departure on their political project. I do not think we can be so sure that a quarter of infrastructure investment accounts for disproportionate underfunding. I would need to check that. Thirdly, the very large investment in Crossrail, a strategically important national project, has had the effect of skewing infrastructure investment towards London over the past few years.

Smart Energy System

15. James Heappey (Wells) (Con): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of a smart energy system on levels of productivity?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in both these important topics. The National Infrastructure Commission has estimated the benefits of a smart energy system to be between £3 billion and £8 billion a year by 2030.

James Heappey: I am grateful to the Minister for his response and am pleased that he agrees with the advantages of a smart energy system. Ahead of the autumn statement, will the Minister look at the role that the Treasury might play in digitising our energy system by accelerating the deployment of storage technologies, demand-side response and the upgrade of our distribution networks so that we can achieve the productivity gains he expects?

Simon Kirby: The Treasury will continue to work with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to drive forward a smart energy system. The Government have committed to implementing the National Infrastructure Commission’s recommendations in full.

Leaving the EU: Regional Funding

13. Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has he made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on (a) the northern powerhouse and (b) regional funding.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government have provided a guarantee for all European structural and investment fund projects signed before the autumn statement. We have also provided a guarantee for all ESIF projects signed after the autumn statement and before the UK’s departure from the European Union, provided that they pass the value-for-money test and are in line with domestic strategic priorities.

Luciana Berger: I have listened closely to the Chancellor’s previous answers about regional distribution of investment. The latest figures show that only a quarter of national infrastructure projects are in either the north-west or the north-east of England, with just one of the top-funded 25 projects in that area. With further damaging cuts to public sector net investment due in the remainder of this Parliament, when will the Government address this inequality, match their rhetoric with action and start properly funding the northern powerhouse?

Mr Hammond: I make three points to the hon. Lady. First, we will have an autumn statement in just over four weeks’ time, and I will be able to set out more of our forward plans at that time. Secondly, I am not sure off the top of my head what the population proportion of the UK is in the north-west and north-east regions, but if the figures that she has quoted are correct, I am not so sure that a quarter of infrastructure investment represents disproportionate underfunding. I would need to check that. Thirdly, the very large investment in Crossrail, a strategically important national project, has had the effect of skewing infrastructure investment towards London over the past few years.

T1. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure the stability and prosperity of the economy. In the current circumstances, that requires a combination of near-term measures to respond to the shock that the economy has received and longer-term measures to manage the structural adjustment as the UK transitions out of the EU and to address the UK’s long-term productivity challenge.

Steve Double: Today is my 30th wedding anniversary, so will the Chancellor join me in wishing the long-suffering Mrs Double a happy anniversary? Does he agree that the marriage tax allowance is a demonstration of this Government’s support for marriage? However, take-up has been low, so ahead of the autumn statement is the Chancellor considering increasing the allowance? If he is not, may I encourage him to do so?

Mr Hammond: I certainly join in wishing my hon. Friend and his wife a very happy 30th anniversary. Taking my queue from last week, I probably will not suggest how Mrs Double might commemorate the event.

Topical Questions
My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the value of marriage in society. I hope that I can reassure him that the Government remain firmly committed to supporting this important institution through the marriage allowance. Eligible couples could benefit by up to £432 this year, and we have just passed the landmark of 1 million families who have made successful applications. I agree with my hon. Friend that take-up of the marriage allowance is not high enough, but HMRC will launch a new campaign early next month to increase awareness and take-up.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Bringing the Chancellor back to Brexit and the role of his Department—happy anniversary, by the way, to the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double)—before the referendum, as the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie) said, the Treasury published a paper warning that the impact on Government receipts of leaving the single market would be a loss of up to £66 billion. Last week, Tom Scholar, the permanent secretary to the Treasury, told the Treasury Committee that the figures were “not directly applicable”. The Chancellor then questioned his own Department’s calculations by referring to mitigating factors that were not taken into account. There is fumbling chaos about Brexit not just in the Cabinet, but in the Treasury as well. Will the Chancellor clarify his Department’s exact calculation of the outlook for public finances if access to the single market is not achieved?

Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman can characterise it however he likes, but the simple fact is that all economic modelling must make assumptions. The model that the Treasury produced in April assumed no policy response by Government—we know that there has been a monetary response in the form of the monetary expansion delivered by the Bank of England on 2 August—and that an article 50 notice would be served immediately after the referendum, which we know was not the case.

As for the ongoing work, the right hon. Gentleman will have to wait until 23 November when the Office for Budget Responsibility will publish its forecast.

John McDonnell: No figure is attached to anything that the Chancellor has said, which again confirms the chaos in Cabinet and in his Department. Can I ask the Chancellor to pass on my thanks to the officials who helpfully published on the Treasury’s website a document labelled “Public Sector Finances Briefing—Official: Sensitive for internal use only”?

The document at least gives us some reliable information in that it confirms that the Government are failing to meet predictions on tax receipts and deficit reduction. It also reveals that that data are based on “activity from before the referendum so any post referendum downturn will exacerbate this.” Does that not prove once and for all that far from fixing the roof while the sun shone, this country was scandalously economically ill-prepared and politically totally unprepared for the Brexit decision?

Mr Hammond: Just so that the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely clear, it is quite wrong to suggest that my Department does not have any figures—it does, but I am just not giving them to him.

As for the document that the right hon. Gentleman spent such a lot of time yesterday rather unsuccessfully trying to tout around the media, it was published by mistake, but all the figures in the document have already been published elsewhere. All of them are in the public domain.

T2. [906773] Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): Kevin Lancaster and Simon Davis started their business, Aqua Cooling, from scratch in Fareham in 2000, and it now generates £1.7 million in profit and is a leading industrial cooling firm. Last week, the Institute of Physics awarded Aqua Cooling its business innovation award for its innovative application of physics to generate jobs and profit. Will the Chancellor join me in congratulating Aqua Cooling and outline what the Government are doing to support research and development, so that other self-starters like Kevin and Simon can grow their businesses?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I think that all Treasury Ministers would be delighted to congratulate Aqua Cooling on the innovation award it has won. As has been said, the Government have committed to supporting research and development in British businesses, providing one of the most generous R and D tax credit schemes in the world to UK small business. I am delighted to say that it was claimed by more than 18,000 small and medium-sized enterprises in 2014-15.

T7. [906778] Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Why does the Chancellor believe that corporation tax receipts collapsed in September 2016 to their lowest level since 2009? Why does he believe borrowing will overshoot the Office for Budget Responsibility’s forecast by an extra £17 billion this financial year?

Mr Philip Hammond: I am sorry to be boring, but all these issues will be addressed at the time of the autumn statement, when we will have the latest fiscal projections from the OBR.

T3. [906774] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I know that there will be a statement on this in a moment, but it has been reported that Heathrow is the chosen option for expansion. It is important that every part of the UK benefits from this and so do our regional airports. Will the Chancellor agree to meet me to discuss how we can improve connectivity to Leeds Bradford airport and how we might get funding for a rail link to it?

Mr Hammond: As my hon. Friend and the House will know, an announcement has been made that the airports committee this morning decided to move ahead with the north-west runway at Heathrow, and my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will be making a statement to the House very shortly. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that regional connectivity is vital. Regional slots at Heathrow have been squeezed out by the pressure on the runways there, and we will ensure, as a part of this package, that regional slots are protected in the future.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Tens of thousands of UK jobs depend on euro-denominated clearing in the UK. Will the Chancellor tell us how important he regards its still being permissible in the UK after we leave the European Union?
Mr Hammond: The right hon. Gentleman has put his finger on an important issue. As he will know, the European Central Bank has already one go at trying to prevent euro-denominated clearing from taking place in the UK, and it is no doubt a very iconic issue for many of our European partners. It is an important part of the overall financial structure in London and it is not easily separated from the other activities that operate in London, but in terms of the jobs and value attached to it, it is a relatively small part of the total.

T4. [906775] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is the Chancellor planning to do with Bradford & Bingley’s assets?

Mr Hammond: Following the announcement at Budget 2016, UK Asset Resolution Limited has launched a programme of sales of the Bradford & Bingley mortgage assets that it holds. That will be designed to raise sufficient proceeds to repay the £15.65 billion debt to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme and, in turn, the corresponding loan from the Treasury. It is expected, subject to market conditions and ensuring value for money, that this programme of sales will have been concluded in full by the end of 2017-18.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The Government gave £5 million in funding for the refurbishment of the Burrell collection in my constituency, with the money coming from cash collected from the LIBOR scandal. Will the Chancellor consider a similar funding scheme for Holmwood house in my constituency, given that it is the bicentenary of the architect’s birth next year and it needs some TLC?

Mr Hammond: I am glad that at this stage of the process before the autumn statement, I am able to say that all submissions will be carefully considered, and if the hon. Gentleman would care to let me have something in writing, I will happily look at it.

T5. [906776] Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Chancellor provide an update on what the Government are minded to do about air passenger duty, following the discussion carefully at them.

The Government are reviewing the potential options to support regional airports, following the discussion paper that was published last year, and of course we will set out full details of our response in due course. We have created 2.7 million new jobs, making this economy the fastest growing in Europe and would he like to apologise for that divisive and discredited ideology?

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What impact has the Secretary of State made of his predecessor’s austerity economics on the nation’s prosperity and would he like to apologise for that divisive and discredited ideology?

Mr Philip Hammond: I assume that the hon. Lady means what assessment I have made. Since 2010, we have brought this country back from the very brink. We have borrowing down from more than 10% of GDP to around 4% with more to deliver. We have created 2.7 million new jobs, making this economy the fastest growing in the G7 for the past three years, and the fastest job creator in the developed world. That is a record of which we can be proud.

T6. [906777] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Under what circumstances would my right hon. Friend the Chancellor authorise another round of quantitative easing if requested by the Governor of the Bank of England?

Mr Hammond: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. He knows that the operation of monetary policy in the UK is independent of Government. Monetary policy, including measures such as quantitative easing, has been highly effective in supporting the economy. Because of the fiscal implications of an indemnity for the Bank, packages have to be formally agreed by the Chancellor. Although I cannot prejudge any hypothetical request, no request for quantitative easing has ever been refused, and I see no reason why circumstances would be different in future.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The latest reports on the dash for cash in RBS’s Global Restructuring Group show even more misconduct by this bank. Given that we own a majority of RBS shares, does the Chancellor not believe that the UK Government have an obligation to the people of this country to conduct a robust investigation into the allegations of misconduct?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): The Financial Conduct Authority is looking at this important issue, and we will wait on its view.

Mr Speaker: Michael Fabricant—not here. That is unprecedented in the history of my being in the Chair. I have never known the hon. Gentleman not to be here, but, fortunately, Mr Philip Davies is here.

T9. [906780] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): How much UK taxpayers’ money used to bail out and loan to other EU countries by the EU has been repaid to the UK, and how much is still outstanding? What is the Chancellor doing to ensure that we get all that money back when we leave the European Union?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): No UK taxpayers’ money has been used in the EU’s lending to other member states. Only in the event of default would the UK be asked to pay its share.

Mr Philip Hammond: Clearly, the decline in the value of sterling will have an inflationary impact. How quickly that passes through into the UK economy is a subject of modelling by all economists who carry out these types of analyses. The Bank of England will very shortly be publishing its next inflation report, and that should give an indication of the forward trajectory.
Mr Gauke: We believe that HS2 is part of modernising our transport system and ensuring that we have infrastructure fit for the 21st century.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): In light of the upcoming report of the RBS’s Global Restructuring Group and given that past systems of redress for small businesses have been ad hoc and have failed, will the Chancellor meet the all-party group for fair business banking to see whether we can involve a permanent and effective system of redress?

Simon Kirby: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but we should wait until we receive the FCA report before we proceed.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will have seen the latest Office for National Statistics survey that found that Newark is the happiest place in mainland Britain. However, what is testing the people of Newark is the appalling state of their local roads. Will the Chancellor do another favour for Newark, and in his autumn statement bring forward the new Newark northern bypass?

Mr Philip Hammond: As a former resident of my hon. Friend’s constituency, I am delighted to acknowledge that it is the happiest place in Britain. Certainly some of my happiest times and memories are of living there. As I said earlier, we are currently in the process of receiving submissions from hon. Members across the House, and I would be very happy to receive a written submission from my hon. Friend.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As the Chancellor is considering investment in roads in his autumn statement, will he look sympathetically at the need for investment to support the substantial Carrington development in my constituency, both in the M60-M62 network and in the relief road that will be necessary to support journeys in and out of the Carrington area?

Mr Hammond: I do not know the project that the hon. Lady talks about. I assume that it is a housing development, and we are certainly interested in the way in which infrastructure investment can not only deliver in its own right, but enable much-needed housing development. If she would like to let me have a written submission, I would be happy to look at it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am afraid that this will be the last topical question.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does the Chancellor support Cheltenham’s Cyber Innovation Centre, and does he agree that spending on our world-class defence and security assets, such as GCHQ, can play a vital role in nurturing the high-tech civilian jobs of tomorrow?

Mr Hammond: Yes. I was privileged as Foreign Secretary for two years to have oversight of GCHQ, which is truly a world-class facility, and using that facility not only to ensure Britain’s security but to create a cutting-edge business sector is an entirely sensible thing to do. I welcome the success of the Cheltenham Cyber Innovation Centre.
Private Members’ Bills

12.36 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House of Commons if he will make a statement on the Government’s response to the Procedure Committee’s second report of this Session on Private Members’ Bills and if he will provide time for that report to be debated.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The Procedure Committee published its report last Tuesday, 18 October. In my evidence to the Committee last Wednesday, 19 October, I said that the Government were considering the report and intended to respond in detail within the normal two-month timeframe. I am happy to confirm that commitment to the House today.

Mr Walker: I thank the Leader of the House for his answer. Too often on Fridays, when we have private Members’ Bills, this House bleeds. It bleeds credibility and it bleeds standing. The Government are well aware of that fact. The Procedure Committee has been trying for the past three years to bring its concerns to the attention of the House and to gain Government support for some of our modest recommendations to restore some credibility and some faith in the process.

Our recommendations—the Committee’s recommendations—would not necessarily mean that what happened this past Friday would not happen again, but they would demonstrate to the public that we in this place, Back Benchers, take legislation seriously and that we take Back-Bench legislation seriously. The truth is that, without the will on behalf of the Government to change Fridays, we will still have too many days when we leave this place downcast and somewhat ashamed at the proceedings that have gone on before us.

We have a listening and concerned Leader of the House. I hope that he will receive our recommendations in a positive way and accept some small part of them, particularly that part that would allow the Backbench Business Committee to assign up to the first four private Members’ Bill slots to Members. That would encourage serious legislators in this place to invest time and energy, working with one another for a year or more, to come up with a legislative proposition that, if it did not command the support of the House, would at least demand the attention of the House when it was brought before it.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend has provided a succinct summary of some of the key recommendations of his Committee’s report. He has campaigned strongly and honourably for procedural changes to try to enhance the status of Friday debates on private Members’ Bills. I gave him an undertaking in an evidence session with his Committee last week that the Government would look seriously at his Committee’s most recent report. Clearly, we will need both to consider his recommendations and to have collective discussion in the Government before publishing our response, but that we will do.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) for his urgent question. I well remember as a new Member coming in here on a Friday when there was a debate on a private Member’s Bill on daylight saving and Members took so long to talk it out that it was dark by the time we left the Chamber.

One of the recommendations is that the Backbench Business Committee should decide which Bills are worthy of going forward. May I ask the Leader of the House whether the Committee will be expanded on a cross-party basis? It currently has two members from the Opposition, five from the Government party and one from the Scottish National party. The smaller parties are not represented at all.

Does it not appear that the Government would be in control of which Bills are picked? Therefore, will the Committee’s terms of reference and the objectives have to change? Will the Leader of the House have to provide extra time for these Bills, or will they eat into other House business that is currently protected such as Opposition days and Backbench Business debates? When the Bills are picked by the Committee, will they become part of days devoted to Backbench Business debates? If the Government say that they support a Bill, rather than talk it out as the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), did last Friday, can they not set up a Bill Committee to go through the clauses and amend the measure, just as we do for other legislation? Alternatively, they can come clean and say that they do not support the Bill.

Will the Leader of the House have to look at changing the right of a Member to present a Bill under a ten-minute rule motion and at the procedure for doing so? Finally, he kindly said that he will report back to the House within two months—is that before or after Christmas?

Mr Lidington: Our intention is to publish the Government’s response within the two-month timeframe that has been long established under the conventions of the House. We will respond in detail to the proposals from the Procedure Committee. I am always willing to look with an open mind at proposals, whether from the hon. Lady or from other hon. Members, for changes to our procedures that command significant and, ideally, cross-party support. I do not intend this to be in any way a rejection of what she said, but sometimes proposals are made that, when examined more closely, turn out to have the support of a minority of Members, who feel strongly, but which do not command widespread support.

To respond to another point that the hon. Lady made, it remains the case, as it always has, that if a promoter of a private Member’s Bill has sufficient support among colleagues in all parts of the House to deal with closure motions or insist on a Second Reading, they can do so. Their ability to do so would reflect a genuine surge of support for their Bill from the House as a whole.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): As someone who has probably had the privilege of listening to more Friday debates than any other serving Member, I support the vehemence of my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), if not all the recommendations of the Procedure Committee. I hope that the Leader of the House is prepared to allow a fuller debate in which different ideas can be put forward, because we have really got to change the present arrangements.

Mr Lidington: I am happy to discuss further with my right hon. Friend his particular experience as a former Chairman of Ways and Means. I will consider the
request for time to be made available, although I would
gently say that time is available in the House for debates
that is not within the gift of the Government but within
the gift of Back Benchers.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I do not think that we have ever witnessed such a
depressing and dispiriting spectacle as the one we saw
on Friday. A Government Minister got to his feet to
talk out a private Member's Bill. It was not political
knockabout or a party political issue: it was a private
Member's Bill designed sensitively to try to ensure that
generations of gay men were pardoned for crimes that
no longer exist.

The public could not hold the way in which we
conduct business in the House in more contempt. On
Friday, they were proved right, and every single fear
about the way in which we conduct business was justified.
I totally support the hon. Member for Broxbourne
(Mr Walker) in his attempt to ensure that we do something
about the appalling way in which we deal with private
Members' Bills. It is the one opportunity that we have
as Back Benchers to engage in the legislative process
and to ensure that we get things on the statute book. We
cannot continue to do things as we did on Friday, so I
appeal to the Leader of the House to look at the report,
treat it seriously and introduce solid plans so that we
never ever get the disgrace of Friday on the Floor of
the House again.

Mr Lidington: I repeat the undertaking that I have
given once this afternoon that the Government will
indeed consider the report from the Procedure Committee
very carefully and publish our response to it. As regards
last Friday, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my
hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah),
was speaking at 2.30 pm, having spoken for 26 minutes.
During that time he took seven interventions, including
at least two from the Scottish National party Benches,
and refused four SNP requests to give way. I would ha ve
hoped that, on reflection after the weekend, the hon.
Gentleman and his party would be willing to welcome
an amendment to a Government Bill ensures that
the legislative change that the hon. Gentleman and I
hoped that, on reflection after the weekend, the hon.
Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah),
in his attempt to ensure that we do something
about the appalling way in which we deal with private
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and to ensure that we get things on the statute book. We
cannot continue to do things as we did on Friday, so I
appeal to the Leader of the House to look at the report,
treat it seriously and introduce solid plans so that we
never ever get the disgrace of Friday on the Floor of
the House again.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend makes a very
good point. Last Friday a closure motion was moved,
but only 57 Members were present to vote in its support.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am
surprised by what sounds like complacency from the
Leader of the House. He knows that one of the reasons
that Members cannot always be here is constituency
obligations. When we know that his own Minister is
going to talk out a Bill, that devalues this place. More
than 130,000 people signed a petition when my National
Health Service Bill was talked out earlier this year, so
can he demonstrate greater seriousness and greater
urgency in tackling this massive area of reputational
damage to this House?

Mr Lidington: I said that we would consider seriously
the proposals from the Committee. The hon. Lady
needs to reflect on why her Bill failed to get the support
of the majority of MPs.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Does the Leader of
the House agree that if people are particularly unhappy
about a Bill not getting through on a Friday, they
should make the effort to turn up to support it, because if at least 100 people turn up to support the first Bill that is taken, it will go through despite any opposition or attempt to block it? Does he agree that it is not too much to expect any Bill that goes through this House to have the support of 100 MPs?

Mr Lidington: I do not always agree with my hon. Friend, but on this occasion he makes a very reasonable point.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The thing is that tens of thousands of people were watching the debate last Friday as though it really were a matter of life and death for them, because it was about their own sense of shame, how society had treated them, and whether they would have a possibility of real exoner. For all the fine words that we hear about 100 Members and all the rest of it, the truth is that last Friday brought the House into disrepute. I have no beef with the Minister; the problem is that the system encourages Ministers to do that week after week. The system is bust and it needs mending.

Mr Lidington: I repeat that as a result of the course that the Government have chosen, Turing’s law will now be enacted within weeks as part of a Government Bill, together with safeguards to ensure that anyone who is not supposed to receive a disregard or pardon will not be able to secure it by subterfuge.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I fully support my hon. Friend the Chair of the Procedure Committee. Will the Leader of the House respond to the question he has been asked as to whether he accepts that the existing arrangements bring this House into disrepute? I believe that they do.

Mr Lidington: We will respond in full to the Committee’s report. Over the years, many criticisms of the private Members’ Bill procedure have been made from different quarters. I will take seriously the proposals the Committee has made. However, we also need to ensure that under our procedures, legislation does not reach the statute book, perhaps even creating criminal offences affecting our constituents, unless there is clear demonstrable support within Parliament among a majority of Members for it to be enacted.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does the Leader of the House understand that the people watching the unedifying carryings-on in this place when private Members’ Bills, such as that of my hon. Friend, that would not be able to support it as he had at that time envisaged it.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend, when he schedules the debate on the Procedure Committee’s report, to provide sufficient time to allow a full discussion of all the aspects of the private Members’ Bill procedure, because part of the problem seems to be that not every Member of this House fully understands what the procedure is?

Mr Lidington: It is a good bit of advice to all Members of the House, recently arrived or more senior, to be thoroughly cognisant of its procedures and to do additional homework from time to time.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): As this weekend, yet again, we are plunged needlessly into winter darkness, what happened to the Daylight Saving Bill is a very good example of the Leader of the House being wrong when he says that if a Bill has overwhelming support it can proceed. That Bill did proceed, but the Government killed it by not implementing its provisions. Will he fully accept the recommendations of the Committee in order to restore public confidence and the reputation of this House?

Mr Lidington: That is obviously a matter for other Ministers, and I shall draw the right hon. Gentleman’s remarks to their attention. However, there was, I recall, very strong opposition in certain parts of the United Kingdom, particularly from Scotland and Northern Ireland, to the daylight saving measure that he supported.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I voted for the closure motion on Friday. The problem was that there were not enough Members here; that is the reason the Bill did not proceed. However, there are occasions when a Bill does get to Committee and can pass this House on Second Reading but is blocked by the lack of provision of a money resolution. That needs reforming. We need to debate this as soon as possible, because there are areas that do need reform.

Mr Lidington: The issue of money resolutions was mentioned in the Procedure Committee’s report, so the Government will respond on it in due course.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Instead of listening, it seems that the Leader of the House is hiding behind excuses about the closure motion not being supported, complacency about filibustering, and the fact that the Minister spoke for 26 minutes. The Minister treated this place, and the viewing public, with contempt. Will the Leader of the House commit to his Government not treating this place with contempt?

Mr Lidington: I completely reject the aspersions that the hon. Gentleman casts on the Minister, who handled last Friday’s business in a thoroughly reasonable and courteous fashion. The hon. Gentleman might ask himself why, if he and his colleagues genuinely wanted the Bill to reach the statute book, it was published only a couple of days before the Second Reading debate.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): As a veteran of sitting through talk-outs and the sleep-out, I have seen all sides of the private Members’ Bill process. Does the Leader of the House agree that while there may be merit in the Backbench Business Committee being able to schedule Bills that have widespread support, it must still remain difficult to get it debated, and the key reform is that people should show up to debates?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very telling point.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Is not the real reason there is a bankruptcy of confidence in the private Members’ Bill system that the Government can always kill a Bill by using methods that are sometimes hidden and sometimes open? We need a shaft of sunlight on this system so that we can restore some confidence. Let us have a debate on it.

Mr Lidington: The convention for many years, under successive Governments, has been that the Government make their view on private Members’ Bills plain during the course of a Second Reading debate. I return to the point that a private Member’s Bill that enjoys genuine majority support within the House has a decent chance of success.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This Friday, I will have the opportunity to present my Bill, which has all-party support and has been properly scrutinised before getting to this place. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should not have a lottery to get serious legislation on to the statute book, but require the case to be argued before a Committee before we get to that stage?

Mr Lidington: In the light of the Procedure Committee’s recommendations, I would be genuinely interested in whether my hon. Friend’s suggestion represents the view of the House as a whole, or whether more Members feel that they might lose out through the abolition of the lottery, which very many Back-Bench Members in all parts of the House prize as a great annual occasion.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): When I was briefly Deputy Leader of the House, I had responsibility for private Members’ Bills. I found that, in practice, it was not Ministers in other Departments who were opposed to them, but officials in the Cabinet Office who did not want to devote the time to the briefings. The right hon. Gentleman has the opportunity to be a reforming Leader of the House and to improve on the performance of his recent successors—will he take it?

Mr Lidington: We shall consider all the recommendations of the Committee and respond within the timescale that the House usually expects.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): As I am someone who, in the previous Parliament, had the privilege of bringing a private Member’s Bill through this place, I hope that the Leader of the House will give serious consideration to reforms to the system. When I listened to coverage of the day’s proceedings on Friday night, my toes curled with embarrassment at the shabby treatment of the Turing Bill.

Mr Lidington: As someone who has also managed to get a private Member’s Bill on to the statute book, I understand my hon. Friend’s sense of pride. I reiterate that the Government, and the Minister in particular, have nothing to apologise for in the way that Friday’s business was handled. The fact that we now have an amendment tabled in the name of a Liberal Democrat Member of the House of Lords means, most assuredly, that the Turing Bill will be on the statute book much more quickly than if we had resorted to the private Members’ Bill route.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In too many places the Standing Orders of this House give power to the Government at the expense of Parliament. Will the Leader of the House admit that he will not make changes to the private Members’ Bill process because he does not want the Government to cede any power?

Mr Lidington: I point out to the hon. Lady that, through such measures as the creation of the Backbench Business Committee and the provision for the direct election of Select Committee Chairs, we now have a Parliament—a legislature—that is more powerful, less deferential and more outspoken than at any time during my 24 years of service.

Mr Speaker: Jolly good thing, too.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Leader of the House remind the Procedure Committee that there are, in fact, 52 Fridays in any year; that Members can attend all 13 private Members’ Bill Fridays and still have 39 constituency Fridays; and that, given that they involve creating laws of the land and that there are 650 Members, asking 100 Members to turn up to support any Bill really is not too much to ask?

Mr Lidington: I agree completely with my hon. Friend.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): A constituent wrote to me after last Friday’s filibustering to say, “How on earth can this happen in this day and age?” If the Leader of the House responds positively to the report, will that not at least do something to improve the reputation of this House?

Mr Lidington: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman was one of the 57 who voted in favour of the closure motion, or whether he was elsewhere at the time. Anyone who read the Minister’s speech on Friday in Hansard, or his subsequent article in PinkNews, will understand and sympathise with the arguments that he posed and will welcome the Government’s proposed legislation to give effect to the Turing Bill.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it not the case that the Government accepted the Sharkey amendment simply because my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) won a raffle? Does he agree that the Procedure Committee’s report brings us closer to the Scottish Parliament system, whereby a Bill that can demonstrate genuine cross-party support can continue to progress through the legislative process, or does he think that that is not the best way to proceed?
Mr Lidington: The reason we are introducing this legislation is that it was a Conservative manifesto commitment.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): SNP Members regard Friday as an extremely important opportunity to work in our constituencies. It is, therefore, not only frustrating for us, but incredibly disrespectful to our constituents, when private Members’ Bills are talked out. Will the Government look seriously at the report’s recommendations, in particular those that tackle the issue of filibustering?

Mr Lidington: No complaint was made about filibustering during the debate on Friday. Members on both sides of the House took part, and my hon. Friend the Minister spoke for a perfectly reasonable length of time and took seven different interventions during the course of his speech. The hon. Lady ought to reflect on that and welcome what the Government have done, which is provide a better, surer course of action than that proposed by her party.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): May I correct the Leader of the House? In my speech I explicitly said that if the Bill was deliberately talked out by the Government, what should have been one of the brightest days in this Parliament’s history would become one of its darkest. May I therefore invite him to withdraw the suggestion that no complaints were made during the debate? Will the Leader of the House also confirm that several of the interventions that the Minister took were specifically from Back Benchers pleading with him to sit down, stop filibustering and give the democratic, elected Chamber the chance to make a decision?

Given that the Leader of the House is convinced that if a Member cannot get 100 Members in here to support a Bill, it does not deserve to go through, will he tell us how many Members were in this Chamber last night when the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill was given its Second Reading?

Mr Speaker: Order. That last point has absolutely nothing to do with the Procedure Committee report. I am sure that the coming off of the topic was entirely inadvertent on the part of the hon. Gentleman, and it therefore requires no reply.

Mr Lidington: We will respond to the report in due course. The problem with the Bill that was debated last Friday is that it was flawed, in that it would have made it possible for people who are living today to receive a blanket pardon, even if they have been properly convicted of offences against minors or offences involving non-consensual sex. That is why the Government consistently took the view that the disregard procedure needed to be followed, and why we have taken swift action to provide for such a scheme though proposed Government legislation to give effect to the Turing Bill.
afterwards. If we do nothing, the cost to our nation will be significant, amounting to more than £20 billion over 60 years through delays, fewer flights and passengers having to fly from airports elsewhere. In addition, the wider impacts on our economy will be in the region of £30 billion to £45 billion. That is why the decision we have reached today is so important to the future of our country, not just to tackle the immediate shortage of airport capacity, but to set our country on a course to even greater prosperity for future generations.

I have spent a considerable amount of time this summer visiting the different schemes, talking to their promoters, and assessing their strengths and weaknesses. I have been genuinely impressed by the quality of choice available to us and the detailed work that has been put into the three plans. Any one of them would bring benefits to our country. At the end of its work, however, the Airports Commission made a clear and unanimous recommendation to the Government—that we should accept the proposal to build a new north-west runway at Heathrow, subject to a package of measures to make expansion more acceptable to the airport’s local community. Since the publication of that recommendation, my Department has studied in detail not only the report, but new and supplementary information that has emerged about the different options since. The commission’s report and the subsequent information formed the basis of the discussion that took place this morning at the Cabinet Sub-Committee. As a result of that discussion, the Government have decided to accept the recommendation. We believe that the expansion of Heathrow airport and the north-west runway scheme, in combination with a significant package of supporting measures on the scale recommended by the Airports Commission, offers the greatest benefit to passengers and business, and will help us to deliver the broadest possible benefit to the whole United Kingdom. That approach will deliver the greatest economic and strategic benefits for our economy. It will strengthen connectivity for passengers right across the United Kingdom. It offers a major boost to freight operators. It can be delivered within carbon and air quality limits and, crucially, it comes with world-leading measures to limit the impacts on those living nearby.

In addition to the benefits identified by the commission, the scheme will deliver the connectivity and hub capacity that the UK needs to compete with fast-growing European and middle eastern hubs. The airport’s location means it is more accessible to business and the rest of the United Kingdom by both road and rail. Access to Heathrow is more resilient, and it is better placed as the national freight hub. Ultimately, the proposal will bring the largest benefit to passengers and the wider economy: up to £61 billion over 60 years. But we are not alone in this view. UK airlines and businesses are also clear that Heathrow is the right place to expand.

Before I continue, I would like to pay genuine tribute to the promoters of the other two schemes considered by the Sub-Committee. As I have said, both presented well-developed and compelling cases for new capacity. In particular, I would like to place on record the fact that Gatwick, despite not being selected today, remains a key part of our national transport picture and will continue to do so in the future. I want to be clear that expansion will not be at any cost to local people, to passengers or to industry. We have to make three assurances. The first is about making Heathrow a better neighbour. We must tackle air quality and noise, and meet our obligations on carbon both during and after construction. Air quality is a significant national health issue that the Government take immensely seriously. That was why we undertook further work, which confirms the commission’s original conclusion that a new runway at Heathrow is deliverable within air quality limits. We remain committed to ensuring that that remains the case. The airport has already committed to industry-leading measures to mitigate air quality impacts. Furthermore, the Government will grant development consent only if we remain satisfied that a new runway will not impact on the UK’s compliance with its air quality obligations.

The broader issue of air quality is something that the Government take very seriously, and the updated evidence base shows clearly that the biggest challenge we face is not the expansion of an airport, but the levels of emissions in urban areas more generally. That is the very reason for our national air quality plan. As part of our ongoing work on air quality, my Department has embarked on a joint project with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Treasury to identify further steps which we will take to tackle the issue. By the time a new runway opens in the next decade, we intend to have made substantial progress on tackling such air quality challenges across our nation as a whole.

On the issue of noise, no airport can be silent, but technology is making aircraft quieter. The new generation of aircraft coming into service have a noise footprint that is typically 50% smaller on departure, and at least 30% smaller on arrival, than that of the aircraft they are replacing. Although planes are getting quieter, however, they still have an impact, which is why we will expect a six-and-a-half hour ban on scheduled flights each night to be a requirement for development consent. That would also see the airport held to clear and legally enforceable noise performance targets. Even with expansion, therefore, fewer people will be affected by aircraft noise than is the case today. We also recognise the importance of providing local residents with a clear, predictable timetable of respite from aircraft noise. That is something local communities value, and we will ensure that it continues once a new runway is built.

I recognise that the decision will have a big impact on people who live close to Heathrow, which is why we have insisted on a world-class package of supporting measures. Communities affected by the decision will be supported by up to £2.6 billion towards compensation, noise insulation for homes and schools, improvements to public facilities and other measures. For those whose homes need to be bought to make way for the new runway, Heathrow plans to pay 25% above the full market value of those homes and to cover all costs, including stamp duty, moving and legal fees. That offer is significantly above the statutory requirement. In addition, I can announce the creation of a community compensation fund. Local authorities will benefit from our policy of local retention of business rates.

The second assurance is on costs for airlines and passengers. A new runway will bring in new capacity to meet demand and allow for greater levels of competition, which will lower fares relative to no expansion, even after the costs of construction are taken into account. This is an investment in our country’s future. It will deliver major economic and strategic benefits to the UK, but they must be delivered without hitting passengers
in the pocket. The Airports Commission has made it clear that that is achievable, as has the Civil Aviation Authority. It is important to send the message that this is not expansion at any cost, but the right scheme at the right price. I expect the industry to work together to drive down costs for the benefit of passengers. As the regulator, the CAA will have a vital part to play in achieving that and ensuring that new capacity fosters competition. Its aim should be to deliver a plan for expansion that keeps landing charges close to current levels, and I have full confidence in its ability to do so.

The third assurance is about how the expanded airport will benefit the whole of the UK, not just by creating jobs across the airport's UK-wide supply chain, but by giving even more of the UK access to important international markets by strengthening existing domestic links and developing new connections to regions that are not currently served. The airport expects to add six more domestic routes across the UK by 2030, bringing the total to 14. That will strengthen existing links to nations and regions such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and the north of England, and allow the development of new connections to regions such as the south-west.

I am determined that Heathrow will meet those pledges and that the Government will hold the airport to account on them. Furthermore, the Government will take all necessary steps, including, where appropriate, ring-fencing a suitable proportion of new slots for domestic routes through public service obligations to enhance connectivity within the United Kingdom. It is important to stress that this is a decision in the national interest; it is not just about the south-east of England.

A new runway will strengthen the aviation sector across the whole nation, but we need to do even more. Our airspace is out of date. Modernising it will boost the sector and help to further reduce noise and carbon emissions. We will soon introduce proposals to support improvements to the airspace and to manage noise, which will include a consideration of the way in which affected communities can be engaged and whether there is a role for a new independent aviation noise body such as the commission recommended.

Let me turn to what happens next. There have been recent suggestions in the media that the process has been slowed down or somehow delayed. In fact, the opposite is true. Members will remember the saga of the planning process behind terminal 5, which took years to resolve. Following that, the national policy statement process, which was created by the previous Labour Government in the Planning Act 2008 and improved through the Localism Act 2011, was designed to speed up major projects, but in an open and fair manner. By setting out now why we believe that there is a need for new runway capacity, along with the supporting evidence, we will fulfil our legal obligations to consult the public and allow Members to vote on the proposal before it becomes national policy. That is what the law requires. That means that Heathrow will be able to submit a planning application safe in the knowledge that the high-level arguments have been settled and will not be reopened.

Today, the Government have reached a view on their preferred scheme, and the national policy statement that we will publish in the new year will set out in more detail why we believe it is the right one for the UK. It will also set out in more detail the conditions we wish to place on the development, including the supporting measures I outlined. We want to make sure that we have considered all the evidence and heard the voices of all those who might be affected and, of course, of those who will benefit. The consultation will start in the new year, and I can announce today that I have appointed Sir Jeremy Sullivan, the former Senior President of Tribunals, to oversee the consultation process. This is an independent role, and Sir Jeremy will be responsible for holding the Government to account and for ensuring that best practice is upheld.

The issue of runway capacity in the south-east has challenged successive Administrations for decades. There are strong feelings both for and against a third runway at Heathrow. This is not the scheme that was previously promoted in 2009. It does much more to mitigate environmental impacts, to compensate communities and to distribute benefits across the nation. This is an issue of vital national interest that touches every part of our United Kingdom. It is vital to the economic prosperity and global status of our nation, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.21 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Although I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement, it cannot pass without comment that this decision has been widely leaked throughout the media during the past number of hours in advance of it being sent to me and of being announced to the House. It is simply unacceptable for such a decision to be announced in this manner; it is totally disrespectful to Members and the House. Be that as it may, aviation is crucial to our nation's economy and our future as an outward-looking trading nation. That will be even more the case in the light of the vote to leave the European Union, so we welcome the fact that a decision on the preferred location has now been made. I hope we can put the years of procrastination and delay behind us.

Despite the Secretary of State's proclamation that the work is now complete, today's announcement is not the end of the process, but merely the start of it. It beggars belief that it has taken Ministers more than a year since the publication of the Davies report even to make a start. Just what have they been doing for all these months, apart from worrying about splits in the Cabinet, or about the Foreign Secretary throwing himself in front of the bulldozers and former mayoral candidates triggering by-elections? There is no justification for dithering on this scale. The Secretary of State has failed to provide the shorter timescale for getting to the national policy statement that was set out by the Transport Committee.

We cannot bring back the time that Ministers have already wasted, so over the coming months it will be vital that there is proper engagement, and full and fair consultation with all the interested parties, so that we secure an outcome that stands the test of time. It is essential that there is proper forensic examination and scrutiny. Labour has consistently said that support for any such decision will be conditional: first, on sufficient capacity being delivered; secondly, on meeting the UK's legal climate change obligations; thirdly, on local noise
and environmental impacts being managed and minimised; and, fourthly, on the benefits not being confined to London and the south-east.

Labour fully recognises the need for runway expansion in the south-east of England, but following today’s announcement, it could be a decade before an additional runway is operational. We face capacity challenges here and now, but we heard nothing in the Secretary of State’s statement about how the Government intend to tackle the immediate shortage of airport capacity. What are his plans to utilise existing capacity in the south-east at Stansted and Luton—and, indeed, elsewhere?

There was also no mention of more utilisation of our international gateways. What message does that send to Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham and East Midlands, and what message does it send about the Government’s commitment to the so-called northern powerhouse and the midlands engine? Surface access to many of our international gateways around the UK needs improving, yet it is unclear what action the Government are taking. That is why Labour is calling for the new National Infrastructure Commission to examine the road and rail needs of airports outside the south-east. I urge the Secretary of State to support that proposal as well as Labour’s call to update the West Anglia line to improve rail services to Stansted, and to have better connectivity to Luton airport.

The Government must ensure that we do not fall short of our legal climate change obligations. We have but one planet, and it is essential that the UK plays a leading role in ensuring that agreed reductions in carbon emissions are met. Sustainable Aviation believes that UK aviation could reduce its carbon dioxide emissions by up to 24% by 2050 through the deployment of sustainable alternative fuels. Other countries have made considerable progress but, sadly, the lack of commitment and clarity from our Government caused the collapse of the British Airways green sky project. May we hear more from the Government about what steps will be taken to meet our climate change targets, particularly on developing sustainable fuels and progressing the consultation on the inclusion of aviation in the renewable transport fuels obligation?

After the Davies commission, the Government announced that they wanted to look further at environmental matters and, in particular, at air quality. As was revealed in The Guardian last week, David Cameron’s former policy adviser at No. 10 warned the then Prime Minister a year ago that he was “exposed on Heathrow”, because the Government did not have an answer about the effect on air quality. Indeed, the need for further work on air quality was the reason given for the delay, yet there was not a single reference in the Secretary of State’s statement to explain what work on that has been completed or how such work has informed his position. Will he publish—I hope he will—the additional work that he tells us the Government have done post-Davies so that those inside and outside the House can scrutinise it properly?

It is essential that the unacceptable levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulates from diesel engines are reduced because their direct impact on the health and wellbeing of tens of thousands of citizens simply cannot be ignored or tolerated. Direct measures are needed to lower emissions across the nation, especially in areas with a high concentration of emissions. I urge the Secretary of State to be unrelenting in his pursuit of improved air quality.

The commission recommended establishing an independent aviation noise authority, so will the Secretary of State immediately advise us about the Government’s intentions in that respect? Our air traffic management infrastructure is ancient, and modernisation would secure great dividends not only in terms of carbon emissions, but through considerable mitigations on noise and air quality. What steps is he taking to ensure that the modernisation that is so urgently needed is prioritised and progressed?

On our fourth test that the benefits of expansion are not confined to London and the south-east, it is essential that landing slots affording better connectivity and trading links for our nations and regions are maintained in the longer term. Any assurances that the Secretary of State can give in that respect would be most welcome. Will he also assure the House that the entire UK will be afforded a proper opportunity to engage in the construction process? Perhaps some of the HS2 Ltd protocols can be adopted. You never know, but we might be using UK steel.

The location of an additional runway cannot be the sum total of aviation strategy, so I urge the Secretary of State to press ahead with the full range of measures that are necessary to sustain our successful aviation industry. We must also ensure that the best interests of all the United Kingdom are served, and that the legitimate environmental concerns that have been raised, and that will continue to be raised, are fully addressed. We must do all that we can to protect our precious planet for the generations to come.

Chris Grayling: I will start with the point about the announcement. You know, Mr Speaker, how seriously I, as a former Leader of the House, take such issues. You will also be aware that this matter is highly price sensitive. Indeed, when the Airports Commission published its initial reports, they were launched in a way—that they were announced at the start of the morning—that was consistent with a market announcement. That is the approach we have taken with this announcement. I have come to the House at the earliest opportunity to make a statement, and I will take all the questions that Members have for me.

On the timeframe, the hon. Gentleman asked me what we have been doing for the past year. We have been doing precisely what he asked about: working on the issue of air quality. Today and over the coming days, we will publish additional material so that Members, the public and others who are interested will be able to scrutinise in detail the work we have done and the route we have followed to reach this conclusion. Given the particular importance of air quality, he would expect us to make sure that we had done the additional work to satisfy ourselves that this can be done in line with what we all accept are our necessary priorities for reducing emissions levels.

The hon. Gentleman talked about what will happen during the coming months. As I said earlier, yes, there will be a full and proper consultation. That consultation is set out clearly in statute—[Interruption.] Despite the murmurings of Opposition Members, the consultation is set out in an Act that Labour rightly passed to improve
the process of going ahead with such a national project. That is the process we will follow. We will do so in as timely a way as we can, but we cannot short-change a process set out in primary legislation. On the capacity challenges here and now, there is absolutely nothing to stop new routes being set up tomorrow. We have capacity at Stansted, and new routes have come into Heathrow and Gatwick in the past 12 months. We are not preventing the airports around London that still have capacity—

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): You're not doing anything!

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman talks about not doing anything. With respect, the Opposition do not appear to understand that the airports themselves go out to sell opportunities around the world and bring in new routes. The leaderships of those airports sell Britain as a great destination to fly to and do business in. They will carry on doing that.

There are clearly some big surface access issues to address in connection with this new scheme. However, I remind the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) that we are close to completion of Crossrail, which will make a major difference to connectivity to Heathrow, we will shortly be starting improvements to the M25 between Heathrow and Gatwick, and the new Thameslink routes are due to open in about 18 months' time, which will significantly improve links to Luton airport. Things are already happening to improve surface access links to our airports.

Climate change is a very important issue that we take very seriously. I was delighted by the agreement reached at the International Civil Aviation Organisation summit in Montreal recently, which sets a way forward for the aviation industry with international agreement. That is a significant step forward. We agree that a significant challenge remains that we must monitor very carefully, but the Airports Commission said very clearly that the expansion could take place and we could meet our objectives. That is what we intend to do.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned sustainable fuels, and good work is being done on those, by Virgin in this country, for example, and by airlines around the world. The technology will improve as the years go by.

The hon. Gentleman asked what we are doing on air quality. I agree with him that it is a bigger issue for our country, affecting very many of our urban areas. It requires a broad-ranging response to deal with it through clean air zones, as set out in our national air quality strategy, and other measures that we are working on that go beyond that strategy and continue a process of improvement over the coming decade.

I said in my remarks that I would consult on a noise authority and that we would bring forward plans for airspace modernisation. On regional connectivity, I am happy to restate our commitment to hon. Members from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, northern England and the south-west. We are very clear that this expansion must include binding provision for links to those parts of the country. This has to be a benefit to the entire United Kingdom and it will be. On the hon. Gentleman's last point, Heathrow airport is committed to ensuring that the project will be built using UK steel.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend acknowledge, in the light of the very courageous decision he has announced to the House, that in the 10 years before the extra runway at Heathrow is available great pressure will descend upon Stansted, to which he has referred? Does he understand that my constituents will expect the same level of compensation and care for them against noise disturbance, and wish the recommendations of the West Anglia task force to be implemented as soon as possible, as life will otherwise become intolerable for everyone on that railway line, whether passengers, employees at the airport or regular commuters?

Chris Grayling: My right hon. Friend has been a passionate advocate for the communities around Stansted for a very long time. I remember visiting the airport with him when I shadowed this brief a decade ago. This is something we must be immensely sensitive to, and I give him a commitment that we will be. We are now looking very carefully at the proposals he was involved in shaping and the set of recommendations that he published recently. I want everything done as soon as is practical to make sure that the links to Stansted are as good as those to London's other airports.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place and thank him for early sight of his statement. After what has been world-leading prevarication from his Government, we welcome this decision, which finally almost ends what the Scottish Chambers of Commerce has called the “economic illiteracy” of failing to make a decision. True to form, however, the Government's indecisiveness could not resist one last piece of bad taste fudge to stick in people's throats. The lack of a vote in this House for more than a year will not allow people and companies a true end, and the soap opera will therefore continue.

That said, we welcome the announcement of Heathrow as a preference. Although airport expansion of this type disproportionately benefits the south-east of England, it has strategic consequences for Scottish air routes. In preparation for this announcement, and after more than 18 months of meetings with, among others, airports, campaign groups, business bodies and the UK Government, the Scottish National party Scottish Government have agreed a memorandum of understanding with Heathrow that will bring, among many other things, jobs, an engineering hub and route support to Scotland.

It is now time for the UK Government to ensure a full and fair deal for Scotland. We must see a commitment to addressing those needs. A lot is required. Will the Secretary of State commit to meeting the following wider challenges? First, as he has intimated, will he work with me and the Scottish Government to develop genuine route support and public service obligations, and address Scotland’s needs in relation to this development? Secondly, will he make a proper commitment to supporting aircraft biofuels and giving genuine encouragement to carbon-reducing technology in aircraft? Thirdly, will he...
go further than he did in his statement and commit to starting immediate work to replace the airspace strategy for the UK, which is more than 50 years old?

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to the SNP for its support for today’s announcement. The hon. Gentleman talked about the lack of a vote. I remind him that this is the law. We are following a process that is set out in statute—he is surely not suggesting that we should not follow that process. We will do so in as timely a way as possible, but we have a duty to follow primary legislation.

The hon. Gentleman raised the airspace modernisation programme. The CAA has already started preparatory work on that, and we need to press ahead with it, not simply because of today’s announcement but because we need to change many of the things that unnecessarily use up fuel and cause additional carbon emissions, such as the stacking structures. That work is beginning. We will consult on it extensively over the next two years. That modernisation has to happen alongside the development of the runway plan.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): The Government have chosen a course that is not only wrong but doomed. It is wrong because of the million people who will suffer directly on the back of the environmental harm this project unavoidably produces. It is doomed because the complexities, cost and legal complications mean that the project is almost certainly not going to be delivered. I believe it will be a millstone around the Government’s neck for many years to come—a constant source of delay, and of anger and betrayal among those people who will be directly affected. There are so many questions one could ask at a statement of this sort that I would not know where to begin, so I simply use this opportunity to put my absolute opposition on the record.

Chris Grayling: I very much respect the sincerity of the views that my hon. Friend holds and the commitment he has made to his constituents on this issue. I know how strongly he will disagree with the decision we have taken today. I hope that he will at least respect the fact that all of us in politics have to do what we believe is right. I am doing today what I believe is right. His views are very much what he believes is right. Not all of us can get it right all of the time, but we have to do what we believe is best for our country, and that is what I am doing now.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The decision to build a new runway at Heathrow is the right one, but it is absolutely vital that the Secretary of State delivers on his pledge to ensure that the benefits of expansion are felt in every nation and region of the UK. The Davies commission noted the difficulties in reserving slots for domestic flights from regional airports posed by the EU slot regulations. Now that the UK has voted to leave the EU what assessment has he made of the decision for potential measures to protect and enhance domestic connectivity?

Chris Grayling: The slot issue is one avenue for us to follow. We want to have a detailed discussion with regional airports, airlines and Heathrow itself about the best mechanism. I am absolutely clear that the planning consents, which I hope and believe will eventually be granted, and the national policy statements we prepare must contain provisions that protect connectivity. We need to work out the best way of doing it. It is not just about having a handful of slots at 11 o’clock at night; it is also about connectivity with international flights. We have to get this right for the whole United Kingdom and I give a commitment that that is what our agenda will be.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): Respected outside experts have estimated the need for £11.5 billion of taxpayer support for the third runway and even the Airports Commission suggests up to £5 billion, yet post the Cabinet meeting this morning, the Government website says that the expansion costs will be paid for by the private sector. I listened carefully to the Secretary of State’s statement, but he did not reiterate that commitment. Will he tell the House how much the taxpayer will have to put in for runway 3 and the associated surface works?

Chris Grayling: The most fundamental point is that Heathrow has committed, and will be held, to a plan that: first, does not increase the current level of road transport to the airport; and, secondly, increases public transport access to the airport to 55% of those using it. Those will be obligations that it will have to fund. The Government’s financial advisers have said that that is viable and investible. There are question marks about what schemes are actually part of the surface access. Some of them we have to do anyway. For example, we are about to start improvements to the M4, which will benefit Heathrow and improve access, but they are not solely about Heathrow. There are, however, some very clear obligations in terms of actual deliverables that the airport will have to meet and pay for.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I welcome the fact that the new Government have made this important decision and I welcome the fact that they have made the right decision. In Northern Ireland, there is a wide consensus that Heathrow is the right decision. It will lead to thousands more jobs, and major investment in tourism and business. I therefore warmly welcome what the Secretary of State has said. I also welcome what he said about slots and domestic connectivity, but may I press him on whether there will be any Barnett consequentials through investment and infrastructure?

Chris Grayling: First, I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his support, and for the support of his party and colleagues in Northern Ireland. It is very much my belief that Northern Ireland will benefit
enormously from this decision, and so it should. I hope it benefits not simply in terms of connectivity; I hope to see some of the work being done in Northern Ireland as we aim for a UK-wide supply chain and encourage the airport to achieve that. On other aspects, we will work hard to ensure that we deliver the best possible outcome for all parts of the United Kingdom, that we listen and consult, discuss issues such as the one he raised and try to make sure it is as beneficial as possible to the people he represents.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): As the chair of the Gatwick co-ordination group, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this announcement and make clear to him the relief with which this somewhat overdue statement will be received by all the people represented by colleagues in the group. It will have been clear that keeping Gatwick in the game has delivered welcome improvements in the Heathrow proposition, but, as everyone who uses the Brighton main line will know, the Gatwick proposition, frankly, was not practical. Local authorities would have had to have found housing for the workforce to support the Gatwick option. Before this process began, Gatwick management ran the best single runway airport in the country and had a very good set of relationships with local communities. Will he now invite Gatwick management to go back to those priorities now that the scheme is over?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend has strong feelings about Gatwick expansion, as did many of those in his constituency and in his neighbouring constituencies. What I would like to say about Gatwick is that we need to understand the important role it plays in the economy of the southern part of the country—the Surrey-Sussex economy—and in the economic development of that area and the south coast. I recognise the very real amount of work that Gatwick airport put into its proposal, which, as I said, was very impressive and carefully crafted. I know it will be immensely disappointed with today’s decision. As I said earlier, I believe Gatwick will continue to be a really important part of our transport infrastructure and I send it all my best wishes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Well over 50 colleagues are still seeking to catch my eye and I am keen to accommodate them, but doing so will be brevity-dependent.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State said in his statement that he plans to bring forward proposals to support improvements to airspace and how to manage noise, including the way affected communities, such as mine in Hounslow, can be best engaged. He stated that that would include consideration on whether there is a role for a new independent aviation noise body, but he also said that the commission had recommended one. Why has that been downgraded?

Chris Grayling: I have not downgraded it. I want to make sure there is proper independent noise monitoring. It is just a question of working out the best way to do that. The commission did not set out detailed plans. I will be discussing with interested parties how best to secure that.

Mr Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale West) (Con): A global trading nation clearly needs world-class infrastructure and I think this is the right judgment in the national interest. Will my right hon. Friend reflect on the damage done to our international competitiveness by this country maintaining the highest level of taxation on aviation?

Chris Grayling: Air passenger duty creates a lot of debate in this country. I am absolutely certain that none of us on the Conservative Benches would wish to maintain any tax higher than we needed to. We are, by instinct, a low-tax party, but we are also dealing with some quite challenging financial and public finance circumstances and therefore cannot always do the things we wish to do. Nevertheless, I am sure the Chancellor will have heard my hon. Friend’s wise words, ahead of planning for the next two financial moments.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In 2009, the Committee on Energy and Climate Change suggested that a maximum 60% air passenger growth to 2050 could be compatible with UK climate change goals, provided various fantasy conditions are met. However, the Government’s own analysis shows that even without a new runway there will be 93% growth by 2050. That implies that aviation will take up to two thirds of the UK’s entire carbon budget in 2050, a scenario that is quite simply incredible. Given that the Committee advised against taking international offsetting as a substitute for domestic action, will the Secretary of State explain how this decision can possibly be compatible with our climate change objectives?

Chris Grayling: We listened to the Airports Commission, which did detailed work on this. It recommended that this was an approach we could take and meet our obligations. We have validated that work since and we still believe that to be the case. I was encouraged, as I said earlier, by the ICAO agreement, which I hope will make it easier for the aviation sector to meet those obligations.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The business opportunities arising from the expansion are substantial for Buckinghamshire. Bucks Business First and the Buckinghamshire Thames Valley local enterprise partnership have both welcomed today’s announcement. It will continue to reinforce Buckinghamshire as a prime location for businesses to locate to. However, will the Secretary of State undertake to do an assessment of the impact on the local economy of the potential disruption and cumulative effect of having two major projects, namely Heathrow expansion and HS2, being constructed within the same timeframe and in close proximity?

Chris Grayling: Clearly, we have to work to ensure that the impact of two major projects on surrounding communities is minimised to the maximum possible extent. I know everyone involved in both projects will seek to do that. Undertaking two ambitious, modern future-looking projects is a sign of the direction that
defines the approach we are taking to governing the country. We want to prepare for a stronger and better future for Britain.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Is not the biggest loser from the Tory civil war over Heathrow neither the Foreign Secretary nor the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) but transport everywhere else? For over five years, there has been an obsessive focus on London and the south-east. While welcoming this decision, may I ask the home counties-based Cabinet to listen to what William Hague has said today, and set out in the autumn statement a clear timetable for HS3, linking Manchester Airport to the great cities of the north?

Chris Grayling: I am not sure that Manchester Airport needs to be linked to the great cities of the north, since it is in one of the great cities of the north. Let us be clear first about what we are doing in the north. Across the north of England, a wide range of essential transport projects are happening: £350 million is being spent on improving the rail network in the right hon. Gentleman’s home city of Liverpool, and the construction of the link road between the M56 and the M6. Those are two long overdue projects. He knows that support for the next generation of the Manchester Metrolink is also happening. This is a Government who are doing things for the north of England. I have to say that if I look back on the Labour party’s years in government, I see that these projects were always on the drawing board but never actually happened.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I believe that this decision is misguided and not ultimately in the nation’s interests. Will the Secretary of State assure me that in the consultation and scrutiny to come there will be good and adequate scientific data, because the evidence will show that Heathrow expansion is neither possible nor deliverable? In the Minister’s words, we do not want expansion “at any cost”; this is the wrong scheme and the price is too high.

Chris Grayling: I know how strongly my hon. Friend feels about this issue. I give her an assurance that we will do this job properly. The appointment of Sir Jeremy Sullivan—an exemplary former judge who led an important part of our judicial system, as those who know him will acknowledge—will, I hope, give people comfort that we intend to take the consultation process properly and seriously.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State will know of my campaigning on the establishment of an independent aviation noise authority. About 70% of Edinburgh airport’s traffic goes over my constituency, and a recent flight path trial—the first in 40 years—caused havoc. This noise authority is for everyone in the UK; it should not be dependent on this decision. Will the Secretary of State include me in the discussions as an interested party and bring them forward as soon as possible?

Chris Grayling: Absolutely. Every Member will be included in the discussions as part of the consultation process. I will happily do what the hon. Lady asks.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking the right decision in the interest of the United Kingdom. Will he remind us of how much passenger traffic, and particularly freight traffic, is currently being lost to mainland European airports as a result of lack of capacity in our south-east? Does he agree that in order to bridge the gap, we need to use all the currently available capacity?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important for people to understand this issue. It is sometimes argued that connecting traffic does not add value to the United Kingdom. However, connecting traffic combined with our own domestic traffic can often make viable a new route to an important trading centre. Winning back some of those transfer passengers in order to ensure that routes to developing markets can be opened up from this country is therefore an important part of securing our trading future.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): With news of the replacement of the route to Chengdu with a new route serving New Orleans, why are the Government putting the commercial interests of an expensive airport whose primary passengers are tourists ahead of the health and quality of life of 300,000 people, the costs to passengers and the costs to the taxpayer?

Chris Grayling: I have talked to the boss of IAG, the parent company of British Airways, about the Chengdu decision. It has a number of routes to China and other parts of Asia. It has simply taken a commercial decision that the Chengdu situation has not proved viable. The issue is not about an individual route, but about connectivity for the future and the opportunity to open up new possibilities. It will not always be British Airways that opens up those routes; other airlines might choose to fly from developing markets to the United Kingdom. Those are the opportunities that we will need for the future. That is why we believe that expansion is necessary. If we are to open up new trading opportunities around the world, we must have the capacity to offer those new links. If we look at the price at which a slot trades at Heathrow airport, we realise that demand far exceeds supply.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on taking a decision that is absolutely rooted in the national interest. Will he confirm that Heathrow has the support of all three of the devolved Administrations?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It does have that support, as well as support from business and the trade unions. That is not to say that the Gatwick proposals were not strong or attractive, but the Heathrow option was undoubtedly the one that gained the most support.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Heathrow has clear advantages over Gatwick for the south-west of England, both in respect of access to Heathrow and the hoped-for slots for our regional airports such as those at Exeter and Newquay to connect internationally. The Secretary of State must say much more about what he is going to do about air quality. He is quite right to say that road transport contributes by far the bulk of our emissions and our pollution, but he has not today said a single thing or produced a practical policy to tackle road transport and diesel in particular.
Chris Grayling: If the right hon. Gentleman wants a specific example, I can tell him that this morning we published the consultation document that will pave the way for significant expansion of the availability of electric charging points around the country. My view is that we all need greater diversity of our car fleet for the future, and we are already moving ahead with plans for low-emission zones in our cities. This is not an airports issue but a national one, and active measures are already in place to encourage diversification of the car fleet. Electric vehicles are being built in this country—for example, the Nissan Leaf is being built in Sunderland, which is the main centre in Europe for the production of that vehicle. We are seeing more and more of these cars on our streets, and I think that will continue into the future.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for his strong statement. It is great to see the Government making some forward progress on this issue. Will he assure my constituents and many people in the local area that full consideration will be given to the environmental impact and noise control?

Chris Grayling: It is really important to find the right balance. Around Heathrow, a large number of people, particularly those who work there or whose family members work there or whose businesses depend on the airport, support the expansion. There is a significant amount of support for what I have announced today, but those people will rightly expect that we ensure we look after the environment in which they live, that appropriate compensation will be in place where necessary and that appropriate measures are in place to support local communities. I give my hon. Friend an absolute assurance that that will be the case.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Hallelujah—a decision has been made. The right hon. Gentleman should be in line for a “Minister of the Year” award. This is good news for Doncaster, good news for the north and good news for the UK. However, when we look at investment in infrastructure, we find that Crossrail costs £15 billion—nine times the combined expenditure for the rail projects in infrastructure, we find that Crossrail costs £15 billion—nine times the combined expenditure for the rail projects in this country. We would be happy to meet Members who disagree with this decision. The hon. Gentleman is right that the majority of Members believe that Heathrow is the right place for expansion. Of course, the whole House will, as part of this statutorily defined process, have to vote and approve the decision. I think we should respect people’s long-standing views and not ask them to go against what they have argued in the past.

Chris Grayling: The modernisation of UK airspace will hopefully make all airports better neighbours. This is a system that has barely changed for decades, and it is certainly not designed for the current patterns of usage. We very much believe that we need to modernise the use of airspace in a way that reduces stacking, for example. I know, because my constituency adjoins that of my hon. Friend, that stacking certainly affects our area. This modernisation is better for passengers and better for people on the ground; and it will also save fuel and thus reduce carbon emissions.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): A majority of Labour MPs and a majority of Conservative MPs support the expansion at Heathrow. Given that this project is likely to span multiple Parliaments, will the right hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to set a good example for both parties and ensure that collective responsibility will apply to any votes in this House?

Chris Grayling: The Prime Minister has been very clear that she does not want to force—and, indeed, I do not think the public would expect us to force—MPs who have long-standing principles of disagreement over this issue to go against their own views. There are different views on both sides. There are senior figures on the Opposition Front Bench and on the Government Front Bench who disagree with this decision. The hon. Gentleman is right that the majority of Members believe that Heathrow is the right place for expansion. Of course, the whole House will, as part of this statutorily defined process, have to vote and approve the decision. I think we should respect people’s long-standing views and not ask them to go against what they have argued in the past.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): This is a devastating decision—for the national economic interest as well as for my constituents, hundreds of whose homes will be bulldozed, and for the millions of people affected by the very loud noise from Heathrow airport. Notwithstanding that—we could rehearse the arguments for ever—if during the consultation period the facts, the economics and the timescale on which the decision has been based, or Heathrow’s commitment to invest in the project, are called into question, will the Government have an open mind about changing their decision?

Chris Grayling: The modernisation of UK airspace will hopefully make all airports better neighbours. This is a system that has barely changed for decades, and it is certainly not designed for the current patterns of usage. We very much believe that we need to modernise the use of airspace in a way that reduces stacking, for example. I know, because my constituency adjoins that of my hon. Friend, that stacking certainly affects our area. This modernisation is better for passengers and better for people on the ground; and it will also save fuel and thus reduce carbon emissions.

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): A majority of Labour MPs and a majority of Conservative MPs support the expansion at Heathrow. Given that this project is likely to span multiple Parliaments, will the right hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to set a good example for both parties and ensure that collective responsibility will apply to any votes in this House?

Chris Grayling: The Prime Minister has been very clear that she does not want to force—and, indeed, I do not think the public would expect us to force—MPs who have long-standing principles of disagreement over this issue to go against their own views. There are different views on both sides. There are senior figures on the Opposition Front Bench and on the Government Front Bench who disagree with this decision. The hon. Gentleman is right that the majority of Members believe that Heathrow is the right place for expansion. Of course, the whole House will, as part of this statutorily defined process, have to vote and approve the decision. I think we should respect people’s long-standing views and not ask them to go against what they have argued in the past.

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available for airports in Northern Ireland will be safeguarded at Heathrow, and also whether there are any Barnett consequentials for the Northern Ireland Executive?

Chris Grayling: I hope that the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) will forgive me: I forgot to answer his earlier question about Barnett consequentials.

This project is funded by the private sector, and there are no Barnett consequentials in a private project. There are Barnett consequentials when we invest in our infrastructure in the public sector, but I fear that there will not be any as a result of spending by Heathrow airport shareholders. As for the question of slots in the meantime, we always want to protect connectivity with Northern Ireland—indeed, we have just done so in the case of the route from Londonderry to Stansted—and we would be extremely concerned if routes to Belfast were in any jeopardy.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I congratulate the Government on grasping this nettle, although I personally believe that the Heathrow hub was a cheaper and less disruptive option, and I am sorry that it was ruled out.

I feel that an opportunity has been lost here. As a party, we believe in competition. Surely it would have been better to agree on extra runway capacity at both Gatwick and Heathrow, which would have settled the matter for a long time henceforth. What is Gatwick’s future following today’s announcement?

Chris Grayling: I pay tribute to the promoters of the Heathrow hub scheme, having already paid tribute to the other promoters generally. The scheme was very innovative and very different, but for two prime reasons we felt unable to endorse it. First, it did not allow any respite for the surrounding communities, because the same two corridors would be used for taking off and landing all the time. Secondly, the scheme’s promoters could not ultimately provide the certainty that it would be built and adopted by Heathrow airport, if we opted for it rather than for the main route. Those, to my mind, are two strong reasons. However, I pay tribute again to the promoters. It was a very innovative concept, and we gave it very serious thought. After visiting and listening to the promoters, I considered very carefully whether it was the best option. In the end, however, my judgment was that the north-west runway was the better one for Britain.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Mr Speaker,

“I hope...the Government will recognise...widespread hostility to Heathrow expansion and say no to a third runway.”

Those are not my words, but the words of our present Prime Minister. Why are the Government disregarding “widespread hostility”, and bulldozing through a third runway which will inflict crippling noise, significant climate change effects, health-damaging pollution and catastrophic congestion on 1 million Londoners?

Chris Grayling: Because we do not believe that it is going to do those things; because we do not believe that it will create the air pollution to which the right hon. Gentleman refers; because we do not believe that it will impose catastrophic congestion—I have already explained

the position relating to public transport access and improved infrastructure around the airport—and, most fundamentally, because we believe that it is in the interests of the United Kingdom.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, a decade ago I was among those who were most sceptical about this proposal, but there are times, are there not, when the House must look beyond the immediate issues, on which he touched today, and out to the next 30, 40 or 50 years. In view of the decision that the country has made on Brexit, now is surely the time when we must grab that future and build at Heathrow in order to create a link with the east.

Chris Grayling: I think the message that Britain is open for business is one of the most important messages that we can send to the world. When are we ever going to create this gateway to the future if not now, at a time when we are changing our role in the world? I think we all regret the fact that, notwithstanding our ambitions, it still takes time to do, but we really must get on with it now.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Department’s answers to questions that I tabled asking what protections there were from noise pollution at City airport for constituents such as mine were woefully inadequate. It is clear that once expansion has taken place there will be scant regard for protections for the public, whether from industry or the Government. It is hardly surprising that people roll their eyes when the Secretary of State comes here and tells us that there will be all these environmental protections. In order to convince people that he is in earnest, would he be prepared to make those requirements legally binding, with penalties in place, before any permission is granted for this expansion, so that people can be confident that there will indeed be environmental protections?

Chris Grayling: My view is straightforward. The commitments that are made in relation to compensation for the public and amelioration must form a binding part of the eventual agreements.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the Doorkeeper, who was beetling around the Chamber looking for the wallet of some hapless fellow, poor chap. Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am glad to say that I have not lost my wallet, Mr Speaker.

I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement, but if Heathrow is to meet its emissions targets a large number of people will have to be persuaded to travel by rail rather than car, so will he say something about the western rail link proposals? Will he also consider providing fast rail links between all London’s airports?

Chris Grayling: Both the western and the southern rail links are part of the schedule for Network Rail’s future projects. Heathrow airport is due to pay part of the cost of those links, since they involve broader issues than this project alone, but as a result of today’s decision their construction will need to be accelerated. Links
between airports are not currently being considered, but if the economy of the south-east continues to grow and develop, they may well be considered in the future.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I do not share this cosy consensus on airport expansion. Half the population each year does not fly; for environmental reasons, I have not flown for several years. The Secretary of State said today that this expansion would “further reduce…carbon emissions.” What a joke! Because of climate change, the Government should not be in the business of encouraging people to fly and encouraging more air freight, let alone subsidising increased airport capacity and higher total emissions. I urge the Secretary of State and the Government to think again.

Chris Grayling: We take the issue of climate change very seriously, and the Government have introduced a raft of measures to address it, but we must also ensure that we have the prosperity that enables us, for instance, to fund our national health service and our old age pensioners. Having a thriving, modern economy with strong links around the world is an important part of that.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was pleased to hear the Scottish National party’s spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), confirm that we are “better together”. I was also pleased to hear the support from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) for bringing the four nations of the United Kingdom together.

I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement, which is very important to the south-west of England. Will he redouble his efforts to ensure that he holds the promoters to their commitments about regional connectivity, which he said he would do in his statement? Will he also ensure—my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) referred to this—that people in my constituency and elsewhere in the south-west can travel easily to the expanded Heathrow airport, and thence to the world?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend is right about the need for a commitment to the south-west of England in particular. I was in the south-west last week. We talk a great deal in the House about transport in the north and transport in the midlands, but I think that we also need to talk about transport in the south-west. There are many projects that are necessary to secure the economic future of the south-west. This project is part of ensuring that there is connectivity with places such as Newquay, and easy access for people such as my right hon. Friend’s constituents. That is why the western rail link must be a good priority for the future.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Prime Minister was right when she said that the third runway was a bad idea. She may have caved in to the Heathrow lobby, but will the Secretary of State accept that the level of opposition from councils, mainly Tory-controlled, from local communities, and from Members of Parliament—most notably my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell)—means that the chances of the toxic third runway being built are vanishingly small? Will he be sure to keep the Gatwick option open? We are going to need it sooner than he thinks.

Chris Grayling: I know how strongly Members in London feel about this decision, but, having listened to Members today, I have a sense that the balance of view around the country is that we need this connectivity because it is in the interests of the whole United Kingdom. As a Government who believe in delivering an economy that works for everyone, we must operate in the interests of the whole United Kingdom, and that is what we are doing today.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I welcome the quick decision by the Secretary of State since taking up his position over the summer, but I regret the decision not to include Gatwick at least as one of the options. Will he agree to look again at the Gatwick option as the one that is deliverable in the short term and that is more open for competition, for the benefit of passengers long term?

Chris Grayling: I know that a number of people have said, “Can’t we do both?” I am clear that today we are looking at the Airports Commission report, which set a clear path and said that a new runway would be needed by 2030 and that potentially there would be a need for further capacity by 2050, but only if that could be achieved alongside carbon limits. Therefore, today is about taking the long overdue decision as to how we take that path to 2030, and that is where our focus is.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As the MP representing Newcastle airport, I know that the airport and the wider north-east business community welcome this decision. It enables both the safeguarding and growth of our connectivity to the UK and the rest of the world. However, given the time it has taken to arrive at this point, may I urge the Secretary of State to have some urgency in getting spades in the ground? When will we see the increased capacity and trading opportunities we vitally need in the wake of Brexit uncertainty?

Chris Grayling: I can save myself and my office a phone call today by telling the hon. Lady I will be visiting her constituency and her airport tomorrow to make precisely the point about the importance of regional connectivity. [Interruption.] No, I probably will not have a spade with me; I do not think Newcastle airport wants me digging it up.

I want this to move ahead as quickly as possible. There is a statutory process we have to follow. There is then a detailed period of design. This has always been something that will be ready for the middle of the next decade. I would love to wave a wand and have it quicker than that, but these things take a long time to design and construct, quite apart from the regulatory process. I know, however, that everybody involved will want to move as quickly as possible.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): This is the right decision for Wales, as it is for the whole of the UK. Will my right hon. Friend say a bit more about what specific powers are available to him and whether
he needs to seek further powers to ensure this becomes an outstanding example of British procurement, so that we maximise opportunities for our labour pool, supply chain and, not least, the steel industry?

Chris Grayling: I have been very clear, and this drives to the heart of the debate about costs. I understand the point made by some of the airlines about wanting to ensure that the best possible value is delivered in this project, because ultimately the cost is borne by their passengers. I want to see the maximum possible benefit across the UK. I have extended to the Civil Aviation Authority the power to have a strong supervisory role over this process, not to dictate how the project is designed in detail, but to make sure that there is value at the heart of both the supply chain and the contracting. I want to make sure that this is a value-for-money proposition and that it delivers what we need at a price that is right for passengers.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The advent of Crossrail means my constituency on the London-Essex border has enormous potential to capitalise on the benefits for Heathrow, both for passengers and for business and jobs. I therefore welcome the Transport Secretary’s statement. When does he anticipate the third runway being open for business?

Chris Grayling: On the current timetable, in around nine years’ time. I wish it were quicker than that, but it is not. That is the length of time it takes to go through a process such as this—not just the regulatory process, which has been greatly simplified since 2008, but the sheer complexity of design, the acquisition of land, the preparation of sites and the construction not just of a runway, but of the terminal buildings. So this is not a short-term project. I know the decision on the issue has been kicked around for years, but the new Prime Minister and I have wanted to move as quickly as we could. We wanted to take the time over the summer to ensure we really understood the three projects before we decided today. We have done that; we now want to get on with it.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In the national interest, I welcome the Government’s confirming what the Airports Commission has said is right for this country, and I also welcome my right hon. Friend’s warm words about Gatwick. Can he give assurances that surface access to Gatwick will continue to be enhanced, particularly the rail route, as we go forward?

Chris Grayling: I do not think that any of us could think that the Brighton main line was the priority, for a whole variety of different reasons. We have to deal with the short-term issues and challenges, but we also need to think about how we can best deliver the necessary improvements for the medium and longer term. There is no doubt we need a modernisation programme, but we also need a programme that causes the minimum possible disruption to passengers.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Connectivity to Heathrow is essential for areas in Greater Manchester and beyond. However, does the Secretary of State agree that in tandem with expanding Heathrow, new point-to-point routes with emerging economics are essential from other international gateway airports, such as Manchester, and what is he doing to encourage that?

Chris Grayling: To be frank, I am not sure I need to do anything to encourage Manchester airport as it is doing a cracking job already. It had its runway expansion a few years ago and has made good use of it. It is a thriving airport with links around the world. I am hugely impressed by what it has achieved.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement and the benefits it will clearly bring for British business and trade, but he was also right to acknowledge concerns about the environmental impact of the airport expansion and the potential that may have of interfering with our international commitments to reduce carbon emissions. As well as putting in place welcome consultations on electric cars, what other incentives does he envisage to encourage business to comply with these international commitments and reduce carbon emissions?

Chris Grayling: There are three elements to what we are doing. The first is the air quality strategy and the desire to put in place an environment which requires lower emission vehicles in terms of both carbon dioxide and diesel. This is about, first, a regulatory environment in our cities; secondly, incentivising the purchase of low-emission vehicles—something the Government now do extensively with incentives to buy electric vehicles, for example; and thirdly, fiscal incentives to change, which we have already introduced through the car tax system, and on which I have no doubt the Chancellor will be doing more in the future.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Given today’s announcement that the expansion of Heathrow is in the national interest, not just that of the south-east of England, will the Secretary of State commit today to have route connectivity and public service obligation support between Dundee airport and Heathrow?

Chris Grayling: I am not going to pick individual routes today, but I recognise that Dundee is one of the airports that can benefit. The hon. Gentleman will not expect me at this stage to be setting out detailed slot allocation plans, but it is precisely areas like Aberdeen, Inverness and Dundee that can benefit from greater capacity on this route and better connectivity within the United Kingdom.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): As the Secretary of State has correctly and repeatedly said, this sends a very clear signal that Britain is open for business, but does he agree that if we are to compete with the likes of China and South Korea we must deliver this rapidly, and what reassurance can he give on minimising any administrative and judicial burdens that may be used to slow down this project?

Chris Grayling: I am not in any doubt that there will be obstacles on the road towards delivering this project, but that will not stop us seeking to move ahead as quickly as we can, and clearly the scheme promoter will want to do so as well, but we are also subject to due process and in a democracy we have to respect that due process.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): This is indeed a hugely important project for the whole country, and the Liverpool city region stands to benefit, as other regions do, especially through freight and business travel, so I
welcome the Government’s wholehearted support for the expansion of Heathrow. On the nine-year promise that the Secretary of State has now made, that will be challenging and there must be robust planning and consultation processes, so how will he make sure he gets through that and delivers on the nine-year programme?

Chris Grayling: Essentially, the way it works is that we have this overall process of the national policy statement over the next 12 months, which we will publish in the new year. Now that the recommendation has been made, my officials will prepare that detailed policy statement. It will be published in the new year, and then there will be a statutory period of consultation both outside and in this House, followed by a vote. That effectively seals the big picture stuff for the Planning Inspectorate. There is then the formal process of its submitting its detailed plans and the debate about the minutiae of the application. The Planning Inspectorate does not look at the big decision of whether we should have the runway in the first place; it looks at matters such as the details of the design for consistency with local planning laws.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): This statement has been long overdue. Some countries will have developed three entire nuclear power stations and five airports in the amount of time this has taken to be kicked into the long grass by two Labour Prime Ministers and I am afraid a Conservative Prime Minister too, and it is a reflection on this Prime Minister that the decision has finally been made. But why can we not still be talking about expansion at Birmingham International airport and indeed at Gatwick, too?

Chris Grayling: I have no doubt that others will have views about the further expansion of regional airports, including Birmingham. Right now, though, the focus of the Government is on this process, which was after all set up to identify additional capacity in the south-east following a recommendation by an independent commission. This is about delivering what has been recommended to us.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): We very much welcome today’s announcement, as have my other colleagues from Northern Ireland, but my party is pushing for expansion at both airports. The chief airlines that fly from Belfast International airport, such as Easyjet and Ryanair, have given a new life to many people in Northern Ireland. Can we not keep the door open to expansion at Gatwick, to ensure that we make the most of that and all the other regional airports, because that will help all of us?

Chris Grayling: As I said earlier, Gatwick will remain an extremely important part of our national transport system, but today’s announcement is all about ensuring that we meet a very real need, as identified by the Airports Commission report. I do not think that this is the moment to start getting into a broader discussion about other airports. Let us concentrate on getting this job done; it has taken much too long to get even to this point.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement today. Now that the decision has been made, can my constituents be assured that the blight to their homes that they have suffered for more than a decade because of the threat of a peninsula or estuary airport is at an end and that those proposals are finally dead?

Chris Grayling: The Airports Commission looked very carefully at the issue of an airport in the Thames estuary and came to the view that that was not a viable option. I too have looked at the issue and I share that view. The Government have no intention of reopening that discussion.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinbych) (PC): Transport for London has estimated that the cost of associated transport infrastructure to service a third runway at Heathrow would be about £20 billion. Can the Secretary of State give the House a cast-iron guarantee that any public money used to pay for that work would result in full Barnett consequentials? Or is he saying that the routes identified by TIL would be paid for fully by private sources?

Chris Grayling: It is important to look at the committed outputs. Heathrow airport has committed to an expansion without an increase in the number of motor vehicles using the airport, and to an increase in the number of people accessing the airport by public transport to a level of 55%. That is the objective it has to meet, and it has agreed that it has a financial obligation to get to that point. Some projects are already in train. Crossrail is nearly complete, and the western and southern routes already in Network Rail’s plans will also make a contribution. There is clearly an obligation on the airport to meet those objectives.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has not said a great deal about the already horrendous congestion on the M25 north and south of Heathrow. Does his Department monitor the extent of the existing traffic jams, which are already really bad? Will anything be done as part of Heathrow’s expansion to try to improve capacity on the M25 so that people can get to and past the airport?

Chris Grayling: As I indicated earlier, the situation around the south-west of the M25 in particular is a matter for concern. Highways England has plans in place to start to address some of those problems. My experience is that the worst jams occur to the south and the north where four lanes go into three, and I have asked Highways England to look at how we can address that issue, starting with the junctions to the south-west.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to developing new connections to the regional airports, but is he aware that it takes at least two and a half hours to get from west Cumbria to our nearest airport? Will he also look at how Carlisle airport could benefit from the expansion at Heathrow?

Chris Grayling: If there are more slots available at Heathrow and there is a market to fly there from Carlisle, there will be an opportunity for the air operators
to do that. As I have said, I am keen to ensure that we protect the capacity of our regional airports, but exactly where and how that happens, and at which airports, will be a matter for the future.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. There is no doubt that this will be in the best interests of the nation and of all our constituents in the south-west, where my seat is. Will he kindly confirm how many direct rail links there will be from the south-west to Heathrow, as that will be absolutely key for my constituents and everyone else in the region?

Chris Grayling: There are two options, depending on which part of the south-west you are coming from. The plan is to have a southern rail link that will join up with the South West Trains network and a western link that will join up with the Great Western network, so my hon. Friend will have a choice. The train paths will obviously be a matter for the train operators at the time, but he will have a choice of routes to follow.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): This is indeed the right decision for the UK and for Scotland, but will the Secretary of State confirm that any additional slot capacity for domestic airlines will be guaranteed either in the planning process or in legislation? Furthermore, will he undertake an ongoing assessment of the ability of regional airports such as Edinburgh to attract direct routes following Heathrow’s third runway coming on stream in nine years’ time?

Chris Grayling: We will look carefully at what the right mechanism should be. It might not be as simple as guaranteeing a number of slots, because I want there to be the right connectivity. For example, I do not want a regional airport to be given a tail-end slot at 11 o’clock at night that does not allow proper links between that airport and international destinations. We have to think carefully about how this should be done and what the best mechanism is for doing it. However, I have given a guarantee that there will be protections for the regional airports and the connectivity that they need.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, but with the best will in the world, it will be several years before the new runway comes into use. Will he therefore urge his Friends in the Treasury to allow zero or reduced passenger duty rates on new routes from regional airports such as Manchester, which already have the capacity to expand?

Chris Grayling: All I can say on that is that I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will have heard that representation in advance of the autumn statement and the subsequent Budget.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I welcome the fact that the Heathrow proposals include the potential for a logistics hub at Prestwick airport, and I urge the Secretary of State to involve all the relevant parties to ensure that that happens. May I also ask him, in relation to strategic thinking, to consider Prestwick when making the spaceport decision? This would give Prestwick sustainability and a long-term future.

Chris Grayling: I know that the spaceport decision is on its way. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman thinks the United Kingdom’s choice for the spaceport’s location should be Prestwick. That would cement the bonds that exist between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, showing that we are all part of one United Kingdom.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): We need more airport capacity but, with respect to the Secretary of State, Heathrow is the worst of the choices available to the Government, particularly for my constituents. Will he confirm that the final decision will be made here in this House and that we will be free to reject Heathrow?

Chris Grayling: First, let me say to my hon. Friend, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) and others, that I know this is a difficult decision for a number of colleagues to accept. I respect their views and have every sympathy for the pressure that we are putting them under by doing this. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) is my constituency next-door neighbour and I have worked hard for him in his constituency. I was delighted when he won. All the same, he will understand that the Government have to do what is in the interests of the whole United Kingdom, and these decisions are sometimes difficult for colleagues. The matter will have to be approved by the House, which will have the final say on the national policy statement. If that national policy statement does not secure the approval of the House, this cannot happen.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. The Democratic Unionist party was the first political party in the United Kingdom to back Heathrow, and we have always been clear that its expansion would support growth in Northern Ireland and strengthen our Union. More cargo travels from Belfast through Heathrow than from any other UK airport. Will he commit to continuing that vital link in the supply chain between Northern Ireland’s businesses and their clients in every corner of the globe?

Chris Grayling: That is an important part of what this announcement is about, although it is not always at the top of the agenda. Heathrow is the United Kingdom’s biggest freight hub and an important point of connectivity that enables businesses around the UK to ship their products around the world. This is absolutely an important part of the way forward.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): This is yet another major transport infrastructure investment in the south of England. Will the Secretary of State show similar decisiveness in supporting new long-haul routes from Manchester airport, a new road link for Leeds Bradford airport, the electrification of the trans-Pennine routes, the Manchester and Leeds legs of HS2 and maybe even a new junction 24A on the M62 near Huddersfield?

Chris Grayling: As my hon. Friends who represent seats in the north of the country know, I am very much of the view that we must do a better job for our regions in the north—and, as I said earlier, in the south-west.
and the midlands. Having shadowed this job 10 years ago, which involved going around the country and seeing schemes that should have happened, but which were sitting on the drawing board year after year, one of the most pleasurable things that I have found after arriving in my current job is finding so many projects that we have actually done or are doing. More are on the way. I look forward to delivering more improvements to help the constituents of more colleagues in this House.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In reaching the decision, what weight did Ministers give to the benefit for UK supply chains? People in Corby, for example, will be pleased with Heathrow’s commitment to use British steel because that will be good for jobs in our steel towns.

Chris Grayling: I was pleased by that undertaking. Heathrow will inevitably want to use a diverse supply chain within the UK. We will do everything that we can to encourage that, and I hope that Corby will be one of the beneficiaries.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) warned us that court decisions will prevent a decision taken by this House from being implemented. Has my right hon. Friend considered any legislative remedy to stop that, notwithstanding the fact that he has already told us that this is, after all, a democracy?

Chris Grayling: From what I have read in the newspapers, I suspect that there may be attempts to challenge the decision. However, such court cases usually hang on whether we have given a decision careful consideration. We have looked at the matter exhaustively and considered all the issues. We understand the challenges and the hurdles that we have to overcome. This is a rational, measured, thought-out decision about what is in our country’s best interests. Our elected Government are there to take such decisions and I hope that the courts will not seek to challenge that.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. It showed respect for the work of the independent Davies commission, which had already rejected the bizarre, pie-in-the-sky idea of an estuary airport due to delivery, structural and environmental concerns. I thank the Secretary of State for making the right decision on the basis of the evidence and in the national interest.

Chris Grayling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. The commission did a first-rate job of looking at all possible options, including the concept of an estuary airport. It came out with a clear view in the end. Sir Howard Davies recently emphasised his strong commitment to his commission’s recommendation. When Governments set up independent commissions and ask them to make recommendations, they should listen carefully; that is what we have done.
National Health Service Provision
(Local Consultation)

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

Mr Speaker: It is a great pleasure to be able to move on to the ten-minute rule motion. Without wishing to embarrass the hon. Member for Banbury, she must find it encouraging to have paternal support so nearby.

2.36 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I do find it encouraging to have paternal, maternal and, indeed, filial support in this place, Mr Speaker.

I beg to move,

That leave be given for to bring in a Bill to make provision about mandatory local consultation in relation to changes in services proposed by NHS Trusts and healthcare commissioning authorities; and for connected purposes.

...
more out-patient services. One of the options proposed in the forthcoming sustainability and transformation plan is for exactly that, with the Horton’s maternity services becoming midwife-led. We fear that the situation this summer has been engineered to make that a fait accompli.

I was a civil servant for 17 years and, on the whole, I like to believe the best of our public servants, but I feel let down by the way we have been treated this summer, and by the lack of good management, transparency or evidence-based decision making. I am concerned that without a change to the law, other areas may also suffer as we have. The trust holds all the cards, as only it has the ability to manipulate the number of births each centre receives. We have no control over recruitment. Only the trust has the power to make posts attractive, and it has all the evidence and carries out all the risk assessments. The clinical commissioning group has been notable by its silence.

The Bill would increase the accountability of local trusts and commissioning authorities. When major changes to service provision are proposed, clinical groups and medical consortiums are not a replacement for public consultation. Doctor may know best, but only when he has listened to the patient. Local decision making can work, but only with democratic accountability. We in north Oxfordshire and the surrounding area remain hopeful that our unit will reopen next March, when the north Oxfordshire and the surrounding area remain work, but only with democratic accountability. W e in

Consultation. Doctor may know best, but only when he has listened to the patient. Local decision making can work, but only with democratic accountability. We in north Oxfordshire and the surrounding area remain hopeful that our unit will reopen next March, when sufficient obstetricians have been recruited. In the meantime, we fear for the safety of our mothers and babies. Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Victoria Prentis, David Mackintosh, Alex Chalk, Nigel Huddleston, Antoinette Sandbach, Will Quince, Marie Rimmer, Heidi Allen, Maria Caulfield, Harriet Harman, Robert Courts and Mr David Hanson present the Bill.

Victoria Prentis accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 January, and to be printed (Bill 80).
Mr Wallace: I will make some progress and Members will doubtless be able to make their points throughout the debate.

Many of the criminals who profit from such activities live in plain sight, untouched by law enforcement agencies. They reap the benefits by money laundering—moving, hiding and using the proceeds of their crimes to fund their lifestyles and enable further criminality. It is estimated that the annual amount of money laundered globally amounts to $1.6 trillion, while the National Crime Agency assesses that many billions of pounds are laundered into or through the UK as a result of international corruption.

We should be rightly proud of the UK’s status as a global financial centre. This is one of the best places in the world in which to do business, but we must recognise that the size of our financial sector and open economy and the attractiveness of the London property market to overseas investors make this country unusually exposed to the risks of international money laundering. That is why this Government are taking action—to combat money laundering, terrorist finance and corruption—here and overseas. We are sending a clear message that we will not stand for money laundering or the funding of terrorism through the UK.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. I agree with the content of his remarks, but I wish to pursue further the issue that has been raised by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). Does the Minister agree that transparency is absolutely key to trying to tackle some of the corruption and money laundering that take place? If he does agree, why is he not using this Bill to ensure that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, which come under our jurisdiction, publish publicly available registers of beneficial ownership?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I absolutely agree that transparency is one of the steps along the path of tackling both corruption and money laundering. That is why, at the anti-corruption summit in May, the Prime Minister basically reaffirmed that commitment. Even before that, we had worked with the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to ensure that, hopefully by the end of the year or into next year, there will be transparency; registers, of which a considerable number will be public, and automatic information exchange between our tax authorities and those of our dependencies. In that way, we will be able to have access to information about people hiding tax from us, and our law enforcement agencies will then be able to set about tackling the matter.

This Bill is part of that process. A key element of that approach will be ensuring that we work with the private sector to make the UK a more hostile place for those seeking to move, hide or use the proceeds of crime.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Prosecuting corporations for failing to prevent economic crimes was expected to be a core part of this legislation as it appeared during the consultation phase. It seems that, despite Government indications that they would include provisions to hold to account corporations that let their staff facilitate tax evasion and other economic crimes, those provisions are not part of the Bill. Will the Minister explain why he has chosen not to include such eminently sensible precautions?

Mr Wallace: Yes, but I will come to that part of the Bill later on. It is certainly our intention to prosecute those corporations, or the corporate body, that allow their companies to facilitate tax evasion. Under the current system, an individual can be prosecuted for evading tax, and someone within a company can be prosecuted if they facilitate that evasion. At the moment, it is very, very hard to prosecute the corporate body. We are intending to make that change in our Bill. If the hon. Lady reads the Bill, she will see how we will do that. We will go after not only the corporate body here in the UK, but overseas companies. Being an overseas company will not be an excuse, and we will go after them in the same extra-territorial way that we do with the Bribery Act 2010.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to the Home Office.

In evidence to Parliament earlier this year, the private sector made it very clear that it is trying to co-operate with the Government. There were 381,000 suspicious activity reports made under the ELMER system, only 20,000 of which could be looked into. What support is he giving the National Crime Agency to allow it to have a better system to deal with those reports?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for his kind comments about my appointment.

First, we will remove those barriers to information sharing. Often some of the regulators or the bodies that we deal with say that they would like to pass on more to us, but feel that they are not protected from sharing wider information. We will remove those barriers so that the National Crime Agency can see the full chain of a financial instruction. We will also empower the NCA with a stronger disclosure order so that it can force people—it can go and apply for an order—to release documentation or to comply with questions about a particular transaction. Such an order currently exists in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, but it only covers fraud. We will now do the same for money laundering. We will also extend the time limit for a suspicious activity report. At the moment, there is a one-off extension of up to 31 days, but we would like to see that extended to six months, which means that the NCA will have much longer for its investigations.

Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for his very full answer, but the real problem is that the system is old. The ELMER system needs to be replaced and renewed. Will he give the National Crime Agency the additional resources to pay for the new system to do all the things that he is suggesting? Without a new system, 20,000 simply does not go into 381,000.

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that 381,000 referrals is a hefty amount to get through. First, we need to ensure that there is time to get through them. Secondly, what we do not want is what has happened in the past, which is that the private sector makes a suspicious activity report by default.
If we can remove those excuses about why it cannot get to the bottom of a transaction before it passes it on, that will ensure that it passes on proper suspicious activities, rather than the ones that it can satisfy itself are not such a problem. In that way, we can cut out some of the referrals that are unnecessarily done.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way. He is being exceptionally generous.

Does that example not actually illustrate exactly what prosecutors are up against here and the complexity of these cases? Compulsion for transparency will be necessary, as it will put prosecutors on the front foot. Will he look at this matter again—it has already been raised by a number of Members—as the Bill progresses?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that that will happen throughout the passage of the Bill and even after. This is part of a longer process. We will make sure that, where we cannot get hold of the information that we need, we will prosecute people who are deliberately trying to evade tax, and also prosecute people who are trying to launder money. That is part of the process. Many of these powers, including the unexplained wealth orders, give us the benefit of the doubt and put it on to us to say, “Actually, we think you’re linked to serious organised crime, or we can show you are. Explain to us where your money is from.” At the very least, that will get over some of those hurdles about not being able to get to the bottom of the information in that process. That is one of the steps that we will take and that I hope the right hon. Gentleman will support as the Bill goes through.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to his place as Security Minister. His appointment is much deserved.

May I ask him about seizure and forfeiture powers? Previous legislation in this area has not been entirely successful in ensuring that the assets of criminals are seized. Can the Minister explain to the House why the provisions in this Bill will make a difference? We want to ensure that we grab the money off the criminals so that they cannot carry on with their illegal enterprises.

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend is right that, in the past, it has been a challenge. Crafty hoods have been very good at taking their money out of cash and putting it into a range of moveable valuables, such as fast cars, paintings, jewels, or even betting slips, which I know the Scottish Government are quite keen for us to consider. We need to broaden it out and ensure that when they are crafty, we are crafty as well.

This Government have already done more than any other to tackle money laundering and terrorist financing. More assets have been recovered from criminals than ever before, with a record £255 million recovered in 2015-16, and hundreds of millions of pounds more frozen and put beyond the reach of criminals. We set up the Panama papers taskforce to ensure an effective, joined-up approach to those revelations. The London anti-corruption summit in May built capacity with overseas partners.

It is important to note that we are already doing this. In November 2015, the UK returned £28 million to Macau, which were the proceeds of corruption laundered in the UK. That is a concrete example of our giving back money to those countries that have been robbed by crooks who have used Britain to launder the money or to make the money in its jurisdiction. I want to see more of that and to see it go further.

There was a need for legislation and a need to build on the process of the anti-corruption summit and to find out where we were still vulnerable. In October 2015, the Government published the “National risk assessment for money laundering and terrorist financing”, identifying a number of areas where these regimes could be strengthened. Our response to that assessment was the action plan for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist finance, which was published in April 2016. It represents one of the most significant changes to our anti-money laundering and terrorist finance regime in more than a decade.

The Bill will give effect to key elements of that action plan. It will significantly enhance the capability of UK law enforcement to tackle money laundering and to recover the proceeds of crime. It will strengthen the relationship between public and private sectors and combat the financing of terrorism.

Part 1 contains a number of measures that will amend the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, including the creation of unexplained wealth orders. There are criminals who declare themselves almost penniless, yet control millions of pounds. Law enforcement agencies may suspect that assets are the proceeds of international corruption, but they are unable to freeze or recover them, often because they cannot rely on full co-operation with other jurisdictions to obtain evidence. A court will be able to make an unexplained wealth order to require an individual or organisation suspected of association with serious criminality to explain the origin of assets, where they appear to be disproportionate to their known income. If that person does not respond, this may enable the property to be recovered under existing civil recovery powers.

Part 1 chapter 1 will extend the use of disclosure orders, which allow a law enforcement officer to require someone who has relevant information to answer questions as part of an investigation. Those orders are already in use for civil recovery and confiscation investigations. They will now be available for money laundering cases.

Chapter 2 will enhance the process by which private sector companies report suspected money laundering—the suspicious activity reports, or SARs, regime. Where a company in the regulated sector, such as a bank, accountancy or legal firm, suspects that it may commit a money laundering offence, it is obliged to submit a SAR to the National Crime Agency, seeking consent to proceed. At present, there are occasions where these SARs are incomplete and where further information is needed to inform the NCA’s decision. The Bill will give law enforcement agencies more time to investigate those suspicious transactions that require consent, and the NCA extra powers to request further information from companies to help to pursue those investigations and conduct wider analysis.

The Bill will provide a gateway for the sharing of information between regulated companies—subject to appropriate oversight—to help to build a broader
intelligence picture of suspected money laundering. This has been piloted through a programme known as the joint money laundering intelligence taskforce. In the 12 months from February 2015, the taskforce led directly to 11 arrests, the restraint of more than £500,000 and the identification of 1,700 bank accounts linked to suspected criminal activity. We want to build on the success of that work, by providing the clearest possible legal certainty that companies can share information for the purposes of preventing and detecting serious crime.

Part 1 chapter 3 will improve the ability of law enforcement agencies to recover the proceeds of crime. Existing legislation contains civil powers to confiscate cash, but criminals hold proceeds in other forms, as I said earlier, and we must adapt. The types of asset covered by the power are listed in the Bill, so that Parliament can properly scrutinise its potential use. We continue to consult operational partners on their requirements, and I expect that we will introduce a Government amendment to extend the list to include gambling slips and tokens, which are often used by organised criminals to launder their ill-gotten cash. I hope that such an amendment will attract cross-party support.

The rest of part 1 will extend existing POCA powers to a number of other organisations, including the Serious Fraud Office, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Financial Conduct Authority. It will make a range of minor and technical amendments to POCA.

The first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe. The terrorist threat is real and is growing. If we are to combat that threat, we must cut off the funding streams that enable terrorist-related activity. The 2015 national risk assessment identified two key weaknesses in this area: the raising and moving of terrorist funds through vulnerabilities in the financial sector, including money service businesses and cash couriering; and the abuse of the charitable sector for terrorist purposes. To combat these issues, part 2 will make complementary changes to powers for terrorist finance cases, by mirroring many of the provisions in the Bill, such as those on SARS, disclosure orders and seizure and confiscation powers, so that they are also available for investigations into offences under the Terrorism Act 2000.

Part 3 will deliver on the Conservative manifesto commitment to make “it a crime if companies fail to put in place measures to stop economic crime, such as tax evasion”.

At present, if an individual evades tax and that is criminally facilitated by those working for a company, the individual taxpayer will have committed a crime and those individuals facilitating it could also be prosecuted, but it is very difficult and often impossible to hold the corporate entity to account. That needs to change. That is why we are creating two new offences of corporate failure to prevent the criminal facilitation of tax evasion—one in relation to UK taxes; another in relation to taxes owed to other countries.

Tax evasion is wrong. It is a crime. It cannot be right that businesses operating in the UK can escape criminal liability simply because a tax loss is suffered by another country rather than the UK. The new offence in relation to foreign taxes will be of particular benefit in tackling corporate facilitation of corruption in developing countries. HMRC has conducted two public consultations on these offences, including engagement with the private sector—banks, accountants and legal practices—and everyone is clear of the need to take responsibility for ensuring the highest possible standards of compliance in this area.

As I have said, tax evasion and corruption in the developing world are key contributors to global poverty. Those crimes are frequently facilitated by companies in other jurisdictions. We cannot abdicate our responsibility and leave solving this problem to other countries. The UK’s financial sector should lead on the disruption of tax evasion, money laundering and corruption. This measure will help to do just that.

The Government are committed to reducing the regulatory burden on business, which can make it harder for companies to focus on real risks. The measures in the Bill were developed in close partnership with law enforcement agencies and the regulated sector, including major financial institutions, as well as other key representatives.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Although I support the Bill, does the Minister agree that there is no point in legislating if the agencies tasked with enforcing the legislation simply do not have the resources to do so? For example, since the creation of the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation, as far as I am aware from talking to lawyers who work on white-collar crime practices, there has been no enforcement whatever. All of us who want to support the Bill would like to hear reassurance that there will be the resources to match the good intent.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. In the past few months, I have visited regional organised crime units up and down the country, including in his region, and the NCA, and they all say that their barrier to getting further with some of these problems is not the resource issue; they all say that their barrier has been the ability to find the cash, see the cash and seize it. Those three things are incredibly important. We can put all the resources in the world into our law enforcement agencies, but if they do not have the powers to take back some of the stolen assets, it will not make a difference.

The thing that struck me coming into this job only a few months ago, although I thought I knew a bit about terrorism from my previous life, and what has absolutely shocked me is the weight and strength of organised crime across the United Kingdom. To see its depth, how it affects my community in the north-west and how close it comes to us all really takes my breath away. I am absolutely determined not only that the guys and girls at the top, the Mr Bigs, get sent to jail for as long as possible, but that those people who consider themselves a little removed from it—the facilitators, the white-collar smoothies who launder the money into property and so on—also face their time in court, because they are the people who contribute to the message that there is a permissive society and that it is okay to be associated with crime. They are the people who help the nasties to put a gloss on themselves.

That is what I am determined to do with the Bill. All Members should rest assured that I will use the Bill to try to build momentum in non-legislative areas—in the
non-regulated sector. I want to ask the regulators of estate agents and accountants what they are doing to play their part. If we can change the powers here, if their members get into trouble, what are they going to do to hold their members to account? Legislation is only one part of this. I hope that everyone supports the Bill and that the message goes out that there is more to do and that we will make sure that those people who facilitate and think that they live on the edge of the crime know that we are coming after them.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again; he is being incredibly generous. As he says, this is a question not just of laws but of the culture of the organisations. The NCA’s predecessor organisations all seemed to be more culturally bureaucratic. The NCA seems to be more intelligence-led. It seems to have more officials at the top who were intelligence operators in past times. From everything that I have seen, the NCA is far more vigorous at chasing down the intelligence, which is what it really needs to do.

Mr Wallace: There are several parts to this. The NCA has absolutely got the bit between its teeth, and I see a professional organisation up and down the country determined to tackle the threat that we face. I compliment police forces throughout the country that have put away the old-fashioned territorial boundaries that organised crime often exploited and have been determined to work together. When we visit Police Scotland and regional organised crime units in the north-west and all the other regions, we see police forces all sitting around the same table, working together for their own ends, led by intelligence, deciding on their priorities, sharing capabilities and knocking down and getting on with it, rather than just focusing on their small areas. The NCA and regional organised crime units have provided the impetus on this, and the results will speak for themselves. I can assure the House that each of the Bill’s provisions will be subject to a set of stringent safeguards and robust oversight, so that they can be used only where it is necessary and proportionate to do so.

We considered carefully the responses to the public consultation on options for legislative proposals to implement the action plan. We published the Government response alongside the Bill earlier this month. I am grateful to everyone who responded to that consultation. There will inevitably be some additional pieces of statutory guidance to underpin the measures in the Bill. We will seek, wherever possible, to make that available to Parliament during the passage of the Bill, to ensure the widest possible consultation on how it will work in practice.

The Bill is only one part of a wider package of measures, as I have said, aimed at strengthening the Government’s response to money laundering and increasing the amount of criminal assets confiscated by the state. Our wider programme includes improving the effectiveness of the supervisory regime for the regulated sector; reforming the SARs regime, including investment in systems and processes; and further increasing our international reach, working with other Governments, overseas territories, Crown dependencies and international organisations to crack down on money laundering, tax evasion and corruption. We must ensure that the Bill and those other projects have the greatest possible impact on money laundering and terrorist finance in this country and abroad.

I welcome the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) to her post as shadow Home Secretary, and I am pleased that she has been able to meet me since her appointment to discuss this Bill. I would be delighted to continue to meet her and her team during the passage of the Bill to make sure that we get it right. Hopefully, we can work to ensure that the whole House agrees to support the Bill to send a message to the crooks, criminals and facilitators that we will not tolerate this any more. I hope that the hon. Lady, her colleagues and Members from the Scottish National party agree that it is in the public interest that the Bill be enacted at the earliest opportunity, hopefully with clear cross-party support.

I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) on her recent election as Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. I am afraid that she is not in the Chamber, but she has a wealth of experience in home affairs, and I look forward to discussing these issues with her and the Select Committee.

The Government are committed to protecting the security and prosperity of our citizens, and the integrity of our world-leading financial system. We must ensure that we can pursue vigorously those who abuse that for illicit means. That is what the Bill will do, and I commend it to the House.

3.12 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): If someone walks around the most expensive neighbourhoods of London—Knightsbridge and South Kensington—they will see house after house dark every night. Some have no lights on because the owners are out, but many more have no lights on because they have been bought as an investment and lie empty most of the time. Some of the most expensive properties in the capital are unoccupied because they have been bought solely for the purpose of laundering dirty money.

In 2016, money laundering is not just happening in accountancy offices or the back rooms of banks. It is happening in plain sight of ordinary Londoners, because we see some of the most expensive domestic properties in the world change hands but remain mysteriously and persistently empty. We welcome the Bill, which has been introduced with the express purpose of providing new powers and safeguards to improve the Government’s capacity to tackle money laundering and terrorist financing and, above all, to recover the proceeds of crime. I want to make it clear that, in principle, the Opposition support the aims of the Bill.

We do so because it is vital to do as much as we can to bear down on illegal activity, including targeting the enablers of illegal activity: lawyers, accountants and estate agents. We support the Bill partly because public opinion, encouraged by the work of the Public Accounts Committee under distinguished past and present leadership, rightly demands that politicians do more to stop tax evasion. We also do so because some of the poorest countries in the world have had their Treasuries denuded by money laundering. If the UK, which is often described as one of the money-laundering centres of the world, could act effectively against money laundering, not just...
our own tax authorities but the populations of countries in the global south, from which some of this money has been looted, would benefit.

We will wish, however, to ascertain that the provisions of the Bill will actually work and impact in reality on the harms that the Minister set out. We will weigh carefully the civil liberties implications of those provisions. Furthermore, we seek assurances that the Government agencies tasked with implementing the legislation will have all the resources and support that they need.

Keith Vaz: The issue of resources was raised by the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). Despite the effective way in which the Minister made his case, he did not answer my question. When will the NCA get a new computer system? When will ELMER be renewed so that the agency can look through SARs? The system is designed for 20,000 complaints, but it is currently dealing 385,000. The agency needs a new computer system to do what the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) want the Bill to achieve.

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that important intervention. If the Minister does not give a clear reply to that question on the Floor of the House, I can assure him that we will pursue the issue in Committee.

The Minister said that money is not the main obstacle to pursuing money launderers and criminal actors, but it does not help when agencies such as the NCA experience cuts. The Home Affairs Committee produced an important report in June on the proceeds of crime, and I am indebted to the then Chair and the Committee as a whole for their investigatory work. The Committee pointed out that money laundering takes many complicated forms, ranging from complex financial vehicles and activity in tax havens around the world to property investments in London and high-value jewellery. I share the Select Committee’s astonishment that of over 1 million property transactions last year only 335 were deemed suspicious. I agree with the Select Committee’s conclusion that supervision of the property market has been “totally inadequate” and has “laid out a welcome mat for launderers”.

The Select Committee report also made the important point that it is all too easy for people who want to launder money to buy property in London, let it out in the capital’s high-value lettings market, then take in clean money in perpetuity.

Overall, the NCA believes that up to £100 billion of criminal funds could be passing through the UK each year in the form of property, luxury cars, art and jewellery. Transparency International estimates that there are hundreds of properties in the UK that are strongly suspected to have been acquired with the proceeds of corruption. Land Registry figures show that UK real estate worth more than £170 billion is held by more than 30,000 tax haven companies. I do not argue that there can never be a legitimate reason for holding UK real estate in a tax haven company, but I believe that, all too often, what we see could well be illicit activity.

Charlie Elphicke: As a former tax lawyer, may I point out to the hon. Lady that companies in tax havens own UK property because it was possible to do a stamp duty avoidance scheme called “enveloping” during most of the period in which the Labour Government were in office? Action taken by this Government has put a stop to a lot of that abuse.

Ms Abbott: I made a point of saying that there can be legitimates reasons for holding UK property in tax haven companies. I remind the hon. Gentleman that it was not every single detail of the activity of the last Labour Government that I supported.

Most owners of those companies hide behind anonymous trusts or nominee directors and shareholders. For instance, in a single 50-storey apartment complex in London, The Tower at St George Wharf in Vauxhall, a stone’s-throw from the House, a quarter of the flats are held through offshore companies. This Bill aims to close a loophole which means that authorities cannot seize property from overseas criminals unless the individuals are first convicted in their country of origin. The orders will apply to property and other assets worth more than £100,000. If the owner fails to demonstrate that a home or piece of jewellery was acquired using legal sources of income, agencies will be able to seize it.

The Opposition support the new law in principle, but stress that for it to be effective agencies must be given the financial and political support to take powerful and wealthy individuals to court. Furthermore, there is some concern, which we will explore in Committee, that the measures may be too widely drawn. Throughout, the sole safeguard for seizure orders is the reasonable suspicion of a police officer on their own authority. This may be too low a bar as a safeguard against the incompetent use or abuse of state powers.

Keith Vaz: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind comments about the Select Committee’s report published in July. In evidence to the Committee, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe suggested that the criminal law should be amended to ensure that those who had not paid their compensation order should be the subject of a second criminal offence. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is wrong for those who are subject to a compensation order to go to prison, finish their sentence and come out without it being paid? We need to look very carefully at this aspect.

Ms Abbott: My right hon. Friend is right. We need to look at the case of people who serve a prison term that may be relatively short, but are able, in effect, to flout the compensation order.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I take the point that my neighbour, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), makes, but often when a criminal is sentenced, along with a compensation order or a proceeds of crime order, he is sentenced to an additional term of imprisonment in the event that he does not pay back the money. Sometimes those extended sentences can be very long—and, as long as or even longer than the original sentence.

Ms Abbott: Far be it from me to bandy words with the many lawyers in the Chamber. I repeat that as the Bill goes through Committee we will seek to examine the question of people flouting compensation orders. Overall, in relation to bearing down on money laundering, we welcome the relevant provisions, including the
[Ms Abbott]

unexplained wealth orders, the reform to the suspicious activity reports regime, information sharing and the new disclosure orders.

The Bill also deals with tax evasion. In recent years there has been a great deal of public interest and a raft of Government measures on tax avoidance. Arguably, less attention has been paid to tax evasion. There is some blurring between the two terms, but broadly, tax evasion occurs when an individual or corporate entity acts in breach of the law, and tax avoidance occurs when an individual or corporate entity complies with the letter but not the spirit of the law. In recent years Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has produced estimates of the tax gap—that is, the difference between the tax that is collected and that which is theoretically due. Clearly, any such estimate must be speculative, but I draw the attention of the House to the fact that HMRC’s most recent estimate of the gap is £36 billion, which is the equivalent of 6.5% of total tax liabilities. Of that £36 billion that is lost, £5.2 billion is lost to evasion and only £2.2 billion is lost to avoidance.

We welcome the measures to bear down on tax evasion, and we welcome the provision that makes it a criminal offence for corporations to fail to stop their associated persons facilitating tax evasion. We particularly welcome the fact that this will have extra-territorial jurisdiction. However, we regret that in the tax evasion measures in part 3 there is no reference to the British overseas territories and Crown dependencies. That is a startling oversight. There are 14 British overseas territories. Just one of them, the British Virgin Islands, is mentioned no fewer than 113,000 times in the Panama papers. BVI, with a population of just 29,000—fewer than my own constituents in Hackney—is home to 452,000 international businesses. Maybe the 29,000 population is particularly skilled at accountancy and banking, but maybe some of those business entities are shells for tax evasion.

There are three Crown dependencies, Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, and it is frequently argued that the British overseas territories and the Crown dependencies are the largest tax evasion network in the world, so the failure to mention them in a Bill which purports to deal with issues surrounding tax evasion is a major omission. We will be seeking amendments as the Bill goes through Committee. It is frequently asserted that it is not possible to legislate for the British overseas territories and the Crown dependencies, but the Ministry of Justice seems to think differently. This is an issue that we will explore.

The Minister referred to the beneficial ownership register that we are encouraging the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies to introduce, but he must be aware that at least some of the overseas territories are boasting that they are in practice evading the Government’s efforts to get them to set up beneficial ownership registers, and many of them are saying that these registers will not be publicly available. The Opposition insist that if this Government are serious about dealing with tax evasion, they must ensure that the overseas territories and Crown dependencies not only set up beneficial ownership registers, but make them publicly available.

We note that there is little distinction in the Bill between corporate or partnership bodies which facilitate tax evasion, and those that do it routinely and as a central part of their business model. We believe that we should look into a new provision specifically criminalising entities and individuals for whom tax evasion is at the heart of their business model, and punishing them more harshly.

I shall not conclude my remarks on tax evasion without mentioning the Labour party’s tax transparency enforcement programme. We want a public inquiry to examine the loss of tax revenue, and increased powers for HMRC, including a specialised tax enforcement unit. We want to force foreign firms to list their owners and beneficiaries, and we want the introduction of a general anti-avoidance principle and the extension of current rules to cover offshore abuses.

The Bill deals with the important issue of terrorist finance. Those of us who have watched with horror terrorist atrocities all over the world, and here in London, know that terrorism is an existential threat to us and our society. We share the Government’s aims in reducing the terrorist threat, not just to us in the UK but to our allies and interests overseas, and agree that one way of doing this is to deprive terrorists of the financial resources required for terrorism-related activity. Globalisation means that we must constantly update our legal instruments. We note the changes that the Bill will make to the tax enforcement and intelligence agencies in relation to investigations of offences under the Terrorism Act 2000, but we will examine these proposals because we are anxious that they do not have too harsh a bearing on genuine charities.

Labour Members support the Bill in principle. We will scrutinise its detail with care. We insist that it is vital that agencies such as the National Crime Agency get the money they need for implementation, because otherwise the Bill will be a dead letter. For too long, London has been accused of being a hub for money laundering, with all its terrible effects not only on the take of our Treasury but on the lives and countries of many of the poorest people in the world. We hope that this Bill is the beginning of a process that brings the curtain down on the era when London could be described as a money-laundering hub, instead ensuring that London and the UK set an example internationally about what can be done to bear down on money laundering and tax evasion.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I begin by declaring an interest. I have been instructed in the past, and I am currently instructed, by the Serious Fraud Office in a number of matters that touch on this Bill and some of its predecessor legislation.

I apologise to my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Front Bench, and to the shadow Home Secretary, the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), for the fact that I might not be able to be here for the wind-ups. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service will forgive me. All being well, however, the debate may run short—if I do not talk too much—in which case I shall be here.

Like the shadow Home Secretary, I broadly support the principle behind the Bill, which I assume is entirely uncontroversial. We all want the criminals whom we hope will be touched by it to be caught and to be prevented from committing such financial crimes. The days
when people went into banks with sawn-off shotguns are long over. Criminals are now much more sophisticated: they go round the back with a set of wires, metaphorically, and extract money out of banks and other financial institutions through computer crime, rather than by using violence. We need to keep up with them. As my hon. Friend the Minister for Security said, we have to be craftier than the crafty hoods.

In our enthusiasm to pass the Bill, however, there are one or two matters about which we need to be a little cautious, although I am sure that, during its passage, the Government will think about how to get the detail right. It could be said that many of the points I am going to set out would be better made on Report than on Second Reading, but I might as well make them while I am on my feet.

Unexplained wealth orders, as a matter of principle, are in line with provisions in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and similar measures, in that they reverse the burden of proof by making the respondent to the order explain himself, rather than requiring the prosecution or the state to make the case against him. That principle is now accepted in our criminal law, and that will continue as long as there are sufficient protections for the respondent. Under the Bill, the High Court may, on an application made by one of the prosecution authorities or enforcement agencies, make an unexplained wealth order in respect of any property if it is satisfied that each of the requirements for making the order is fulfilled. The order will be made in the High Court and the application will be made to the High Court in relation to a respondent who has a criminal connection, but also to politically exposed persons. We need to be careful that politically exposed persons, who will, as I understand it, be foreigners, are sufficiently protected from the making of an application that could trash their reputation and that, even when that is not acceded to by the High Court judge, none the less still leaves him or her exposed to the allegations made against them. I suppose that, to a lesser extent, the same could be said of a respondent with some form of criminal connection.

It seems to me that the way around that is to do what has been done with deferred prosecution agreements in the Crime and Courts Act 2013. Paragraphs 7 and 8 of schedule 17 to that Act provide a way of dealing with those issues so that reputations cannot be damaged until the necessary time when a particular state of affairs has been proved. In deferred prosecution agreements, the parties—the Serious Fraud Office in this case—apply to the court for a declaration that entering into a deferred prosecution agreement with the respondent is likely to be in the interests of justice and that “the proposed terms of the DPA are fair, reasonable and proportionate.”

That hearing takes place in private. Once the court is satisfied, and the parties are agreed, that the terms of the order are correct, the judge makes an order that is made public, and also makes public the judgment that he made in the private hearing some days or weeks earlier.

That is a perfectly sensible way of maintaining the interests of doing justice in public, while holding in private the initial hearing in the event of an order not being made, or of it being altered in a way that makes the respondent look a lot less guilty than he might otherwise have looked. That allows a hearing to be heard without damaging an innocent man’s reputation. That is simply a matter of mechanics, and if the Government can spare the time between now and when the Bill leaves the House of Commons, we could achieve the end that we all want, without causing collateral or unintended damage.

I am also a little concerned—perhaps this can be dealt with at a later stage—that clause 1 deals with income as though that were all that needs to be considered. Proposed new section 362B(3) of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 states:

“the High Court must be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that the known sources of the respondent’s lawfully obtained income would have been insufficient for the purposes of enabling the respondent to obtain the property.”

Proposed new subsection (6)(d) notes that “known” sources of the respondent’s income are the sources of income (whether arising from employment, assets or otherwise) that are reasonably ascertainable from available information at the time of the making of the application for the order.

If “income” simply means money received, I understand that; but if it means income as opposed to capital, we need to make clear that by income we mean not just the interest from capital or a salary, but all that the respondent owns, so that we can capture the distinction between income and capital. A respondent could be capital-rich, but income-poor. We need to avoid a situation where he can get away from the order by saying that his income does not amount to much when we all know, or can anticipate, that his capital is larger. I am sure that plenty of the houses that the shadow Home Secretary spoke about are bought with cash—essentially, they are bought for great lumps of capital—rather than from borrowing.

I am concerned about the Bill’s use of the words “purports to comply”. I appreciate that that expression is to be found in earlier, similar Acts but, to me, purporting to do something means either doing or attempting to do one’s best, or doing something speciously—appearing, falsely, to do something. Albeit that we accept that that expression is used in earlier legislation, we need to be clear that we pretend to do something should not be a defence or an answer to an accusation of failure to comply with an unexplained wealth order.

I turn to the question of enforcement, which has been brought up on several occasions. Let us assume that an unexplained wealth order is made, and let us assume that there is a hearing, initially perhaps ex parte—singlehanded—by the authority. The matter then either comes back for a hearing between both parties, or moves on in some other way. It is all very well making these orders, but that will do no good if we do not have the necessary police officers or investigators to ensure that they are enforced.

I have noticed that in the past with confiscation orders. Very often, the courts make an order, and either the order is never put into action or very little of the amount required from the offender is ever recovered. We need to make sure that this legislation is not simply written in air; it must have real teeth to deter those who think they can get away with this sort of misbehaviour, and to enable the Treasury to recover the ill-gotten gains. I dare say that the same could be said in relation to suspicious activity reports.

Finally on unexplained wealth orders, is there to be any form of appeal system? It strikes me that under proposed new section 362H, an application for an
unexplained wealth order may be made without notice, and I have dealt with points about that. Will the procedure be susceptible to any sort of appeal, and if not, why not?

I turn to the “failure to prevent” provisions, which my hon. Friend the Minister mentioned in his opening speech. I heartily approve of this new system for dealing with corporate misconduct. We saw it first in our jurisdiction under section 7 of the Bribery Act 2010. Although there have been only a few cases involving section 7, it strikes me as being a sensible way of dealing with the difficulty that we face, under English law at least, in pinning criminal liability on corporations. In the United States, a corporate body can be held to be criminally liable because it employed the criminal. It is vicariously liable for employing the criminal and his activities are pinned on the company. In this country—certainly in this jurisdiction—we rely on the Victorian principle of the directing mind. Nowadays, in huge international companies that have hundreds of thousands of employees posted right across the world, albeit that the headquarters of the company may be in this jurisdiction, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate that the directing mind of the company knew what the criminal employee was up to. Section 7 of the Bribery Act gets around that.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Although I accept the directing mind principle, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that when employees engage in less than ethical practices—such practices have caused a lot of the problems that we have seen in the UK over the past six or seven years—unless the liability goes to the top of an organisation, the organisation will never develop the protocols and processes required to make sure that those employees are responsible for their actions? Does he accept that point?

Sir Edward Garnier: What the hon. Gentleman says is perfectly true, but I am not sure whether that constitutes accepting what he says. The point I am trying to get across is that companies can avoid liability in the absence of the “failure to prevent” system under section 7 of the Bribery Act. Individuals can be prosecuted and imprisoned, but the company gets away free. The advantage of section 7 is that it brings the company within the ambit of responsibility.

Yes, the compliance system in banks and financial institutions is nowadays much more sophisticated and vigorously engineered, so that everybody from top to bottom should know what they are supposed to do and not do, and so that such a culture goes right the way through the company. It seems to me that there is no excuse for failing to behave properly, since we should all now know what to do. The compliance world is certainly keen to ensure that employees in banks and so forth know what they are supposed to do.

I want the Government not to limit the “failure to prevent” provisions to section 7 of the Bribery Act and those clauses in this Bill that deal with tax evasion, but to expand the regime to all offences that can sensibly be brought under it, as set out in part 2 of schedule 17 to the Crime and Courts Act 2013. The schedule covers 40 or 50 economic or financial crimes that corporations should be required to prevent. That would put a blanket across a range of criminal financial offences that are not dealt with at the moment, such as fraud, theft, false accounting, the suppression of documents, dishonestly retaining a wrongful credit, the exportation of prohibited or restricted goods and so on. There is a list for the Government to look at. I hope that thought will be given not just to expanding the regime to the evasion of taxation both in this country and abroad, but to some of, if not all, the offences listed in the schedule.

Finally, I want to make a small point, which I suppose comes back to resources. In an online article in “The Brief” from The Times this morning, a senior lawyer at a City firm of solicitors complained that tax officials were failing to use existing tools against tax avoidance schemes while seeking to expand their powers. He said: “The huge range of swinging powers HMRC has been given in recent years may have helped its image… but to date they have been little used as an enforcement tool, and some may question whether public time and resources could have been better spent.” He also said:

“Before granting HMRC yet further powers… parliament should consider very carefully whether such powers are actually needed and ask HMRC to explain why some of the powers it has been granted in recent years have been under-utilised.”

I do not know whether that is pinpoint accurate, but it seems to me that we can do both: we can make better use of the powers provided to HMRC and ensure that it uses them; and we can also widen the ambit of our ability to catch those involved in financial crime and our ability to prevent it by introducing the “failure to prevent” provisions in this Bill in, I hope, an expanded form.

3.48 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Before I go through my speech, I think I can sum up our position on the Bill very succinctly. The crux is that we support in principle the aims of the Bill. To be truthful, there is not much within the four corners of the Bill that we would dispute. Our problem is not with what is in the Bill but with what is not in the Bill, as I will make clear in my speech.

When I studied the financial system at university in the 1990s, the focus of financial crime and of the Government with regard to it was on anti-money laundering regulations and proceeds of crime legislation, which were specifically geared towards getting at the proceeds of drug traffickers and, quite frankly, bank robbers. For the most part, that has worked. Long gone are the days when criminals could easily legitimise buckets of cash from ill-gotten gains. Thankfully, long gone are the days when the only concern involved in robbing a bank was being caught red-handed. The perception of criminals was that if they could evade capture and did not flash the cash, they could eventually release the money. In many cases, criminals could be incarcerated for crimes and still look forward to spending loot they had stashed when they were eventually released. Money now needs to be accounted for; banks must consider the sources of funds and be satisfied that they are indeed legitimate. Police now have powers to recoup proceeds of crime even if they have been spent by the criminals, and pass them back to the victims.

In my view, we simply could not believe in the rule of law unless we supported such an evolution in rules and regulation. Fairness and the rule of law should be at the
heart of everything we do as a society. It is not fair to anyone to live in a world where criminals are free to generate cash and spend it without fear of repercussion. That is what will simply have to be a level playing field for the vast majority of society who play by the rules. The past changes did not merely disincentivise criminals; they drove a police coach and horses right through their plans. There are many famous bank robbers and drug traffickers. We know them; we have watched all the films. I suggest that they simply would not have committed those crimes had we had tougher money laundering regulations then.

The challenges today are very different. We live in an era of evolving financial crime and now face a very different threat from that which we faced a generation ago, when I was at university. It is the threat of grand corruption, particularly in relation to politically exposed people, facilitated for the most part—perhaps unwittingly—by the City of London.

Earlier this year The Guardian revealed through the Panama papers how a powerful member of Gaddafi’s inner circle had built a multimillion-pound portfolio of boutique hotels in Scotland and luxury homes in Mayfair, Marylebone and Hampstead in London. He was head of Libya’s infrastructure fund for a decade and has been accused by Government prosecutors in Tripoli of plundering money meant for schools, hospitals and archaeology. Scottish police have confirmed that they are investigating. Libya simply made a request for an asset freeze, but that has not yet been implemented.

These challenges are such that new and tougher legislation is required to give law enforcement the tools to really do something about this problem. We in the Scottish National party support that principle. Although I do not wish to undermine your Office’s consideration of the Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker, I respectfully suggest that the Bill applies to Scotland. There are specific clauses on how the provisions will apply to Scotland.

As far as devolved competencies go, the SNP Scottish Government have demonstrated their commitment to tackling criminal finances and tax avoidance, and boast a successful track record in doing so. In Scotland we have introduced robust anti-avoidance rules on devolved taxes, described by commentators as among the toughest in the world. The SNP Government’s approach to devolved taxes demonstrates that we are deadly serious about tackling tax avoidance in Scotland. For example, the Revenue Scotland and Tax Powers Act 2014 established the Scottish general anti-avoidance rule, which will allow Revenue Scotland to take counter-action against artificial tax avoidance schemes, making it more difficult for people to circumvent the requirement to pay tax.

That said, although we support the broad principle at stake here, we note with interest the clear terms of the most recent Tory manifesto:

“We will continue to lead the world on tax and transparency...We are also making it a crime if companies fail to put in place measures to stop economic crime”

and

“We will...crack down on tax evasion and aggressive tax avoidance”.

Admirable principles, and ones we support, but we have real doubts that the Bill goes far enough to achieve those goals, as I and my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) will make clear as we move through the debate.

Many mechanisms and vehicles are provided for in the Bill. One of the most important, and perhaps the easiest for the public to understand, is the unexplained wealth order. The Bill will enable a court—in Scotland, the Court of Session, upon application by Scottish Ministers—to make an unexplained wealth order. The order will require an individual or organisation to explain the origin of assets if there are reasonable grounds for suspecting that that individual or organisation may be involved in criminality or intend to use that wealth for criminal purposes, and the value of the assets exceeds £100,000.

The order will be available to the court where assets appear disproportionate to known legitimate income—for example, as recently reported, when a taxi driver owns a £1 million fish tank. Failure to provide a response to the order and explain the legitimate source of funds would give rise to a presumption that the property was recoverable, making any subsequent civil recovery action much easier.

As a lawyer, the notion of reversing the burden of proof is not one that sits comfortably with me, but, as in other areas, I consider it to be proportional to the issue at stake. Sound legal principles, such as the presumption of innocence and the burden of proof being on the Crown, should not inadvertently protect criminals, which I suspect may have happened thus far.

Unexplained wealth orders will also help to expose the owners of property. Land Registry figures show UK real estate worth more than £170 billion is held by more than 30,000 tax haven companies. The key to this provision is that a criminal conviction will no longer be necessary before law enforcement can pierce the criminals’ veil that camouflages their wealth. Getting away with the crime itself will no longer protect a criminal’s wealth. The Bill will allow for this power to be applied to foreign politicians and officials, or those associated with them, known as politically exposed persons, helping to tackle the issue of proceeds of grand corruption overseas being laundered in the UK.

I have a couple of specific questions for the Minister relating to unexplained wealth orders. There is a provision relating to interim freezing orders. If an unexplained wealth order is made, one could presume that the respondent would be keen to hotfoot it out of the country with a stash of cash. Freezing orders are available if the court is satisfied that they are necessary. Will the Government consider strengthening this position to ensure that the hotfoot temptation is not available to these criminals? I could imagine the rush to flee—I think we all could. Perhaps an automatic freezing order on the granting of the application for the unexplained wealth order can be considered. Will the £100,000 threshold create a new “out” for grand corruption? Will politically exposed people collaborate with many people to do numerous transactions under £100,000? That should also be considered and we should ensure that the provisions catch those types of activities.

Current legislation does not make it easy to seize criminals’ assets in the form of bank accounts and other value assets, such as precious metals and jewels, or indeed casino chips and high value betting slips. There is evidence, however, that these moveable items are being used increasingly, both domestically and across international borders. The Bill will create new civil powers similar to existing cash seizure and forfeiture schemes in current legislation, which would close that
gap. The powers will be exercisable where there is reasonable suspicion that the property is the proceeds of crime or will be used in unlawful conduct.

The SNP’s 2016 manifesto stated:

“We will argue for changes in the law at Westminster to enable the police to seize items of monetary value from criminals, such as high value betting slips and casino chips.”

I was pleased to hear the Minister state that the changes will be included in a forthcoming amendment. I was struggling to conceive how criminals could be caught by the face value vouchers provisions currently in the Bill, so I was grateful for that statement and I thank the Minister for making it.

On corporate failure to prevent tax evasion, the Bill attempts to legislate on what we understand as corporate economic crime. As we heard from the Minister, the Bill will create two new offences. We support the measures as far as they go, but we see this as a huge missed opportunity. For example, nothing in the Bill would criminalise the banks themselves for their employees rigging the LIBOR market. I suspect that when the public begin to understand which corporate crimes are dealt with in the Bill and which ones are not, they may see this as a slight cop-out and a continuation of the status quo that has got us into so much difficulty. It is uncontroversial to hold companies to account for the tax evasion of their employees. It is tax evasion, for goodness’ sake. The public would expect it to be criminally sanctionable as is. What the public want are stronger measures to hold companies, in particular banks, liable for the crimes of their resident rogue bankers. It seems strange that the Government have ducked this issue.

Speaking as someone who has worked for a well-known retail bank—something that I do not advertise as much these days as I used to—I can testify with absolute certainty that until the banks themselves are in the frame they will never, as I claimed in my intervention, develop the risk management and other protocols necessary to make sure that their agents or employees do not commit these crimes. Only when liability goes to the top will we ever begin to solve these issues.

Will the Government consider reacting to what the public understand as corporate crime, and make banks liable for practices that have caused so much economic heartache to so many ordinary people since 2008? Why should the innocent ordinary punter pay for the mistakes of rogue bankers? If we make these bosses liable, we will see a tightening up almost instantly.

Sir Edward Garnier: As a first step, would the hon. Gentleman encourage the Government to look at the schedule to the 2013 Act, where the economic and financial crimes are set out, to see whether we could get “failure to prevent” provisions added to this Bill on a wider basis? Perhaps the hon. Gentleman and I could then get together to try to persuade the Government to introduce the American vicarious liability system of corporate criminal liability.

Richard Arkless: I have a great deal of sympathy with both of the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s points. I suggest, however, that the first one is rather a half-house measure that does not go far enough. It will not pin criminal liability on the banks. On the second point about vicarious liability, it is interesting to note that the United States is often considered as the free market monster of the entire world, yet the US feels comfortable with criminalising banks for the actions of their rogue employees. I suggest that we should do the same in the UK.

Mr Wallace: It is a joy as a non-lawyer to be skewered between two barristers in this place, but may I point out to the hon. Gentleman that one reason why the Bill imposes an unlimited fine for a conviction of corporate facilitating of tax evasion is that we believe it will change behaviour. It is one thing to fine a company for a capped fee, but we need to change the attitude not only of the bosses but of the shareholders—and massive fines make a difference. If that is coupled with our provision to increase the powers of the Financial Conduct Authority, we hope that both will help to change behaviour.

Richard Arkless: I agree with the Minister, but my point is that under the Bill, corporate economic crime extends only to tax evasion and not beyond it. Within the four corners of the Bill, there is relatively little to disagree with, but it does not go beyond tax evasion, which I think is a huge omission.

SNP Members can support other parts of the Bill without much hesitation—for example, the expansion of the suspicious activity reports regime, information sharing disclosure orders and combating terrorism. We support all those measures in principle. Notwithstanding our in principle support, we do not think it goes far enough, as I have said.

I shall shortly go through some of the issues that we think are missing from the Bill. Before I do so, however, I wish to make a small point about the time we have had to consider this Bill and its contents. We do not agree that the Scottish Government were given adequate time to scrutinise them. The Bill has been instructed and drafted with high speed, admirable though that may be, but with limited consultation. Only in the last fortnight were we shown draft clauses that related to unexplained wealth orders and mobile items of value—and even then, they were tagged “in confidence”. That said, we welcome the move to extend to Scotland the powers for wealth orders and disclosure orders, as requested by the Scottish Government.

For these reasons, the Scottish Government have not had the chance—and neither have I—to consider the Bill in sufficient detail, to consult Scottish stakeholders properly or to provide the Minister and the Government with some detailed advice. The Scottish Government will do so in due course. In addition, we are already aware of concerns among some Scottish stakeholders, particularly the civil recovery unit, that their advice has not been fully listened to and acted upon by the Home Office, and that the current approach adopted in the draft seizure and forfeiture powers provisions may not be the most effective available. I would encourage the Minister to continue his dialogue with the Scottish Government. He demonstrated yesterday evening that that is ongoing, for which I thank him.

So what is missing? It remains the case for us that the most notable aspect of the Bill is what is not in it. The headline objective of the Tory manifesto in this context was to deal with tax evasion, but, as has already been pointed out, the Bill makes absolutely no mention of
the United Kingdom overseas territories and Crown dependencies. Given the aforementioned statement of intent in the Tory manifesto and the problems highlighted by the Panama papers—and the public reaction to the Panama papers—that omission seems very odd and very peculiar indeed.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The OECD estimates that tax havens may be costing developing countries a sum up to three times the size of the global aid budget. Does my hon. Friend agree with me, and with the charity Christian Aid, that the most effective way in which the Government could tackle corruption and counter the financing of terrorism would be to set a deadline by which the overseas territories and Crown dependencies would have to adopt the same level of transparency as the rest of the UK, and does he agree that the Bill constitutes a missed opportunity for them to do so?

**Richard Arkless**: Unsurprisingly, I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. and learned Friend. I should like the Minister to consider whether there is any way in which we could compel the overseas territories and Crown dependencies to publish registers of beneficial ownership, which would provide much needed transparency in what is turning out to be a bottleneck in the fight against tax evasion.

**Joanna Cherry**: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a precedent? The Government have repeatedly legislated in respect of overseas territories—for example, on issues relating to corruption, abolishing the death penalty, pirate radio, and the decriminalisation of homosexuality.

**Richard Arkless**: Again unsurprisingly, I agree with my hon. and learned Friend. Where there is a political will, there will be a way. If the Government were inclined to legislate in relation to the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, I have no doubt that that could be done, but the omission indicates to me that there was not the necessary political will.

We do not believe that the Bill will tackle tax avoidance appropriately. Avoidance has increased under the Conservative Government. Last year the UK tax gap was a staggering £36 billion, and, despite the positive rhetoric emanating from the Tory Front Bench, it has increased by £2 billion on last year. More needs to be done in the Bill to achieve everyone’s stated aims.

Why does the Bill not address the tax code? The UK has one of the most complex tax codes in the world, which has clearly led to opportunities both to create new loopholes and to exploit existing ones. We therefore call on the Treasury to convene a commission, and to report back within two years following a comprehensive consultation on the simplification of the tax code. By opening the door to a simplified tax system, the Government could boost tax yield, encourage compliance, and avoid exploitative loopholes such as the Mayfair loophole and employee benefit trusts.

Changes are one thing, but they could become meaningless if we do not allocate the resources that are necessary to ensure that the Bill and subsequent measures have real effects. We think that the Government’s decision to close 137 HMRC offices will be completely counterproductive in relation to the laudable aims of the Bill. Those resources are needed to boost compliance, not to mention the human cost that has been incurred by families, employees, communities and local businesses.

Let me make one final point to the Minister, which will be expanded later by my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, and which we discussed yesterday evening. My request is for the wholly reserved issue of Scottish limited partnerships to be dealt with in the Bill, which it is not at present.

It is the view of the Scottish Government that a legislative consent motion will be required to give effect to the provisions covering seizure and forfeiture powers and unexplained wealth orders, and some of the minor and technical changes in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. The motion will also include the specific provisions on civil recovery and criminal confiscation that the Scottish Government require to be included in the Bill.

We will not trigger a Division this evening, but we want to reiterate very firmly that the Bill does not go nearly far enough in dealing with what I think is a real and tangible outcry from the public, given what has happened over the last five, six or seven years. If we are serious about creating and maintaining confidence in the banking system—which has completely evaporated—we need to tackle this issue head on, and do more than we are doing in the Bill.

4.9 pm

**James Berry** (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I rise to support the Bill—not to complain about what is not in it, but to praise the Government and agree with them on what they have put in this bold Bill.

I should declare I am a barrister and have represented a number of police forces across the country. That experience has taught me two things. The first is a genuine admiration for the men and women of our fantastic police service for their dedication to the task of keeping us safe. Thanks to their excellent work, led by Chief Superintendent Glenn Tunstall, Kingston is now the safest borough in London. However, as I learned at our recent police awards, even in London’s safest borough, there are humbling examples of everyday heroism and compassion by our police officers. We do not hear enough about them, but we are truly grateful.

I pledged at the election to do what I could to give the police the tools they need to do their job. That leads me on to the second thing my experience with the police has taught me: there are a number of powers in this Bill that the police have been, and still are, hamstrung without—where they are powerless to act in the face of wrongdoing.

Before talking about those powers, I want to make a broader point. I am proud to serve as a London MP, representing those who live and work in the best city in the world. London is the world’s financial services capital and I know the Government are working as hard as they can to ensure that that remains the case after Britain’s exit from the EU. But over the last few years there have been reports that London is becoming the capital of something rather more insidious—money laundering.

Following the global financial crisis, property in London has become one of the safest investments in the world. Rich criminals and money launderers have flocked to it in the same way as people who make their money legitimately. Put shortly, Londoners want this stain removed from their city. The Bill will help to do that.
It is not just London: the National Crime Agency assesses that billions of pounds in proceeds of international corruption are laundered into or through the UK every year. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs estimates that £4.4 billion was lost to the Exchequer last year alone due to tax evasion in the UK. Globally, laundered money is estimated to amount to 2.7% of GDP, or $1.6 trillion. To put that in perspective, there are only nine countries in the world with GDPs greater than that.

As the leading nation in the world for soft power, and as a nation that is trying to lead the global debate on anti-corruption, we need to ensure that our house is in order. The Bill is part of the Government’s wider efforts to ensure that that is the case. I want to touch on a few aspects of the Bill.

The first is unexplained wealth orders. We have seen many cases in the press where individuals suspected of grave criminal offences are living lavish lifestyles well beyond what any legitimate income they could evidence could possibly support. It is insulting to the many hard-working people in the UK who play by the rules and go to work day in, day out to earn an honest living to support themselves and their families to see this happening. It creates a feeling of impunity in the upper echelons of criminality.

Unexplained wealth orders will require those suspected of being involved in, or associated with serious criminality to explain the origin of assets of over £100,000 that appear disproportionate to their known income. A failure to provide a response, or a satisfactory response, could lead to a presumption that the property in question is recoverable in civil proceedings.

Unexplained wealth orders will have to be made by a High Court judge on application by a relevant law enforcement officer. Even with those protections, as might be expected of a lawyer, I ask the Minister to give a little more assurance about the nature of the protections in place, given that the measure does reverse the burden of proof that normally rests on the Crown. I am sure that he will be able to provide that reassurance, and I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) that that appears to be proportionate in this case, given the severity of the situation that law enforcement officers face.

Secondly, on enhanced forfeiture powers, I have spent many mornings in magistrates courts up and down the country making applications under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. I have some familiarity with this area. The current powers under the POCA apply to cash. The police may seize it when they have reasonable grounds to suspect that it is the proceeds of crime. They may then apply to the magistrates court to forfeit that cash. A classic example is a shoebox found in a house containing some drugs and rolls of cash. However, the provisions apply to cash alone. The more sophisticated criminals do not have rolls of cash and a little bit of cannabis or cocaine in a shoebox. They have their money in bank accounts and in high-value items of personal property, which are much harder to trace and much easier to move around, domestically and internationally. Such items include precious metals and jewels—and indeed betting slips. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway for drawing those to the Government’s attention. His information appears to be being acted on. The seizure and forfeiture provisions in the Bill extend the cash seizure powers in POCA to bank accounts and high-value items. That will mean that the law and the police’s powers are keeping up with the ways in which crimes are being committed. That is a welcome move.

I now turn to part 3 and the new offence of corporate failure to prevent tax evasion. This is another manifesto commitment that the Government are delivering on today. It is already the case that a taxpayer who fraudulently evades a responsibility to pay tax commits a criminal offence. A person such as a banker, accountant or tax adviser who knowingly assists a taxpayer to fraudulently evade a responsibility to pay tax is committing a criminal offence, but the company employing that banker, accountant, tax adviser or other professional who criminally facilitates tax evasion does not commit any offence. The company is outside the reach of the law. The Bill aims to bring those companies within the reach of the law, not to duplicate the criminal liability of their employee or agent but to criminalise a failure by the company to prevent those acting on its behalf from facilitating tax evasion. It will criminalise the company for allowing an atmosphere to be created in which that tax evasion is possible.

That might seem draconian, but it is absolutely necessary. Companies will have a defence, much as they do under health and safety legislation, if they can show that they had reasonable prevention procedures in place. The new offence will be the stick that will drive up companies’ efforts to ensure that their internal procedures do the utmost to prevent their employees from facilitating tax evasion. It will drive up standards in the whole sector, and that is long overdue.

Richard Arkless: I am listening with great interest to what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he agree that there is a real case to be made for extending the provisions on corporate economic crime beyond the tax evasion issues covered by the remit of the Bill?

James Berry: That is certainly something that could be looked at and consulted on, but the Bill is achieving a manifesto commitment to do exactly what it says on the tin. That is what the Government are trying to deliver today.

Richard Arkless rose—

James Berry: I will carry on, if I may.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Berry: No.

I hope that this provision will have the same effect that health and safety legislation has had, with companies taking the lead in rooting out bad practice to avoid being liable themselves for incidents caused by their employees. Some businesses might dismiss this as red tape, but if it is red tape, it is important red tape that is focused on the aim that it is trying to achieve. It is important to ensure the integrity of our world-leading financial services sector in London, and these measures have been welcomed by many in the industry, including...
the chief executive of the British Bankers Association, even though I do not necessarily support the utterances he made earlier this week.

I have touched on just a few of the provisions in the Bill. It contains many tidying-up provisions that are extensions of existing laws and that are based on feedback given to the Government by the police and law enforcement agencies on the deficiencies in their current powers. That approach is to be warmly welcomed, because when it comes to the fast-moving world of criminality that our police are trying to prevent and detect, we in this House must be fleet of foot. I believe that the Government are achieving that today. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will welcome the aims of the Bill unreservedly, and I hope that by the time it has been through its Committee stage, all its clauses will have been accepted.

4.19 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): This speech represents two firsts: I am the first non-lawyer to speak from the Back Benches; and I think I am the first to acknowledge the role played by our former Prime Minister and by the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles), who was the anti-corruption tsar, in providing leadership on anti-corruption. They should both be acknowledged today as their work led to what we are considering. I agree with everyone who has spoken today that the Bill is extremely important. Whether from the National Crime Agency or HMRC, the estimates of the billions of pounds that are laundered through the UK or lost to public services because HMRC is unable to collect them make this an important measure. I fear, however, that the rhetoric that many have been given to this afternoon does not reflect the reality, so I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to the points that I raise.

Others have mentioned the omission of tax havens, and the failure to take action on the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, which act as key jurisdictions in support of tax evasion, tax avoidance and corruption, is a grave error. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that during the Bill’s proceedings and see whether we can introduce some amendments. The Government’s failure to mention such territories makes them complicit in facilitating the very corruption that they say they want to tackle through the Bill.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I agree with my right hon. Friend and previous speakers that we are something done about the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, that would give the Government more credibility. They have committed to report annually on tax avoidance in some of these overseas territories—for want of a better term. Does she agree that, if they are going to negotiate with other Governments to get them on board, they should do something about the overseas territories?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend’s comments.

Mark Tami: While we support the Bill, does my right hon. Friend agree that the danger is that we might drive even more business to the overseas territories and encourage even more of the problems that have already been identified?

Dame Margaret Hodge: Indeed. I would also add that the Brexit provisions might also lead to increased activity through the overseas territories and tax havens, so there are several dangers.

A number of Members have mentioned the evidence that backs up the importance of the Bill, but I want to point out two or three facts that have not yet been raised. The World Bank reviewed 213 corruption cases from a 30-year period between 1980 and 2010. Shell entities were involved in 70% of them, and UK Crown dependencies and overseas territories were second after the US on the list of those who provided shell entities. That is clear evidence of the importance of the role played by the Crown dependencies and overseas territories. Do we always have to wait for another leak to understand that? We will keep on getting them—the Mossack Fonseca leaks and the Panama papers will be just one in a stream. If we look at the information we garnered from the leaks, over 200,000 corporate entities were exposed, more than half of which were registered in the British Virgin Islands. I ask the Minister to consider that.

I also came across the African Progress Panel, which found that citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were deprived of some £1.35 billion—twice their health and education budgets combined—due to the sale of mining contracts to five anonymous BVI companies. Those assets were sold at about one sixth of their commercial value, enabling the secretive offshore companies to sell them on and secure profits of more than 500% of the original moneys they paid. Again, desperately needed resources were lost to the poorest countries in the world.

If we are really to tackle the corruption, evasion and avoidance that occur in jurisdictions over which we have ultimate control, we must have the transparency that a number of Members have asked for this afternoon.

Mr Wallace: I have listened carefully to what the right hon. Lady said. Will she not concede that since the lead-up to the London anti-corruption summit in May, the Crown dependencies and overseas territories have agreed to establish a central register of beneficial ownership and a data-sharing system with the UK enforcement agencies that will give us access to those data almost in real time, and that that goes a long way to meeting some of her concerns? I recognise that the Scottish National party would like this to be public as well as shared with our law enforcement agencies, but it still goes some way on this issue. On the other side, the unexplained wealth orders for politically exposed persons will allow us to grab the money should they put it in this country and live in the nice houses that they sometimes seem to live in.

Dame Margaret Hodge: In my view, and indeed the British Government’s view, publicising those registers of ownership is crucial. We decided to do that for ourselves, so why are we not using our powers to enforce it on the Crown dependencies and overseas territories? There are multiple reasons why we have decided to do it for ourselves, and I shall mention two of them. First, for many of the poorer countries, getting their agencies up to speed so that they can pursue people and know what questions to ask is tough, and public registers make it much easier for those people to be interrogated. Civil society should interrogate them, and the registers make it much more likely that the type of activity that I mentioned in the DRC is revealed.
Secondly, we are talking about a very reactive response; if a register can be interrogated only by the international agencies that are allowed to have access, people will have to know that there is something they are after before being able to discover whether or not there is information about beneficial ownership that is relevant to a criminal activity or to aggressive tax avoidance and so on. Such an approach presupposes a degree of intensive resources and knowledge that will not necessarily be in place. Although one of course welcomes the creation of these registers, having them made public is central to making them work.

The Minister should listen not to my words on this, but to those of the former Prime Minister, who was absolutely clear, year on year, when talking about these issues, that the openness and transparency of these registers was what mattered. In 2013, he said to the Crown dependencies and overseas territories that they had to rip aside the “cloak of secrecy” by creating a public register of beneficial ownership. In April 2014, he wrote to the overseas territories, saying that “beneficial ownership and public access to a central register is key to improving the transparency of company ownership and vital to meeting the urgent challenges of illicit finance and tax evasion.”

He also expressed his hope that overseas territories would follow suit to “consult on a public registry and look closely at what we are doing in the UK.”

On a trip to the Caribbean in September 2015, he said:

“Some of the British Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories are making progress in this direction. And others, frankly, are not moving anywhere near fast enough. I say to them all today, including those in this region”—the Caribbean—

“if we want to break the business model of stealing money and hiding it in places where it can’t be seen: transparency is the answer.”

When we established our own public register here in the UK, David Cameron said that “there are also many wider benefits to making this information available to everyone. It’s better for businesses here, who’ll be better able to identify who really owns the companies they’re trading with. It’s better for developing countries, who’ll have easy access to all this data without having to submit endless requests for each line of inquiry. And it’s better for us all to have an open system which everyone has access to, because the more eyes that look at this information the more accurate it will be.”

I simply say to the Minister that I really do agree, in this instance, with the former Prime Minister and I hope the current Government will listen carefully to his wise words.

Joanna Cherry: The right hon. Lady is, as one would expect, making a very powerful speech. Does she agree that the Government can be comforted by the thought that extending this transparency to the tax havens would be a very popular move with the public, as YouGov polling shows that more than two thirds of people think that the Government should take such action? Research published by Oxfam shows that there are high levels of support for extending this transparency across the political spectrum.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I, too, have seen that survey. Any action that the Minister takes will be warmly welcomed by the public across the whole of the United Kingdom—by people of all ages and all genders. This is a really important bit of work, and I hope that the Minister will take it seriously.

I am concerned about the action taken so far. I am concerned that in December 2015 when we had the Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council, the Government failed to persuade those territories to implement public registers. I am concerned that, in March 2015, the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands refused to meet Ministers from the Foreign Office and the Treasury. I am concerned that they failed to meet the Financial Secretary’s request that they adopt registers by November 2015. I am concerned that—as I understand it—they have ignored letters from UK Ministers. I am deeply concerned that tax is not even on the agenda for the forthcoming meeting of the Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council. I hope that the Minister can address that point. We do have the powers, and, as was mentioned in a previous intervention, we have used them before. The Government must act.

If the Minister could at least tell us that he will set a timeline, at the end of which, if matters cannot be resolved in a collective and collaborative way with the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies, the Government will use their power. That would go a long way to settling some of our concerns today. I hope that he can at least consider that as a possibility for taking the matter forward.

May I briefly comment on some of the other provisions in what is a warmly welcomed bit of legislation? On the unexplained wealth orders, it is particularly welcome that they will be applicable no matter where in the world the offence takes place. May I ask the Minister two questions? If the money comes from an overseas territory—a developing country, for example—will there be a notification to that country of the setting of an unexplained wealth order? Again, our enforcement agencies will be more capable than some others in pursuing laundered money.

Mr Wallace: I can get an exact answer to the right hon. Lady’s question. Just around that, though, we have started to sign memorandums of understanding with a number of countries—we signed one in August with Nigeria—to help them recover their assets, without barriers between here and there, and to assist them, both in their country and here, with tackling crime. Once they find their assets, we will get them back to them as soon as we can.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I am grateful to the Minister for providing that information. Will he explain why the orders do not apply to politically exposed people inside the European economic area? Will he look again at that issue, because there may occasionally be a relevant instance where that is important?

Mr Wallace: That is quite straightforward. We are unable under EU law to discriminate against different members of the EEA in relation to the UK citizen. What we do for the UK citizen we also have to do for other members of the EU.

Dame Margaret Hodge: I wish to raise two other issues. One arises from a debate held in the House on March 2012, initiated by the hon. Member for Esher
and Walton (Mr Raab), on what is known as the Magnitsky-style amendment. The argument there arose from the horrific and brutal killing of Sergei Magnitsky—a Russian lawyer who was tortured and murdered because he uncovered a huge $230 million tax fraud in Russia. Allegedly, $30 million of that found its way laundered into the UK, according to evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee.

The hon. Gentleman proposed something similar to an amendment enacted in America—he and I would support such an amendment during the proceedings on the Bill—that would have ensured that foreign individuals involved in corruption and human rights abuses had their assets frozen, be denied right of entry to this country and be publicly named and shamed. Again, although that is slightly different to other provisions in the Bill, I think that there is strong cross-party support for introducing a Magnitsky-style amendment into UK legislation.

I hope that the Minister will look favourably on such an amendment. I have looked at the details, and a particularly disturbing aspect is how many UK banks were involved in laundering the alleged $30 million into the UK, according to evidence given to the Home Affairs Committee. They include Barclays, HSBC, NatWest, Bank of Scotland, RBS, Citibank, Bank of America, Lloyds TSB and the Bank of Tokyo. I hope that, from that horrific tragedy, we can introduce an important change in our legislation.

Finally, I want to talk about the corporate failure to prevent tax evasion, which other hon. Members have spoken about. I welcome the Bill as the first attempt to place responsibility for tax evasion not just on individuals but on corporations. However, this is a very small first step towards making those who are responsible for devising, advising and facilitating evasion and avoidance accountable for their actions.

Before we go over the top on saying what a great change the Bill represents, we should realise that it will apply only where a criminal offence has been successfully prosecuted against an individual or where an individual adviser has committed an offence when working for a corporation. It does not cover negligence by the corporation. It will not make the corporation responsible for the crimes of its staff. It does not cover aggressive tax avoidance. Unlike my Front-Bench colleague, I think that that is where the important bit of action must be taken if we are to ensure that we get the resources into coffers according to people’s wealth and their profits and incomes.

The Bill simply asks that reasonable procedures are in place, which is a risk-based and proportionate exercise, so it does not represent a fail-safe procedure. As I think through some of the instances we heard about during my time chairing the Public Accounts Committee, where we felt that corporations were misbehaving, I do not think that it would cover PricewaterhouseCoopers and all the stuff that it was doing in Luxembourg, where it was clearly selling schemes in an industrial way that had no other purpose than to avoid tax. We had a discussion earlier today about Heathrow. I do not think that it would cover Heathrow, which has managed to avoid paying a heck of a lot of tax on massive billion-pound profits that it has made. I do not think that it would cover Google. I do not think that it would cover—this is really important—the fact that when we interviewed advisers about the tax advice they give to corporations and individuals, they said that they would give advice so long as there was a 50% chance that it was not challenged by HMRC. The reverse of that is that there is a 50% chance that it will be challenged by HMRC, but given the size of the task and HMRC’s limited resources, it takes a long time to catch up with such schemes and does not have the resources that some of the big accountancy firms, advisers, banks and lawyers et al. have. That will be caught not by the first welcome but small measures that are being taken.

From all the work that we did in the PAC, the only thing that I can think would be caught is probably HSBC’s actions. The non-executive director, Rona Fairhead, gave evidence to us, sought to blame the whistleblower in that instance for being a thief—I thought that that was pretty awful—and blamed the front-line staff for doing what was obviously expected of them by the organisation for which they worked. She, as a non-executive director earning £500,000 a year at HSBC, felt that she did not have any responsibility to ensure corporate governance. The measure might catch that sort of instance, but it is very limited, and as we examine the Bill, I would welcome opportunities to extend that important first step in ensuring corporate liability as well as individual liability and accountability for actions that have been taken. I warmly welcome the Bill and I hope that the Minister can take the further steps that I have suggested.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge). I would also like to put on record the fact that I must be the second non-lawyer to speak in the debate.

I support the Bill, especially its provisions on countering terrorist financing. In November last year, shortly after the horrific terrorist attacks in Paris, I wrote to the then Prime Minister, the former right hon. Member for Witney, to raise my concerns about overseas funding received by religious or educational establishments in this country that radicalise and promote extremist values—basic criminality—whether they network through individuals, mosques, schools or community groups. I argued that if an organisation is unwilling to agree to a set of tolerant principles that society considers acceptable, it is not unreasonable to prevent it from receiving dubious funding from overseas. I am not so naive as to overlook the accusation that that approach could itself be seen as intolerant, but we have accepted that there are rules to which the funders of political parties and unions must adhere, so why not the funders of other important institutions? Extremism is a symptom of criminal ideology, and we must cut off any finance that helps to spread an ideology that promotes criminality, extremism and violence.

The Bill builds on the Government’s action plan for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist finance by putting into law one of its main principles: more information sharing between the private and public sectors. It goes without saying that we cannot disrupt terrorist financing unless we know about it, and I welcome the fact that that is fully recognised in the Bill through concrete measures to deal with the problem. Measures to introduce a disclosure order regime under terrorism legislation offer new opportunities to uncover illicit financing of terrorist or extremist behaviour and the promotion of criminality. We have seen the benefits of the work...
of accredited financial investigators in proceeds of crime investigations, and it is right that those benefits should be extended to counter-terrorism investigations with the extension of powers to AFIIs in the Bill.

We need to go further with provisions that are not appropriate for inclusion in this Bill but would, in my view, strengthen its provisions. Perhaps I may be so bold as to make a suggestion. The vast majority of churches are registered as charities, which means that their finances are transparent. I would suggest that a formal register of mosques in the United Kingdom would make it far easier to investigate their financial affairs and their recruitment of imams, especially if those people come from overseas. That would help us to understand the strand of Islam that they wish to promote, and it would flush out sources of financing that promote the intolerant ideas that put us at risk of harm from criminals who use those ideas to justify their actions.

The Islam that came to this country with the communities that settled here after the second world war is not the Islam that is being exported by Daesh today. With many of our communities and mosques feeling that they are under siege from that foreign death cult, it is our duty to protect those communities and show that we stand by them in countering extremism. As a member of the Home Affairs Committee, I have seen all the evidence that I need to justify our hard-headed response to the threat of terrorism and criminal extremism. I hope that the Government will consider such a step when the appropriate vehicle arises.

As of June this year, some 165 people were in custody for terrorism-related offences, and domestic extremism and separatism, but there are still individuals and organisations based overseas that have a mission to spread insidious intolerance and violence, which requires funding that travels across borders. As terrorist groups organise and reorganise, they need access to well-funded diverse networks, and they are becoming increasingly complex and sophisticated. Technology and the proliferation of financial instruments challenge the authorities’ ability to accurately trace and counter the flow of funds, but one thing remains the same: the objectives of terrorists. They seek to divide our communities, spread fear and hate, and undermine the good work of community leaders who do everything they can, often in the face of unhelpful opposition, to make sure that their communities are safe.

By enhancing our ability to counter the financing of terrorism, we are taking another step in preventing the spread of organised crime and terrorism. The Bill offers the Government’s support to leaders and communities, makes us all safer, undermines the financial management of terror groups and co-ordinates legal measures to combat them. I therefore warmly welcome it.

4.45 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) on a rather succinct speech. There are many things that divide us in this House, but the subjects that she was talking about bring us together.

It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), formerly aformidable Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, of which I am now a member. I know that her studs have been felt by many a civil servant and many in the private sector. A lot of people are pleased that she is no longer the Chair of that Committee, but I am not one of them.

For too long, law enforcement agencies have had to fight organised crime and terrorism with one arm effectively tied behind their back. It is simply not possible to counter organised crime and terrorism as effectively as is necessary without the power to investigate properly, and to confiscate criminal property and the proceeds of crime. Like many other speakers in the debate, I broadly support in principle most of the Bill’s measures. It is right that those who have gained assets in suspicious circumstances should be asked to explain where those assets came from. Where it is found that they have been involved in crime, and that those assets are the proceeds of crime, law enforcement should be able to confiscate and seize assets beyond cash. That is the only way to ensure that justice is done and for the proceeds of crime to be returned to the system and used for the public good.

Information sharing between banks is key to the investigation of financial crimes, so I am pleased that the Bill includes measures to improve that. Perhaps the Minister will tell us whether the banks have made any response. When I have talked about the sharing of data, they have been reticent, citing reasons of competition. I hope that concern has been overcome and that the Bill will provide good law.

Following the shocking revelations earlier this year in the so-called Panama papers, I am pleased that the Government are fulfilling their commitment to be tough on the middlemen involved in tax evasion and other financial crimes. Corporations and their employees who are involved in facilitating tax evasion and other financial crimes in the UK and internationally must be held to account. I welcome the fact that investigations into terrorist financing are covered by the Bill. If we are to clamp down on violent extremism, it is vital that such groups do not have access to the resources that they need to commission their acts of evil.

I believe, however, that some elements of the Bill are vulnerable to being undermined. Although its measures would apply in the United Kingdom, it does not appear that they would extend to British overseas territories and Crown dominions. This problem must be addressed, otherwise there is a risk that the Bill and law enforcement agencies’ ability to investigate crime will be weakened. In particular, British overseas territories such as the Cayman Islands and the British Virgin Islands have lamentable policies on transparency. I know that the former Prime Minister was desperate to change the situation and pay tribute to his work in that respect. Those islands literally harbour money, as they are the registered home of some of the largest and most valuable super-yachts in the world. Anybody can walk across any harbour in Spain or Italy, or see at sea, the Russian oligarchs’ huge super-yachts that are registered to the Cayman Islands. One has to ask why a Russian oligarch finds the Cayman Islands such an attractive place to register his rather large boat.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): It is the weather.
Chris Evans: It could be the weather, although I wonder whether the reason is something a little more sinister.

These islands have not agreed a timetable for introducing public, or at least central, registers of beneficial ownership of trusts and other companies, which are often used to launder money and hide assets. If the Government indeed intend to use the Bill to tackle money laundering and corruption, to recover the proceeds of crime, and to counter terrorist finance, their aim might be undermined as, by moving money between secret trusts and offshore companies, some of the most serious and organised criminals, including those who commission acts of terrorism, could still operate.

While the need to tackle organised crime and terrorism is important from a domestic standpoint, it is also important that we play our part in tackling international corruption. A review by the World Bank found that in more than 70% of 213 serious corruption cases, secret company ownerships were relied on to facilitate the corruption. The UK, alongside our overseas territories and Crown dominions, provided the second largest number of those companies. That situation demands urgent action.

It is sometimes hard for us to understand the serious effects of corruption, as corruption is largely under control in mainland Britain and Northern Ireland and is swiftly dealt with whenever it emerges. In developing countries, however, the misuse of public funds has a devastating impact. The Africa Progress Panel found that $1.35 billion had been stolen from the citizens of the Democratic Republic of the Congo due to the sale of mining contracts for just one sixth of their commercial value. Those contracts were sold to five anonymous companies based in the British Virgin Islands. To give some perspective on the scale of that loss to the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, $1.35 billion equals twice the country’s health and education budgets combined. That devastating loss is another sad chapter in the country’s long and tragic history of corruption, murder, death and executions, with many women, girls and children having become victims of a tyrant.

It might be unwise, for constitutional reasons, for the UK Government to use the Bill to force British overseas territories and Crown dominions to introduce more transparency, but it is clear that they must take action. Earlier this year, the former Prime Minister laid out a welcome commitment to transparency and urged all British overseas territories and Crown dominions to make changes. We can all agree that that was an important step forward, but the momentum has been falling away and more action must be taken. Real people are losing out every single day as a result of international corruption, organised crime and, yes, terrorism. If the Government are serious about countering that, and meeting our duty not only to ourselves but to others around the world, they must now stop dragging their feet on this very important issue.

As I said, I welcome the principle behind the Bill, but I fear that it will not do the job that is intended. I look to the Government and the Opposition to table amendments that would improve it. The Government are not covering all the bases, especially with regard to British overseas territories and Crown dominions, and I fear that that could lead to some of the Bill’s measures being circumvented. The Government must match their words with actions and commit to putting far more pressure on British overseas territories to embrace transparency. Only once transparency has been achieved will the Bill be able to meet its aims of ensuring that UK-based and international criminals and terrorists are stripped of their resources, and that our citizens are safe, wherever they live.

4.54 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I had not been in a debate with the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) until this morning, and now we have the pleasure of two in one day.

It is very strange to stand here and talk about the Criminal Finances Bill, because I think that a lot of the things under discussion are totally alien and completely baffling to many of my constituents. Many of them will be thinking, “Why aren’t we doing this stuff already? Why has it taken so long for Governments to get around to addressing the issues?” That is particularly true of unexplained wealth orders, which, for the avoidance of doubt, I support. It is a good idea to introduce them, but I am sure that many people are wondering why that has not happened before.

Most of my constituents will only ever pay tax through pay-as-you-earn. None of the taxes under discussion, such as corporation tax and inheritance tax, apply to them, so they will not know quite how complex the UK tax code is, or that a van is needed to transport it, as is regularly mentioned in this Chamber. I am aware that repetition is allowed—in fact, it is positively encouraged—in this place.

The fact that the tax code is so complex means that it is very easy for people to find and exploit loopholes in it. I appreciate the Bill’s measures to close at least some of them, but there are some glaring omissions. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) has said—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roder Mullin) will mention this, too, because I may have read his speech—Scottish limited partnerships are still missing from the measures. We have brought up the issue and it has been widely reported by The Herald. I think that people in Scotland who have read those articles will be clear that the UK Government need to fix that and that they can do so relatively easily because of the high percentage of SLPs that are being used for financing crime.

The right hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) mentioned the Victorian principles behind some aspects of finance and tax law. That is a big problem. A lot of the laws have evolved over a number of years and there has never been a wholesale review. The approach has been not “Let’s take it all apart and start again,” but “Let’s tinker by adding a little bit and taking away a little bit.”

When some of the tax powers were devolved, Scotland was, in some ways, in a much better position, because we could start with a much cleaner slate. Our general anti-avoidance rule was said by Isobel d’Inverno, convenor of the tax law sub-committee of the Law Society of Scotland, to be “much fiercer than the UK one.” It has also been widely commented that the Scottish Government are in a position to have a much stronger law and stronger rule, and that that has been beneficial for us to administer the devolved taxes.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway has said, we are calling for a moratorium on the closure of HMRC offices. If it is a massive priority for the UK to ensure that tax loopholes are closed and that criminals do not exploit the tax system, particularly through tax evasion, it is bizarre that offices are being closed, rather than more staff being taken on and more resources being spent on ensuring that such exploitation does not happen. I would appreciate it if the UK Government would reconsider, again, the loss of those important offices and dedicated staff. That is key.

What the Government are doing and the way in which the current system is set up do not encourage people to have confidence in the economic system. It is much like the House of Commons, which is set up in a very traditional way with Standing Orders that were written hundreds of years ago. They do not encourage transparency or confidence in the system, because they allow some people to have too much power. The tax law and the tax codes have much the same problem. Some of them are far too old, and they have been tinkered with rather than changed wholesale. They encourage and allow some people who are in receipt of millions of pounds to continue to have millions of pounds without paying appropriate tax on it, whereas the people at the bottom cannot do so.

One of the problems with the system is that nobody has confidence in it. Criminals have worked out how to get around it, and they continue to do so. The people at the bottom of the pile, who are not involved in those tax affairs and who do not see the criminal proceeds, do not have confidence in the system either.

The Government have a real job of work to do if they are to ensure that Bills such as this restore confidence in our tax and regulatory systems. My hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway talked about the free market economy in America and some of the moves that that country has made. If we were to introduce similar financial regulation for banking and property ownership, not only in and around London but for those who own vast swathes of land in the Scottish highlands, we would inspire confidence among the general public.

The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) mentioned the recent YouGov poll, and they talked about public confidence in these measures and public concern about tax evasion, particularly in the Crown dependencies. Because such tax evasion has been widely reported in the news, the public are really concerned about it. Their concern is increased by the fact that the Government have not used the Bill to introduce a public beneficial ownership register, and they have not given Parliament a timetable for introducing such a register. The quicker the Government can publish such a timetable, the better for the confidence of the general public in the tax system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway has said, we are generally supportive of some of the measures in the Bill, but it does not go far enough to inspire public confidence in the measures that the Government are taking.

5.2 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Many people in the Chamber consider much of the Bill to be praiseworthy. It struck me that all the critical speeches this afternoon—spanning all parties represented by the Members who have spoken—have been about what is not in the Bill, rather than what is in it. I wondered who would put the Bill in the context of the challenge that we face, and I think the Minister did that best in his opening remarks. He said of the extent of the criminality that he discovered on becoming a Minister that “it... takes my breath away.”

The extent to which the Bill will deal with such criminality does not quite take the breath away.

I would like to comment on three areas that have been mentioned, the first of which is the permissive culture of banks. The best critique of that culture has come not from me or from anybody who is currently in the Chamber, but from the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on 24 May this year. When talking about this forthcoming Bill, he commented: “we in this country are very bad at dealing with white-collar crime, and there is growing awareness of that. If someone wishes to rob a bank, they go to the LIBOR market; they do not put on a balaclava and pick up a shotgun—that is much less profitable.”

He very succinctly drew out the problem of how the culture in banks has created a context in which it is easier to commit grand crimes in them than it is for the old-fashioned external robber to do so. He went on: “London is still the money-laundering capital of the world. For an African despot or a serious international criminal, London is the best place to put their money, because they can trust the bankers to look after it and not to steal it from them.”

He concluded: “I hope we will also impose a duty on those at the head of the institutions involved to ensure that they take positive steps to stop those working for them encouraging such activities.”—[Official Report, 24 May 2016; Vol. 611, c. 450.] I doubt whether anybody in this debate would disagree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s words in May, but I do not think that his optimism about the Bill is reflected by the reality of what we now face.

On banking, I suggest that the Minister look at two things. The right hon. Member for Barking, who is no longer in her place, gave the example of what happened in HSBC, where someone was willing to speak up but was then pilloried by senior management. One thing I would suggest to the Minister that needs doing is to strengthen protection for whistleblowing in the banking and financial sector. If we could find a mechanism to encourage people to speak up about criminality or bad practice, that in itself would be a useful measure. Many people have commented that the crisis in the banking sector in 2008 was not predominantly because of the details of regulation, but predominantly because of the culture at the top level. It was caused by group-think on the boards of banks, and by the over-confidence of individual chief executives who were immune to considering anything other than a dash for cash. The other thing I would suggest to the Minister is that it would be useful for a requirement for proper cultural analysis to be built into the banking sector.

The second area on which I want to comment has already been hinted at by my hon. Friend the Members for Dumfries and Galloway and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), but no one else has talked about it in this debate thus far. It is the topic of Scottish limited partnerships. This may be new to some hon. Members, so I hope they will allow me to give a few examples.
Scottish limited partnerships are not a new phenomenon. They are not a devolved matter; they are a matter for this House. Although they were created by Asquith in the Budget of 1907—even I do not remember it—from 2008 they began to be used much more extensively for criminal behaviour. Since 2008, the use of SLPs has risen by approximately 40% year on year.

Scottish limited partnerships have been at the heart of some of the major corruption scandals in the world. For example, they have been named in major corruption scandals involving the former Soviet Union, particularly Ukraine, where they are still openly marketed as off-the-peg zero-tax offshore companies. Elsewhere, one Scottish limited partnership is at the heart of a $1 billion digital bootlegging case in the United States. The International Monetary Fund has warned that the risk posed by SLPs to the fight against money laundering and organised crime is something to which attention needs to be given. Other Scottish limited partnerships are involved in pornographic and even in paedophilia websites. Indeed, the span of criminal activity through these financial vehicles seems to know absolutely no bounds.

Closer to home, The Herald newspaper, which has done extraordinary work in this area, revealed barely six days ago that the tax haven bank owned by Lord Ashcroft is being used, without his permission, as a base to set up dozens of firms utilising SLP loopholes linked to a known fraudster. Indeed, two Belize companies have been falsely using the address of the HQ of Lord Ashcroft’s bank for at least six years. Those secret Belizean businesses, Sherbrook Assets and Whitmore Solutions, have formed at least 70 other Scottish entities, most of them registered. I am sorry to say, to a convicted fraudster who lives in Fife in Scotland, Anzelika Young. The Bill should be ensuring that every SLP, along with any similar financial vehicle elsewhere in the UK, is exposed to rigorous due diligence at the very least.

During proceedings on the recent Finance Bill, I attempted to add a very simple new clause calling on the Government to investigate SLPs. They chose to vote that new clause down. When, subsequently, yet more criminal activity came to light, on 26 September I wrote to the Chancellor—I have a copy of the letter with me—seeking a meeting about this major international criminal activity. As of last week, when I was yet again chasing this up, the only response I have had—this is after a month, showing the Government’s lack of concern about international criminal activity—is that they are still considering how to respond to my request for a meeting. It is quite inappropriate for a Member of this House seeking a meeting about a major criminal activity to have to wait a month for any response.

Mr Wallace: I reassure the hon. Gentleman, given our meeting yesterday, that I have listened to what he said. I will meet my ministerial colleagues to discuss the problem he raised with me and see what we can do about it.

Roger Mullin: I am particularly grateful to the Minister for that clarity. Indeed, in coming to the Dispatch Box at that moment he confirmed what I was about to say in my closing line on the issue of SLPs. He has discussed this matter with those of us on the Opposition Benches who are interested in it, and his understandable and quite appropriate concern about the matters raised, I was going to suggest that the Prime Minister could appoint him the formal tutor for all Treasury Ministers, in addition to his role as Minister for Security; I am sure they would learn a great deal from him. Richard Arkless, he deals with matters. I commend that new appointment to the House. I speak in jest, but surely there is an issue here, as some of the Treasury Ministers who have been turning a blind eye for months need to learn that these are matters of great concern and importance, and deserve to be treated as such.

The third area I will briefly mention—and it will be very brief, as many Members have already commented on it—is what has been happening post Panama papers on Crown dependencies and the like. The clear view expressed in this debate is that the Bill does not yet go far enough, particularly on the much needed transparency and openness on beneficial ownership. If the Minister would be willing to think about how we might, in a collegiate way across the House, begin to address that issue and some of the others raised today, he will win himself many friends indeed.

5.14 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and listen very carefully to the important points he has had to make. I am glad he has had his meeting with the Minister and that promises have been made which I am sure he will ensure will be fulfilled.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, because one of the most important reports the Home Affairs Committee produced this year was that on the proceeds of crime. I am sorry to have missed the speech by the hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani), who is a member of the Committee, but I am sure she spoke brilliantly about the conclusions of that report. I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for mentioning it and for the points she made concerning the practicalities and the issues it revealed.

The Minister did not mention the report, but I am sure he has read it. I am sure he has taken on board some of the points the Committee made. When seeking to legislate, it is important to first see where the problems are and where gaps exist, to listen to all those with experience—when we conducted the inquiry we did not just go to the usual suspects; many members of the private sector also gave evidence—and try to come to a conclusion that will provide the basis for sound legislation.

The Minister, who is newly appointed to his position in the Home Office, will have a pretty easy ride in respect of today’s proceedings, because I understand that there will be no vote. There is general support throughout the House for the measures the Government are proposing. They are the right measures and they are sound measures. They are designed to deal with the issues of criminality and terrorism. On those two issues, he will always find a House united. However, I hope he does not take that support as carte blanche to get the proposed legislation through in its entirety. I hope Members will table amendments in Committee based on the important points they have made today. I hope the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) and for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) and others will table amendments relating to the important measures
the contribution that they make is not fully assessed. and they are part of other operations, which mean that the recovery of assets—they are involved in other areas about £1 billion a year, they say that it is not just about 2014-15. However, the amount of criminal assets recovered has been very poor—only £155 million was recovered in the Serious Fraud Office has a budget of £45 million. Conduct Authority has a budget of £500 million; and Financial agencies cannot compare with the level of criminality in there were so many of them. not possible to deal with all the complaints because as Dublin is sometimes used by money launderers as an entry point to the EU. All those great financial centres are being used in this way, which is why it is right that action is taken, and taken immediately. The Committee was shocked to find that poor supervision and enforcement in the London property investment market are making a safe haven for laundering and the proceeds of crime, a point made by the shadow Home Secretary. As we found out from the regulators themselves, it is far too easy for this to happen in a financial centre like London, which we believe—Edinburgh is, of course, respected—to be the greatest financial centre in the world. It is therefore essential to look at the markets here, how regulation operates, and try to deal with it in a constructive and positive way. The hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) is not in his place, but he raised what I thought was a very important point about the necessity for resources. The Committee found that the private sector was using suspicious activity reports as a box-ticking exercise, sending in their information because it was their duty to do so. I was heartened by what the Minister said about the Government’s wish to cut through red tape so that information is sent on as quickly as possible. Only 335 of the 1.2 million property transactions were deemed to be suspicious in 2015. The estate agents and their regulators were saying themselves that it was not possible to deal with all the complaints because there were so many of them. We—Committees of this House, Members of Parliament—have made the point over a number of years that the assets and finances available to our law enforcement agencies cannot compare with the level of criminality in existence. Let us look at the budgets of the three main organisations dealing with this issue: the National Crime Agency has a budget of £450 million; the Financial Conduct Authority has a budget of £500 million; and the Serious Fraud Office has a budget of £45 million. However, the amount of criminal assets recovered has been very poor—only £155 million was recovered in 2014-15.

In defence of those three agencies, whose assets total about £100 billion a year, they say that it is not just about the recovery of assets—they are involved in other areas and they are part of other operations, which mean that the contribution that they make is not fully assessed. However, if we just compare like for like, we will see quite a difference between what the budgets are and what is recovered.

I pay tribute to Lynne Owens, who has done a tremendous job as head of the NCA. The abolition of the National Crime Agency was one of the legacies of the previous Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister. In fact, I am on record as saying that we had something of a revolution in policing in the six years when the Prime Minister was the Home Secretary. The whole of the Home Office was shaken up and new organisations and institutions came into existence. She stayed Home Secretary longer than any other Home Secretary since the last century. We cannot expect Home Secretaries to stay for ever—as with Chairs of Home Affairs Select Committees, there is always an end to the fun of doing these jobs. The fact remains that there are aspects that have not fully settled down, and one of them is the ability to give organisations the resources they need in order to finish the job.

Lynne Owens is doing a terrific job, as is her organisation, but I am extremely worried about the computer system that exists to do the very things that the Government want to do. I assume that the Policing Minister will be winding up this debate. When he does, I hope he will have the answer to the question I posed to the Minister for Security—the question has been posed over months and years—about when the ELMER system is going to be renewed. It is all very well saying that we want more information coming in but, if we look at the figures, we know that they just do not add up. This is an old and creaking system, designed to manage only 20,000 suspicious activity reports. On the basis of the last available figures, there were 381,882 suspicious activity reports, so how is a system designed to deal with 20,000 supposed to deal with 381,882?

The Minister seemed to be saying that people are ticking boxes and sending in information and they do not need to send in that information, but I do not think that we should expect the private sector to be involved in becoming officers of the law. It is similar to what we have seen over the last five years with landlords becoming immigration officers, as have people working for airlines when they check passports and tickets. Despite what immigration Ministers have said over a number of years, we do not have 100% immigration checks on exit. The airlines check, but no immigration officer checks a passport or a ticket on departure from our airports, which is very sad. That is a different story. My issue is that we cannot get staff in the private sector to act as enforcement officers; they are not trained to do so. That is why we need a new computer system.

When we asked the then Home Secretary—the present Prime Minister—about that, she had no answer to the question of who was going to pay the bill. Would the money come from the budget of the National Crime Agency? Would it come from the Home Office budget? That, I think, is crucial to ensuring that this legislation is properly resources. Are we going to give the NCA and the Serious Fraud Office the equipment that will enable them to deal with these issues productively? I hope that the Minister will tell us when the new ELMER system will be established, because that is a fundamental issue when it comes to suspicious activity reports.

Another aspect of the Bill is the granting of powers allowing banks to close accounts. I believe that the threshold is too low, and that the Minister must look at
that, although it is really a Treasury issue. A number of my constituents have come to me—I know that this applies to other Members as well—and expressed concern after being told that their banks had closed their accounts. They are never given an explanation. Unfortunately, that has happened to too many members of the south Asian diaspora community, and, indeed, the African community. The Somali community was so concerned that representations were made to Treasury Ministers that, just because they happened to be Somali, their bank accounts had been closed. On Friday, I met someone from the Yemeni community who had been told that his bank account had been shut down in 28 days. He had been given no explanation, because banks are private organisations.

Obviously we do not want people to be told “By the way, we are closing your bank account because you are a terrorist” if inquiries are ongoing, but certain explanations need to be given. We need to be sure that the powers that we are granting are appropriate to the agencies to which we are granting them.

Charlie Elphicke: May I take up the issue of money laundering and the NCA? When I was a lawyer, one would do an ID check and then the information would be put in the bottom drawer, never to be seen again. If one were at all concerned, one would just do a “tipping off” and dump it on the authorities as a box-ticking exercise. There is no qualitative method of processing such information. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there should be such a method?

Keith Vaz: I think that, when it comes to the hon. Gentleman, it is probably a case of “once a lawyer, always a lawyer”. He is absolutely right. Training should be given to those who are involved in these activities, and in each organisation there should be a compliance officer who has received the necessary training. I do not know what kind of law the hon. Gentleman practised, but we would not expect every single lawyer to be trained to deal with issues such as SARs. We would expect a compliance officer in a big firm of solicitors to be able to do that, because there would not be the time to train everyone. However, I do not believe that that would cut the figure of 381,000 to 20,000. Faced with a third of a million SARs, even the best-trained lawyer—and I would know what kind of law the hon. Gentleman practised—would not be able to lower that figure. So as well as giving the private sector more responsibility to check, we need to ensure that the equipment is fit for purpose.

Let me commend the suggestion made to the inquiry by the outgoing Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe. I pay tribute to the excellent work that he did as commissioner. The hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) will remember that, when she was a member of the Home Affairs Committee—before she was poached by the Police Commissioner to become his Parliamentary Private Sector; we used to train them well in the Select Committee—Sir Bernard came up with a suggestion that was very important in relation to those who were involved in criminal activity. I raised this point with the shadow Home Secretary, and I am grateful to her for saying that she would consider it. I hope that the Police Commissioner will also consider it, because when it comes from someone as distinguished as the Metropolitan Police Commissioner it is worth looking at again.

Those Mr Bigs or Mrs Bigs who serve their sentence and come out of prison and still have not paid their compensation order are at an advantage. I agree with my constituency neighbour, the right hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier), that we probably should not keep them in prison indefinitely, but there needs to be some sanction for them to pay up.

One of the issues that arose was that compensation orders were given for assets that probably did not exist. They sound like fabulous figures in court—“This criminal involved in mass criminal activity has millions and millions of pounds”—but actually they do not have those kinds of assets. We need to be realistic about what we are going to recover when we issue the compensation orders. However, there needs to be a penalty. We need to ensure that something is done so these people have to pay up before they come out of jail, otherwise they will simply use a sentence as an opportunity to be detained at Her Majesty’s pleasure and come out and have access to that money.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker—or should I say very finally? [Interruption.] I did not realise we were short of time; I thought this debate was ending at 7 o’clock.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There is not a shortage of time, but when the right hon. Gentleman says “Finally” I actually believe him.

Keith Vaz: Mr Deputy Speaker, after all these years how can you believe a Member when they say, “Finally”—how can you assume they are about to finish their speech? But this is very finally, in honour of you, Mr Deputy Speaker: when the Police Commissioner replies, I want him to address the issue of the police funding formula.

We have been waiting for a long time for the new police funding formula to be decided upon. Every Member of this House has a constabulary. That includes you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and Lancashire was very vocal last year: its Chief Constable Finnigan said he was running out of money and the reserves were going to run out.

All the constabularies have been waiting for the Police Minister to announce the arrival of the police funding formula. His predecessor told the House he could not give us the formula because Sara Thornton, head of the Association of Chief Police Officers, now at the National Police Chiefs’ Council, was doing her analysis and we could not have a police funding formula until she had completed her work. I understand that that is not the case and that there is no reason why we cannot have the police funding formula.

Why do we need that to deal with the issues raised in the Bill? It is because it is not all about the City of London. This kind of activity happens all over the country and if we expect local police officers in Leicestershire, Lancashire, Kent, Sussex and throughout the country to be able to plan to deal with this issue, we need the formula. Therefore, I hope that, as well as telling us about ELMER, the Minister will give us the co-ordinates and the new date for the announcement of the police funding formula.

5.33 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): This is the first time that I have spoken from the Dispatch Box and I am pleased to find it accommodates even people of Rupa size.
I am pleased to be responding for the Opposition on the Criminal Finances Bill, which touches on issues that have been catapulted into the public eye with both the Panama papers scandal and the anti-corruption summit held here in May under the previous Prime Minister—how long ago that all seems now.

We have had a good debate today, which has strayed into the murky underworld of illicit finance, terrorism and international aid as well as home affairs, and we have had contributions from my right hon. Friend the Members for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), the right hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) and the hon. Members for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) and for Dunfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) among others.

This Bill seeks to tackle money laundering and corruption, to recover the proceeds of crime and to counteract terrorist financing, all measures Labour supports. This seems like good news in a year in which that has been in short supply on many fronts, but we must temper our reasons to be cheerful by identifying certain omissions and sounding some notes of caution.

First, the green ticks. We welcome the eye-catching unexplained wealth orders, which would force individuals with assets way above their means to account for those possessions, which can now include jewellery and art work as well as property. The new seizure and forfeiture powers will mean that such assets can be frozen and possession of them can be taken. As a London MP, I am all too aware of genuine Londoners who want to get a foot on the property ladder, but the transactions involving the ill-gotten gains of gangsters are messing things up for these people and creating an over-heated property market.

We also commend the fact that the investigatory powers are being extended to politically exposed persons. A thumbs up, too, for the new offence of failure to prevent the facilitation of tax evasion being applied to corporations and regulatory bodies. We also applaud the improved data sharing between the private and public sectors, and the Government’s extension of disclosure orders to money laundering investigations, bringing them into line with corruption and fraud investigations. Also to be commended are the strengthened suspicious activity reports. The period of investigation used to be 31 days. I think that there will now be six extension periods, adding up to 186 extra days. We live in an age when terrorism is probably the biggest threat of our time, so we also welcome the extension of powers to include terrorists’ property and finances.

So, what’s not to like? We acknowledge the steps being taken to tighten the net on corrupt practice, and we shall not seek to divide the House this evening, but more could be done to end the status of the UK as a magnet for dirty money. There should be no safe havens, particularly in our own back yard, where the proceeds of international corruption often turn up. Taken as a package along with its overseas territories and Crown dependencies, the UK constitutes the most secretive tax jurisdiction in the world. That is not a record to be proud of. Good work has been done in the reports produced by the Public Accounts Committee and the Home Affairs Committee, when they were chaired by my right hon. Friends the Members for Barking and for Leicester East, but not all their suggestions have been taken up. Many Members on both sides of the House have flagged up the fact that action must be taken on our overseas territories and Crown dependencies, and we argue that they need public registers of beneficial ownership. The British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands are among the worst offenders, and we administer them. We assert that this is the most gaping hole of all.

A trick has been missed. Applying transparency to those opaque corporate structures is a key part of the solution, but the Bill does not go there. We know that 75% of the corruption cases investigated by the Met police’s proceeds of crime unit involve companies in secrecy jurisdictions, and that 78% of the companies involved are registered in the UK’s overseas territories or Crown dependencies. We need full transparency, but the Bill does not go far enough. A measure on the failure to prevent economic crime was trumpeted in May 2016, but it is missing from the Bill. Without some degree of transparency in company ownership, we cannot be completely aware of the scale of the problem or the damage that is being done. Kenya, Nigeria and Afghanistan have all conceded this point.

It has been pointed out that the people interpreting the rules need resources, and the weaponry that we use for crime-fighting could do with an update. The National Crime Agency will have more work to do, so the Bill will now have cost implications in that regard. The agency is the successor to several bodies that have been merged. Notwithstanding the one-off cash injection that it received in the spending review, it needs consistency in its funding rather than just receiving one-off blockbuster sums. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East eloquently made the point that there were serious question marks over the IT system designed to support the suspicious activity reports regime. It was originally designed to deal with some 20,000 cases, but, as he said, it is currently processing 381,882 of them. It is creaking at the seams. A new system was promised—I think its name is ELMER—and I again ask the Minister to tell us when we can expect it.

Keith Vaz: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Dr Huq: Will it come off my time?

Hon. Members: No.

Dr Huq: Okay. Go ahead.

Keith Vaz: I can assure my hon. Friend that I would never want to reduce her time. I congratulate her on making an excellent maiden Front-Bench speech.

The delay in ELMER, and in the new system that the Government will want to put in place as technology moves on, will lead to more criminal activity. The quicker this is done, the better.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I reassure the hon. Lady that she is quite safe in giving way during a winding-up speech. She has plenty of time. Indeed, she has until 10 minutes to 7, but she will know that the House would prefer that she does not take quite that long.
Dr Huq: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I will resist the temptation to sing, rap or recite poetry and will finish well before 10 minutes to 7.

My right hon. Friend makes a good point. We cannot fight modern cyber-wars with catapults. Technology changes and we need to upgrade this wholly inadequate system. We were told that that was happening; we want to know when.

New powers for the Serious Fraud Office are all well and good, but it needs officers with the right training. Since it was set up in 2009, it seems as though the public purse has been used to train officers in financial crime, yet we are simultaneously powerless to prevent them from falling prey to private sector poaching, so something needs to be done. There was to be a working group on the recruitment and retention of investigators—what became of that? Are some of those deficiencies to be plugged at a later stage?

At the moment, 27 separate bodies are responsible for asset recovery—people who investigate SARs—and they are often in the private sector and sometimes funded by the groups they regulate, so there is a mismatch. It would not be a bad idea to have an overall SAR tsar or tsarisra to get some coherence. What progress is being made on the anti-corruption strategy due by the end of the year? I understand that a joint ministerial council will meet at the Foreign Office next week. Will tax issues be on the agenda? If the Minister does not know, will he have a word with his friends in the Foreign Office to find out? If it is not on the agenda, can I politely suggest that it be added urgently?

What are the Government doing to ensure transparency in our overseas territories and Crown dependencies? What is the plan? My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking suggested that the Government could at least set a timetable to allow them time to adjust. In the meantime, will the Government give them every support to transition their business? They have propped up this business model for a long time and they need to move away from facilitating corruption. Without action in our tax havens, the small bits of good news in the Bill will be overshadowed by the Government’s failure to act. The Government should be able to persuade their own territories to follow their lead. Members on both sides of the House paid tribute to the former Prime Minister and his ambitions in this area.

We need to get away from the idea that not paying tax, whether by avoidance or evasion, is a victimless crime. Countries in the developing world lose three times as much to tax havens through illicit funds and re-laundering than they gain in aid. It adds up to a trillion pounds a year and we are pumping aid into these places at the same time—it makes no sense. Given our straitened circumstances, we should be justifying every pound spent, but HMRC estimates the tax gap to be £36 billion, including £5.2 billion owed to our Exchequer from tax evasion. My right hon. Friend the Member for Barking quoted the same figures, but other interest groups say that they are conservative estimates. By definition, secret transactions and hidden money mean that we do not really know the true extent. For that £5.2 billion, we could get 42,000 full-time doctors or 54,054 nurses a year. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East pointed out, we have a poor record of recovering costs, and these things do not pay for themselves.

The practices that this Bill seeks to tackle expose the dark side of globalisation, its links to terrorism, and the way global financial cross-border crime, terrorism and all these things can be done nowadays at the click of a mouse, meaning that illicit funds can fuel a golden age of money laundering. That is entirely possible and we do not want it to happen. We do not want illicit funds to finance terrorist operations, aided and abetted by financial secrecy jurisdictions of our own.

Governments can hold all the summits they like and people can orate good intentions, but warm words need to be matched with action. This Bill is a case of “could do better” on the Government’s report card, and I urge them to work together with us. In Committee, we will be pressing the Government on some of the issues outlined today—and more. When the opportunity for reform presents itself, the Government will surely not want to go down as having bottled it. We will not oppose this Bill on Second Reading, and we look forward to contributing constructively to its passage through Parliament.

5.46 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I thank right hon. and hon. Members for this informed and valuable debate. We have heard strong and important contributions, and there has been support from both sides of the House for the principles behind the Bill. We will have interesting and strong discussions in Committee.

As my hon. Friend the Minister for Security emphasised at the start of the debate, there can be no doubt about the seriousness of the threats of terrorism and organised crime, or about the scale of the challenge that we face in combating them. As of July last year, about 5,800 organised crime groups were operating in the UK. Fraud due to organised crime is thought to cost this country about £9 billion, and the social and economic costs of illegal drug supplies are estimated to be some £10.7 billion a year. As has been said, these are not faceless, victimless crimes; they have an impact on people we know and those who live in our constituencies.

As we have heard, the UK is a fantastic place to do business, and the Government want to maintain that. We want to send out a clear message across the country that we are open for business, but if we are to maintain our position, we must ensure that this is one of the cleanest and safest places to invest. We need to send a message to those who would seek to corrupt legitimate trade.

I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, and I particularly welcome the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) to her Front-Bench role. I also welcome the hon. Members for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) and for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) to their roles. I was pleased to hear that the Minister for Security has had the opportunity to discuss the Bill with the official Opposition and Scottish National party Members prior to the debate—and, indeed, some of the paperwork was shared some two months ago—and I know that we will continue that conversation during the passage of the Bill.

It is clear that Members on both sides of the House want to contribute to make sure that we end up with a robust, strong system of which this country will be proud. Almost without exception, hon. Members who
have spoken have understood the importance of these powers and been supportive of the Bill. Of course, it is right that on such issues as money laundering and terrorist finance, the House should present a united front, as it is doing on the principle behind the Bill. I welcome the fact that in our consultation on the Bill, a diverse group of stakeholders—ranging from the major banks, which have been mentioned today, to law enforcement investigators, prosecutors and civil society groups—have given an overwhelmingly positive response to its provisions.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con):
I apologise that I was not able to contribute to the debate itself. I am afraid that I am a veteran of the consideration of the Bill that became the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Although I accept that there is a great deal of unity regarding some of this Bill’s provisions, the real issue is how enforceable those provisions are. It is important that the Bill is scrutinised very carefully in Committee because there is a danger that although we will put on to the statute book a lot of new laws, some of which might be regarded as rather draconian, they will not be properly enforced by the police, or will be ruled out by the judiciary when matters come to court. That is the one caveat I would set out, although it is right to say that these powers are important, especially the new ones in relation to counter-terrorism, which were not envisaged at the time of the 2002 Act.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, particularly by outlining the importance of the Bill’s Committee stage to ensure that Members have a chance to have an input into the debate, as indeed they have had this afternoon. He should have great faith in my hon. Friend the Minister for Security, who is determined to work with colleagues to ensure that the Bill is robust. The Bill gives a clear message to those who want to try to usurp our system that that will not continue—we will not allow it. Although we are a country that is open for business, we are also a country that believes in fairness and that will ensure that fairness prevails.

A couple of core issues have been raised by a number of Members, particularly about the overseas territories. We heard speeches from the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), and the former Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). We have agreed that UK law enforcement and tax authorities will have, in real time, unrestricted and secure access to things such as the beneficial ownership initiative, and information about corporate and legal entities incorporated in the overseas territories and the Crown dependencies.

The right hon. Lady outlined the excellent work of David Cameron and the strong message that he gave when he was Prime Minister. This is something that the current Prime Minister is determined to continue. We will ensure that there is an end to people usurping the law. It is important that we work closely with our colleagues around the world to ensure that we have a strong and robust system. We have taken a lead on this. Those territories have agreed that they must commit to new global standards in tax transparency so that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs can investigate any untoward activity. As a result, later this year, HMRC will have new data on billions of pounds of accounts held in the overseas territories by UK taxpayers. This is a big step forward. I know that we as a Government are determined to ensure that we stamp out that kind of behaviour.

Funding was mentioned by a number of Members, including the right hon. Member for Leicester East. The NCA’s funding has increased from £448 million to nearly £478 million over the past year and police budgets have been protected. Funding for HMRC has also increased—up to £3.6 billion, with the £241 million input that was mentioned earlier.

I can be clear that we are determined to ensure that the police and the NCA have the resources that they need to be able to look at all this in the round, including IT issues. The right hon. Gentleman suggested that I use the debate to discuss the police funding formula, but he will have to excuse me for resisting that temptation for now. Over the past few weeks, I have written to all chief constables and police and crime commissioners to ask them to come to talk to me as we seek to deliver our election manifesto commitment of a fair funding formula for police, which we will do.

In response to comments about the overseas territories and Crown dependencies, I am pleased to announce that the British Virgin Islands and the Turks and Caicos Islands have just—conveniently, as I am here at the Dispatch Box this afternoon—committed themselves to the initiative on beneficial ownership, which many hon. Members have spoken about today. All the overseas territories have now agreed to have central registries, which will be accessible to law enforcement authorities. We will continue to push for all countries to introduce public registers. This is good news, and we will continue to work on it.

Richard Arkless: Clearly, I am delighted to hear the good news that the Minister has just given. Can he confirm whether his announcement confirms that those registers will be published?

Brandon Lewis: As I said just before the hon. Gentleman intervened, we will continue to push for all countries to introduce public registers. This is a step in the right direction. I welcome it, and we acknowledge that we want to continue to work on this. Another issue raised by his good self, as well as the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) and others, was about Scottish limited partnerships. I hope that they will take into account the fact that my hon. Friend the Minister for Security intervened to say that we want to work on that with colleagues across Parliament. We have very much taken those points on board.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) and my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) and for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) spoke passionately and made incisive contributions. In particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden outlined the Bill’s importance given the part that it will play in ensuring that we fight the funding of extremism. We have discussed the Bill’s vital importance in protecting the UK’s position as a global financial centre and in ensuring that criminals cannot benefit from the proceeds of their crimes. I expect and hope that right hon. and hon. Members will want to give in-depth scrutiny to the Bill,
as they have suggested this afternoon, as we move on to clause-by-clause examination in Committee, and I look forward to a lively debate on its provisions.

I am proud that, by comparison to most European countries, we are positioned high in the league table for having a strong and independent judiciary, as well as a determined law enforcement environment. If we are to maintain our record and position, we always need to stay one step ahead of those who seek to undermine our attempts, especially in such a fast-moving global environment. That is why the Bill is so important, why it is reassuring that it has received principled, cross-party support in the House, as that sends a clear message, and why we must ensure that law enforcement agencies have the powers they need to combat the ability of criminals to launder the proceeds of their crimes, as well as to tackle terrorism financing and to bring more offenders to justice. I hope that the House will agree that that is in the public interest and that the Bill should be passed at the earliest opportunity with clear, continued cross-party support. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

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

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Criminal Finances Bill:

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 24 November 2016.

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

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading
(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

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

Other proceedings
(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments or on any further messages from the Lords) may be programmed.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

CRIMINAL FINANCES BILL (MONEY)
Queen's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Criminal Finances Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—
   (a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown or a government department; and
   (b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—(Mel Stride.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Contracts for Difference (Allocation) (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 6 September, be approved.—(Mel Stride.)

Question agreed to.

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

BANKS AND BANKING

That the draft Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Ring-fenced Bodies, Core Activities, Excluded Activities and Prohibitions) (Amendment) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 21 July, be approved.—(Mel Stride.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION


5.58 pm

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I am delighted to have this opportunity to present this petition to the House. It calls for fair transitional arrangements for 1950s-born women who are affected by changes—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Mr Boswell is speaking and other people should not be making a noise in the Chamber while he is doing so. If Members wish to leave, they should do so swiftly and quietly.

Philip Boswell: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Women born in the 1950s who are affected by changes to the state pension age are surely bearing an unfair burden. When the Pensions Act 2011 was debated, Ministers promised transitional arrangements to ease the burden, but those arrangements have not materialised, leaving women in my constituency—Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill—and many others facing hardship. I thank all those who have signed the petition and those in similar terms presented by other hon. Members. I also thank the Journal Office for its work in this respect.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pensions Act and the 2011 Pensions Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden, but those arrangements have not materialised, leaving women in my constituency—Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill—and many others facing hardship. I thank all those who have signed the petition and those in similar terms presented by other hon. Members. I also thank the Journal Office for its work in this respect.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pensions Act and the 2011 Pensions Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed upon them with little or no personal notice; further that
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Philip Boswell]

implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Veterans Care Sector: Government Role]

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

6.1 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting me this debate.

I know that this is a persistent cause of mine, and sometimes I feel that I should apologise to the Minister for bringing him to the House to discuss his portfolio. I want to say from the outset how impressed I and many others in this sector are by his personal commitment to this agenda, and my comments are in no way directed at him or any of his staff who work hard to try to tackle the challenge of veterans care within the envelope that he has been given by the Secretary of State for Defence and the Prime Minister.

It is not easy. The political world is chaotic at present and priorities are hard to define, but the truth is that in this sector the challenge of closing the gap between what we say so promisingly at the Dispatch Box and how it feels to the men and women who serve increases in severity the longer we leave it. The landscape is clear, with ever increasing demand—an ongoing cost, as it were—resulting from the recent campaigns that this country has undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan, set against a declining interest in this agenda, both from the wonderful people of this country who have carried the torch valiantly in recent years, but who are experiencing battle fatigue now that operations have faded from view and, I regret to say, from Government too.

Let me expand my argument. In January last year, I met the previous Prime Minister and presented a report that for the first time had almost universal support across the veterans care sector. It examined a sustainable veterans care model so that the United Kingdom could do its duty by those who serve. I also presented the report to the Secretary of State for Defence and others.

The paper was not my solution but that of many people involved in the arena: serving, retired, and third sector. It was our voice, and I was proud of it. It was greeted with warm words and encouraging lines about duty and responsibility, with a promise of a response, but regrettably, after a while, nothing materialised at all.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, and on all he does in this field. Having looked at the paper, I recommend its proposal on having a single point of contact. May I invite him to read another paper on the armed forces community health and wellbeing team for Dorset by Andy Gritt, and see how it fits with his model?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely; I should be delighted to have a look at that.

In the current political landscape, I fear that the can of veterans care has received another good punt down the road in the wake of Brexit. I strongly welcome and support the new Prime Minister, who is supremely equipped to tackle a job which, from my position, looks almost impossible—that of managing my party and granulating the United Kingdom’s exit from the European Union.
I could not wish her more strength to her arm in these challenges, and I will support her to a fault, as she well knows. I believe that we achieve nothing on our own in politics, and the strength to tackle the challenges ahead is in the team on the Conservative Benches.

However, I must confess myself to be disappointed at first sight on this single issue. In July I challenged the Prime Minister in the leadership campaign, in front of my entire party, about her commitment to this agenda and her willingness to look at a new Government Department—or something similar—to finally match our words with our deeds when it comes to the 2.6 million veterans in this country. Her response was that she was not keen to restructure Government and create any new Departments beyond a Department for Exiting the European Union, which I entirely understood. The House can imagine my concerns over the summer about where veterans care ranked on her agenda, as she subsequently re-ordered Government to face the challenges ahead which, as I mention frequently, I entirely support, but she chose not to include this cause too.

I was further concerned that the veterans care agenda was being diluted when the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), had his veterans care duties spread even more thinly with the addition of the reserves brief to his work—an increasingly enormous challenge as the military reconfigures its relationship with the reserves heading into 2020. For me this was a clear mistake in direction to that which we were pursuing, which did not go unnoticed by those who strive to deliver this country’s duty to those who serve.

That is the current position—ever-increasing demand, a general and understandable decline in interest in this agenda now that the wounds of war are not visible on those flying back from Iraq or Afghanistan every week, and a Government challenged by unprecedented political demands.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this incredibly important debate. I know that he shares my concerns about the mental health of veterans. Does he also share my specific concern about the availability of specialist mental health services for our veterans, which we know are particularly patchy in some parts of the country, exacerbating many of the challenges that we know our veterans face?

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely—I completely agree. On mental health, we have moved so far away from getting involved, getting our hands dirty and sorting this out that we are now in danger of being in a place where the perception is that everybody who leaves the armed forces has some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, and that is wildly inaccurate. We need to provide these services for those who need them, professionalise the standard, and take far more of an interest than we have done.

Given his current operating envelope, the Minister has achieved some significant things. Let us take, for example, his work in the healthcare arena for service personnel and veterans with complex care needs. The scheme he announced in July, assuming that the pilot is successful, could fundamentally change the way in which care for our most seriously injured is commissioned, successfully, could fundamentally change the way in which we know are particularly patchy in some parts of the country, exacerbating many of the challenges that we know our veterans face?
about what we have put into the sector. These
announcements are clearly to be welcomed, although I
cannot help but feel that they play somewhat to a home
crowd. The evidence is how what we do affects and
matters to those whom we are trying to help. I have said
for a long time that until we fundamentally change this
conversation from talking about what we are endlessly
pouring into this sector to how it actually feels to be a
veteran in the United Kingdom in 2016, we will never
truly understand the scale of the work to be done.

I would say to the Secretary of State for Defence and
to the Prime Minister that the evidence is there if we
were only to look. For example, a study done by SSAFA
just before the summer recess indicated that 88% of
veterans feel that the UK Government do not support
them well enough, while 84% believed that the much
heralded armed forces covenant was not being implemented
at all. Almost half the people in the armed forces
surveyed in the study—the very people we are trying to
help—had not even heard of the armed forces covenant.
The gap between how we think this is being implemented
as a policy and how it is really being implemented is so
great that I hesitate to air it in public. It is a lottery of
choice as to where local authorities or others choose to
implement it, and that currently dictates whether the
military covenant is a reality for our servicemen and
women. It has become a catch-all phrase in this place
and No. 10 that is becoming—I hesitate to say it—
increasingly meaningless to the service community, and
that will continue unless we stop this trend. I say this as
someone who last week privately met the previous
Prime Minister—a good man who genuinely “got” the
military in this country—and could tell that he has genuine
pride in his achievements with this policy. However, the
gap between the top and the reality on the ground is

I reference one study for evidence. In truth, there are
many, for in this country we have been blessed for some
time by a public and a third sector that has done
wonders for our armed forces veterans over the years.
Of the thousands who work in the sector—who do so
for little reward but in the same vein as that duty of
which I spoke earlier—I want to mention one couple
who have left the sector in recent months, leaving their
indelible mark, and the conversations around veterans
care in the United Kingdom forever changed. Bryn
Parry and his wife Emma set up Help for Heroes in
2007 as a result of the catastrophic consequences of a
criminal dereliction of veterans care by the United
Kingdom Government in the aftermath of the early
days of Iraq and Afghanistan. The third sector presents
its challenges as much as any other sector. It is a
congested market, competing for the same funding,
with people trying their best to do what they think is
right for our armed forces veterans. We will hear good
and bad of every organisation, but the truth is that
Help for Heroes has completely and fundamentally
changed the way in which veterans care happens in
this country today.

Like any success story, Help for Heroes has its detractors,
and I am not naive about this, but I will never countenance
them, I am afraid. I am from that generation who had
nowhere else to go in 2005 for veterans care. Help for
Heroes grew faster than any similar organisation in
history, but did the thing that so many, I regret to say,
neglect—retained its focus on those whom this is all
about, the guys and the girls. Bryn and Emma, have
now passed their torch to their successors, but their
light will never go out. From a generation of soldiers
who felt that no one really cared once the battle finished,
I want to say thank you from the bottom of our hearts
for everything you did. They committed their lives to
this pursuit, delivered extraordinary change and services,
and I shiver to think where we would be without them.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): Yesterday,
volunteers from Help a Squaddie Find a Home in
Rugeley visited Parliament. Will my hon. Friend join
me in congratulating them on their hard work, and does
he agree that the responsibility to support veterans to
integrate back into civilian life and to ensure that they
do not find themselves homeless is critical?

Johnny Mercer: I do, and I commend the work of
some of the brilliant charities that we have in this
country; as I have said, I shiver to think where we would
be without them. I think that it is a fundamental duty of
Government to ensure that that care is available. We
have a duty to these people. I do not think that we
should deliver it, but we need to ensure that they are
looked after. What is happening is not good enough.
The Americans realised that after Vietnam. We need to
catch up with the programme and make sure that care is
delivered.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): My hon. Friend is
making an incredibly powerful speech. I am very proud
to represent the garrison town of Colchester, and I
know too well the fantastic charities that work in this
sector. As we withdraw from theatres of operation, we
will inevitably have a peace dividend. Does he agree that
this is the time that we should invest money to support
our veterans?

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for his
intervention and absolutely support what he says. We
are reaching a point where demand is going up and the
mindset of war is declining, and the moneys are in
decline as well. If we do not get this right now, it will be
far too late to do so in 2020.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): My hon. Friend
is making a very passionate case, as always. Go Commando,
a charity in Taunton Deane, does great work to support
not only veterans, but their families, which is so important.
Initiatives such as children’s centres, holiday vouchers,
days out and the provision of emotional and practical
help could be very good models for the Government to
incorporate into all the things that my hon. Friend is
suggesting.

Johnny Mercer: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend
for her intervention. We are not asking for the moon on
a stick; there are some brilliant practices out there—not
only in this country, but internationally—that we could
learn from quickly. The services are there, but the
Government have a job to do to bring everything together.
The third sector remains deeply challenging, and that
is the reason for this debate. There are almost 2,500 military
charities and funds in the UK today. Okay, many are
regimental or sub-unit funds that are not in day-to-day

[Johnny Mercer]
Johnny Mercer: I agree. Some sort of education before people leave would be helpful, and I understand that some work has been done. I agree that any sort of direction through this pathway is strongly to be welcomed.

Why do we have to do this? I ask you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to put yourself in the shoes of the average user—a corporal who is two or three years out. He gave the best years of his life to the service of this country, willingly. Now, in a civilian job, he starts to find his past a challenge to deal with. We have all seen someone like him in our constituencies, up and down this land. He does not want sympathy; when the bell came, he was proud to serve this nation of ours. He just wants to know where to go. He does not want to have to re-tell his story all the time. His wife wants to know that the course he is doing is safe, that he will be looked after and that his treatment has a fair chance of working. She wants to know that someone will be managing his case, taking an interest and encouraging him through the process. Crucially, she wants to know that he will get that help in a timely manner before his condition deteriorates and becomes so much harder and so much more costly to treat.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing such an important debate. Does he agree that we should use the armed forces covenant as an opportunity, and that it should be more than just talk? In places such as Staffordshire, with the relocation of regiments from Germany to Stafford, that would allow us to think about how we can help veterans over the next 10, 20 or 30 years—both now and when they retire—so that they can build families and homes without having to worry about some of the issues that he is raising.

Johnny Mercer: My view on the armed forces covenant is that it is a great policy and, if implemented, it could work. The trouble is that, as I alluded to earlier, it is a complete lottery. I have seen it done well and I have seen it done appallingly, and there is no accountability at all. I hate to talk about it becoming meaningless but, ultimately, unless it means something, it is just another phrase. It can be a bit of a “get out of jail free” card for those who talk about the matter from the Dispatch Box, and that is what I want to change.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on the veterans sector and for making a brilliant speech. Does he accept that the military covenant has made a huge difference to veterans’ lives since its inception and since it was enshrined in law? I agree that there has to be a better way of co-ordinating charities, and perhaps a centralised access point and standards across the board, but I would not dismiss what the military covenant has achieved thus far, even though there is always work to do.

Johnny Mercer: I agree with my hon. Friend, but I refer him to the evidence that I presented earlier: 85%—quite a significant proportion—of veterans do not believe that that is the case at the moment.

In looking at all this, I really struggle to put my finger on why any of it is so desperately hard for the Government to achieve. Nobody else is going to do it. The third
sector cannot compel faux charities to cease. It cannot compel others to agree to a single point of contact or a common needs assessment. The issue needs leadership. It needs a small but strong Department with a Cabinet Minister whose single duty and career stands and falls on veterans care. It needs the Government to make the shift from talking a very good game on this agenda to actually delivering it. It needs a game-changing event such as Help for Heroes provided in 2007. It is in the Prime Minister’s gift to do this, and I again plead with her to listen to this evening. There are always reasons not to do this, and I have heard them all, but they do not wash. Every other ally we fight alongside has tried different ways but has settled on creating a Department for veterans affairs, and we should do the same.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): I rise simply to say that we must not give the impression that Help for Heroes suddenly burst on to the scene and that no one else has helped veterans. The Soldiers Charity, the Army Benevolent Fund, the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund—all those charities have helped for a very long time, and they will continue to support our soldiers. We must not give such an impression about the people who have helped my soldiers from 35 years ago—they are still suffering—unlike Help for Heroes, which at least to help my soldiers from 35 years ago until the situation changes because they deserve it. Too many lost their minds in the view and their name was added to the wall at the...
My hon. Friend and I agree on many things, but I fear there is one on which we do not. I once again note his request for a separate Department for veterans. I can only repeat what I said in the debate in March this year, that on balance I do not believe that to be the best approach; if it meant I ended up in the Cabinet he might be able to persuade me to change my mind, but I fear it would not be me in the Cabinet. The needs of veterans straddle Whitehall boundaries and national borders because first and foremost our veterans are civilians. As I said previously, although we agree on the end, we do not necessarily agree on the means.

I fear a veterans Ministry would duplicate work that already exists through the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Communities and Local Government and many organisations and Government agencies. I believe that the work of Defence Business Services Veterans UK provides a valuable service bringing together pensions, compensation and welfare support.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is the veterans Minister. As the veterans Minister—

Mark Lancaster: To a degree, this goes back to the principle of the armed forces covenant, which is really an agreement between the nation as a whole and our veterans. I would hate to think that there be such a Department that would demote some of the very good civil servants in the Department of Health, the Department for Work and Pensions and elsewhere who are currently thoroughly committed to the issue of veterans, as if there were to be a separate Department for veterans they might well say, “That is nothing to do with me—give that to them”?

Mark Lancaster: I am certainly the only Minister with the word “veterans” in his title and I am certainly prepared to say that I take the lead on veterans matters. I would argue, however, that all Ministers in government should have our veterans on their mind and do what they can to support them. So, yes I am happy to take the lead, yes I am happy to have the title in my portfolio, and yes I am happy to try to ensure that all my ministerial colleagues also show the same interest. However, I would not want to be Minister with sole responsibility for veterans, for the reasons I gave when I answered my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray).

I recognise that the Ministry of Defence has a responsibility to ensure that the transition from service to civilian life is as smooth as possible, allowing service personnel to draw upon the vast array of transferable skills they have obtained in service, but I am not for one second saying that there is not more that could and should be done. I believe firmly that effective transition to civilian life is a major factor in ensuring effective care. I must emphasise that most service leavers transition well to civilian life through our robust process. We are looking at different ways to ensure that the veteran community is seen as a through-career management process. We are looking at different ways to ensure that those leavers not only have the possibility of a fulfilling career but are aware that one day they will

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. He is.

Bob Stewart: Forgive me—the Minister is the focus. I am getting seriously carried away—it is the fault of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Mark Lancaster: We have a perfect example of why it is so important that the responsibility for veterans runs across the piece in government. As was so rightly pointed out, it is not in my power, as veterans Minister, to force the chief statistician to include this in his survey. If my hon. Friend is right, the Cabinet Office has the right to do that.

Transition is seen as a through-career management process. We are looking at different ways to ensure that from the point that people join the armed forces, they can see that they not only have the possibility of a fulfilling career but are aware that one day they will
[Mark Lancaster]

become a civilian and need to prepare for that. Career transition should start on day one of service and we must communicate this message on the very first day an individual joins. However, where there are veterans who have difficulties in transition, the Government, local authorities and the charitable sector must step in to ensure that they are afforded appropriate support. Alongside the Government, some 2,500 service charities also play a role. Cobseo, the Confederation of Service Charities, of which many charities are a member, has also created various cluster groups to discuss important issues, such as mental health and housing, where they encourage collective working and provide a forum to raise issues and ideas to implement solutions.

To reiterate some of the points made during the debate in March on the role of charities in the veterans care sector, we value our partnership with the charitable and community sectors. They provide and address wider welfare requirements, particularly for the more vulnerable individuals in the armed forces community. Only last week at the MOD, I chaired the ministerial service charities partnership board, a meeting attended by relevant Government officials and Cobseo charities such as SSAFA, Help for Heroes and the Royal British Legion. In recognition of some of the concerns my hon. Friend raises, I reset its role with a focus on co-operation and a strategic approach to discussions, where actions are taken on current and important issues arising in the veterans sector, with a view to ensuring that the MOD, charities and other Government Departments can be held to account. I believe that accountability is important. Frankly, as the Minister with responsibility for veterans, I walk a tightrope when it comes to dealing with charities. Ultimately, I have no power to direct a charity to do anything. Charities are not responsible to Government—they are responsible to their trustees—but I believe that the Government have a role in providing leadership to try to unite the various sectors in supporting veterans. This is a role that I try to fulfil.

On the point about Help for Heroes, it was a charity that started up in 2007. The armed forces had recently re-engaged in Afghanistan and stayed for a further seven years. The support, welfare and treatment initially provided by Help for Heroes bore fruit from the horrendous injuries that our brave service personnel suffered in that conflict. Throughout those seven years and beyond, along with improvements to equipment, we have made great strides in ensuring that the best medical support is available from the MOD, charities and the NHS. I would like to take the opportunity to pay tribute to both Bryn and Emma Parry, whom I have got to know very well over the last couple of years, and thank them for all their service in leadership of this charity. I wish them well for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I had a meeting with a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister, which is why I could not attend this Adjournment debate any sooner.

In Northern Ireland, about 100 veterans have tried to commit suicide over the last year and a half, mainly those who served in Afghanistan. Those veterans are not with any charity or regimental association—they are under the radar. What can be done to reach those people that nobody knows about, but who have been affected very greatly by what they saw during their service in Afghanistan?

Mark Lancaster: I intend to visit Northern Ireland shortly. For obvious reasons, I appreciate that there is a unique set of circumstances over there, and I am determined to do my bit to address them. Of course, communication is the key. I shall explain in a few moments how I believe we can help, but the key is making sure that support services are available and communicated. All too often, help is out there, but it is not clear how our veterans access it. I intend to say a few words about that if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me.

I informed the House earlier this year of a plan to improve the care received by the most seriously injured and highly dependent service personnel and veterans. Currently, this support is funded and delivered by a number of separate agencies, including the MOD, the NHS, local authorities and charitable organisations. As such, we have a pilot, which is ongoing, that sees care of this kind co-ordinated and delivered by a new integrated high-dependency care system—I think we need a better name. It produces a joined-up and improved system of care for the individual, reducing strain on local care commissioning groups. The early signs are that this is going well. I am happy, once it is established, to see how to extend it to a wider cohort of veterans.

Michael Tomlinson: On that very point, I invite the Minister to look at the Dorset model—I mentioned a few moments ago the work that Andy Gritt is doing in this area—to see whether it can feed into the model that the Minister has just mentioned.

Mark Lancaster: I would be delighted to look at that model and see whether we can learn any lessons from it.

The aim is that this system will provide confidence for a small number of individuals and their families that their clinical, health and social support needs will continue to be met when they leave the armed forces and for the rest of their lives.

On the point about a single point of contact for veterans, I have good news for my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View. The armed forces covenant fund has £10 million each year to support the covenant by funding projects that address specific priorities, one of those being the creation of a veterans gateway. The aim of this initiative is to provide a single point of contact via a fully transactional website and one telephone number, together providing an information clearing house that takes into account the needs of all veterans, wherever they may be located. An announcement will be made very shortly on the preferred bidder for this contract, with this facility being launched during 2017. Further to that, there is the armed forces covenant website itself, which both serving and former serving personnel may access.

I am the first to recognise that the support of our veterans and the services that are provided for their welfare are not perfect. Nothing is, but I, like my hon. Friend, and indeed all hon. Members here tonight—it is a very good showing for an end-of-day Adjournment debate—am determined to do more. For example, the Department for Communities and Local Government is doing important work on supported housing, ensuring
that local authorities have afforded priority where it is due. The DCLG has also introduced various measures to improve access to social housing for members of the service community, including veterans. That includes changing the law to ensure that local authorities always give seriously injured service personnel and veterans with urgent housing needs high priority in the provision of social housing. As for health, NHS England is introducing new initiatives in mental health services for veterans, the details of which contain expert input from MOD officials. Those are just a few examples of the collaborative work that we are undertaking throughout the Government.

**Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** May I make a plea on behalf of NHS workers? Veterans care is a very specialised area, and doctors, nurses and other staff need training and support if they are to care for veterans adequately. We have a great deal to learn from veterans. For example, the McIndoe Centre in East Grinstead was established because of the need to look after veterans who were returning from warfare, and that has benefitted the country as a whole.

**Mark Lancaster:** I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The issue of veterans healthcare is crucial, and I have been looking into the issue of veterans mental health care in particular. I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) has just entered the Chamber. His report “Fighting Fit” involved a great deal of work, and I am pleased to say that we have implemented nearly all his recommendations. Vital work is now being done to enable the medical records of service personnel to be transferred to the civilian national health service so that we can effectively track our veterans.

We must ensure, from the day people join the services until the day they leave, that they are ready for the transition to the civilian world, and collaboration and co-operation are key elements of that. We must continue to work with other Departments, with local authorities and with the charitable sector to build on what we have achieved thus far.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View for raising this important issue.

**Johnny Mercer:** I sense that my hon. Friend is beginning to wind up his speech. Before he does so, let me thank him for his response, and also point out that it is imperative, as far as Conservative Members are concerned, that we do everything on the basis of the evidence that is presented to us. We can talk persistently about the fact that the armed forces covenant is working for our veterans care, but it is clear from the strength of the attendance in the Chamber this evening and from the stories that emerge each week that the current system is not working as well as it should.

I understand why my hon. Friend dismissed my proposal for a Department for Veterans Affairs, but such Departments work elsewhere. My proposal is not based on the United States model; it is completely different. I ask him not to close his mind to the concept, because I think that until we do something like that and fundamentally change the present position, we will not stop the haemorrhage of bad veterans care in this country.

**Mark Lancaster:** Let me say two things to my hon. Friend. First, I do not think that it is just Conservatives who care passionately about this issue; I am confident that Members on both sides of the House care passionately about it, and I have been greatly encouraged by the positive co-operation and constructive support for progress that I have observed on the part of Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition. I hope that that continues, and I am sure that it will. Secondly, I do not have a closed mind about anything. I would like to think that during my tenure as veterans Minister to date—given that I have just praised Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition, it may well come to an end quite shortly—I have demonstrably tried to take a fresh approach to a number of issues, including mesothelioma. I have looked at issues again, and I am currently looking at a couple of issues that are in my inbox.

I do not have a closed mind. All I am saying is that at the moment, on balance, I do not believe that my hon. Friend’s suggestion constitutes the right approach. We have heard this evening about how other areas of government can contribute effectively to the care of our veterans. I also feel—this point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire—that we should not allow the other areas of government, and society, to feel that responsibility for our veterans has somehow been delegated to a small part of government. I believe—at the moment, on balance—that that would be a mistake.

*Question put and agreed to.*

6.49 pm

*House adjourned.*
The Secretary of State was asked—
NORTHERN IRELAND

1. **Graham Evans** (Weaver Vale) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the Northern Ireland economy. [906757]

2. **Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the strength of the Northern Ireland economy. [906759]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): Before I answer the questions, I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in condemning the murder of Joe Reilly last Thursday in Belfast. My sympathy is with his family and with the local community. It is a stark reminder of why we must all continue to work together to ensure that this sort of violence has no place in Northern Ireland.

The UK and Northern Ireland economies are fundamentally strong. In Northern Ireland, economic activity increased by 1.6% over the year and 64,000 more people are in work compared with 2010. That means that we are well placed to build a stronger economy that works for everyone.

**Graham Evans:** I welcome the growth of the Northern Ireland economy, and particularly the fact that unemployment has fallen to its lowest levels since Labour’s great recession. I also welcome last week’s excellent news of the investment from Thales. Will my right hon. Friend continue to prioritise making the case for Northern Ireland as a great place to live, work and do business?

**James Brokenshire:** I entirely endorse my hon. Friend’s comments. I will not tire in talking up the Northern Ireland economy and underlining what a great place it is to do business. He highlights investment: outside London, Northern Ireland is the leading UK region for attracting inward investment across a range of sectors. He is right to highlight the new and innovative investment from Thales, with its space propulsion facilities in Belfast, which underlines what a great place Northern Ireland is to do business.

**Jack Lopresti:** The Northern Ireland economy is doing well, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the devolution of corporation tax offers further opportunities to boost the private sector and to build a stronger economy for everyone?

**James Brokenshire:** I certainly underline to my hon. Friend that we stand by our commitment to the devolution of corporation tax powers, subject to the conditions around fiscal discipline and financial stability agreed in the Stormont House and “Fresh Start” agreements. The Northern Ireland Executive have indicated that they would like corporation tax to be set at around 12.5% from April 2018, and they estimate that that could create 30,000 more jobs.

**Mr Nigel Dodds** (Belfast North) (DUP): I join the Secretary of State in his comments about the recent murder. It is important that we all redouble our efforts to ensure that such events are a thing of the past.

Does the Secretary of State agree that, to build and strengthen the economy of Northern Ireland, investment in infrastructure is absolutely vital? The announcement by the Minister for Infrastructure in the Northern Ireland Executive that he was delaying the major York Street interchange project—for access to ports, an airport and a major road thoroughfare through Belfast to the rest of Northern Ireland—is a bit of a blow to that strategy. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to reiterate to the Minister for Infrastructure that all EU projects that are signed off before we leave the EU will be funded even if they continue after we leave the EU?

**James Brokenshire:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the continuance of EU funding. He will have noted the statement, which he has referred to, from the Chancellor of the Exchequer underlining that the Government will guarantee funding for structural and investment fund projects that are signed off until the point at which the UK leaves the EU, even where projects continue after we leave. It is important to underline that message. There should, therefore, be more projects coming forward, and we should continue to benefit from EU funding up until the point at which we depart.

**Mr Dodds:** I am grateful to the Secretary of State for underlining that important commitment, which should allow investment in that much-needed project to go ahead.

On the question of exporters, who have received a boost as a result of the revaluation of the pound, Northern Ireland was the only area last year that grew its exports, by 9.5%. Will the Secretary of State make a commitment that the new Department for International Trade will work closely with Invest NI to continue that really positive news for Northern Ireland, along with many other very positive economic indicators for the Province?

**James Brokenshire:** The right hon. Gentleman is right to underline the fact that the value of goods exported from Northern Ireland increased to £6.6 billion, which emphasises the strength of the Northern Ireland economy. The Secretary of State for International Trade has underlined his all-UK approach to his work, and he will want to work with Invest NI and the Executive to ensure that there is that clear message of seeing further investment and further exports coming from Northern Ireland.

11. **Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): Manufacturing is very important to the Northern Ireland economy. Given the recent job losses at JTI...
Gallagher and Michelin, what is the Secretary of State doing to safeguard current manufacturing jobs and to help to create more manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the role that manufacturing plays in the Northern Ireland economy. It directly contributes more than 85,000 jobs—some 10% of employment—and, clearly, it provides high-skilled jobs. As a Government, we will continue to work with the Executive on the issues of skills and pathways into employment. It is notable that we have seen record employment levels. We want to work with the Executive to ensure that that very positive picture continues, underlining the fact that we want to see further investment in the economy.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware that the financial and related professional services industry provides jobs for some 31,000 people in Northern Ireland and generates more than 6% of economic output. What are the Government doing to ensure that Northern Ireland will have the benefits of passporting for financial services after the UK leaves the EU so that that industry is not damaged?

James Brokenshire: I underline the work I have done as Secretary of State to reach out to the business community. Indeed, I have established a new advisory group, and one of the sectors we have met is the financial services sector. We are listening keenly to the information that it is providing us with as we frame our all-UK approach to the negotiations that lie ahead with the EU.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): On the back of the Chancellor’s comment to Nissan that it will be compensated for losses due to Brexit, the Secretary of State for Scotland said at the Dispatch Box two weeks ago:

“Whatever support is put in place for businesses in the north of England will apply to businesses in Scotland.” — [Official Report, 12 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 287.]

Given that the manufacturing sector plays such a pivotal role in Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State confirm to the House that his Government’s policy will apply to Northern Ireland in the same way as it appears to apply to Scotland and the north of England?

James Brokenshire: We take an all-UK approach. That is the way in which the Chancellor has been approaching his announcements about support post the departure from the EU, ensuring that we do have such a UK-wide approach, and indeed his preparations for his autumn statement. The approach will be to support the UK, with Northern Ireland being a core part of that.

Arm.ed Forces Covenant

2. Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If he will take steps to work with the Secretary of State for Defence to enhance future funding for the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland.  [906758]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): The armed forces covenant is making a real difference in Northern Ireland. Bids for funding from the armed forces covenant fund have been more successful in Northern Ireland than in any other part of the UK. Grants that have been made include £450,000 for Combat Stress to help veterans with mental health support, and £600,000 for the Somme Nursing Home in Belfast to enable it to add more bed spaces for veterans requiring nursing care.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his response. Northern Ireland is in 10th place among all the regions of the United Kingdom for small grants. Beyond the Battlefield has applied for LIBOR funding for four years running, with a substantial and detailed business plan, but it has not been successful. Does the Minister consider that to be fair? What steps will he take to address that imbalance, and to help groups and bodies such as Beyond the Battlefield to prepare successful applications?

Kris Hopkins: I commend the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends for making sure that they have secured the largest proportion of the big pot, although I appreciate that he is now going after the small pot. His point about how to secure the funding is really important, and I am more than willing to sit down with him to talk about how we can support that package.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the Minister confirm that he and the Secretary of State have the determination and the will to eliminate all impediments to the full implementation—I do mean the full implementation—of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland?

Kris Hopkins: I do not think I need to go further to reassure the hon. Lady than to say that I want the best possible services for our veterans. I want the covenant to be implemented in full, and I will do everything I can to ensure that that happens.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I add to the comments of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and to those of other hon. Friends representing Northern Ireland? When I went there as the Minister with responsibility for veterans, I was, frankly, deeply struck—perhaps only an English person can say this—by the complete lack of drive to ensure that all its local authorities signed up to the military covenant, as local authorities have done across the whole United Kingdom. There is no reason why the covenant should not be in effect in Northern Ireland just as much as it is elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Kris Hopkins: I agree with my right hon. Friend that every council should participate. I get the opportunity to meet lots of councils, and I know that a lot of them are making a massive contribution, but where they are not I reassure her that I will push those councils to do so.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I disagree with the Minister? The armed forces covenant is not working especially well in Northern Ireland. There is £100 million in the LIBOR funds for the whole military covenant. Can some of that be used to make sure that the mechanisms work—that is, that we get a nominee on to the covenant reference group, that the reserve forces and cadets association gets the support it needs to help all soldiers and that the champions get some help?
Kris Hopkins: I know that there are opportunities to get on to the committee that the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and I will support him if he wants to do that. I know it is a big issue, and I say this as ex-services personnel myself: I want to make sure that this works, and that every partner—not just councils but health authorities and housing authorities—works together. But this is devolved, and it is up to the Executive to make it work. However, as someone with a history in this area, I will assist him in every way I can to ensure that that is delivered.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The shadow of the past hangs heavily over the questions that have been asked and there are many unquiet graves still on the island of Ireland. Bearing in mind that it is now 42 years since the atrocity of the Dublin-Monaghan bombings and in view of the vote in the Dáil Éireann, what contact and communication is the Minister having with the Irish Government on this question?

Kris Hopkins: I agree that that act 42 years ago was appalling, and offer my sympathies to the families of those who were lost. There is a continuing dialogue with the Irish Government and their Foreign Minister. We will continue that and I am quite happy to have discussions with the hon. Gentleman if he wants further information about the progress we are making.

Leaving the EU: Republic of Ireland

4. Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of the Republic of Ireland on the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

James Brokenshire: I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State reassure us that the common travel area is a key priority. Does not the fact that citizens of EU countries will be able to move freely to live and work in the Irish Republic make a nonsense of the leave campaign claims that Brexit means that somehow we can take back control of our borders?

5. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Government of the Republic of Ireland on the Government’s negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

James Brokenshire: No. This Government are very clear that the EU referendum underlined that free movement cannot continue as it does today. We are considering carefully the options in relation to migration policy as well as border policy, to ensure that both work in the best interests of the United Kingdom.

6. Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Government of the Republic of Ireland on the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

James Brokenshire: I entirely agree. There are very strong relationships and connections between An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other UK Government agencies. Those have been and will continue to be really valuable and we are determined to maintain them.

7. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): I have met and will continue to meet counterparts in the Irish Government as we work through the challenges ahead. The UK-Irish relationship has never been stronger. It is a unique relationship, and in the coming months we will strengthen co-operation to help to secure the best outcome from the EU negotiations.

Craig Whittaker: I think my right hon. Friend will agree that both the common travel area and the open border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland have served us well for decades. Will he do everything he can to ensure those arrangements continue and that there is no establishment of hard borders within the island of Ireland or within the UK?

James Brokenshire: I agree with my hon. Friend that the common travel area has served us well over many years; indeed, we were party to it before we joined the European Union. It is a priority that we do not see a return to the borders of the past.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Given that Her Majesty’s Government, the Irish Government and political parties in Northern Ireland want to see the special relationship and soft border continue, is it not incumbent on the European Union to allow us to exit on terms that will enable us to preserve that relationship?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): A number of institutions have been established for discussing these matters with the Government of the Irish Republic, including the North South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those are the bodies through which discussions take place, and not some ad hoc arrangement?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman rightly highlights the structures that have been in place since the Belfast agreement, such as the North South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council, which will meet again in a few weeks. They are really important and valuable structures that can and will be used in supporting the negotiations ahead; there is of course the new Joint Ministerial sub-committee as well.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Charlie Flanagan said in Derry on Friday night:

“I view my role as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement as a solemn duty and—together with the Taoiseach—will be working to ensure that all aspects of that international agreement
are fully respected in the new arrangements between the EU and the UK. Ireland has a seat at the EU table which we will use in the best interests of the whole island."

Does the Secretary of State recognise that that will include the need for a bespoke and explicit reflection of the key constitutional precepts in annex A of the Good Friday agreement in any new EU-UK treaty?

James Brokenshire: The Irish Government and the UK Government are co-signatories to the Belfast agreement. I have said on a number of occasions that we stand behind our commitments. There are unique circumstances that operate on the island of Ireland: the common travel area, the single electricity market and so on. We are determined to find the right solutions that serve Northern Ireland well and all of the all-Ireland issues.

10. [906766] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): In the recent referendum, Northern Ireland voted to remain. In large part, that was due to issues relating to the border with the Irish Republic. This is a key issue for the Secretary of State, but more so for working families, so will he tell us what the Government’s policy is in relation to the border?

James Brokenshire: As I have already underlined, the Government are determined not to see a return to the borders of the past. We want to strengthen the common travel area. Work with the Irish Government has been ongoing for many months and will continue, reflecting the important issues the hon. Gentleman highlights on the movement of people, the movement of goods and services, and the sense of politics and identity, which is why this is such a priority.

13. [906770] Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Secretary of State says he wants to take back control of our borders, in particular this border. At the same time, he says he wants to keep the common travel area and the current arrangements. Is that not contradictory nonsense? In the end, will it not be the EU that decides, because it is the Republic’s border? What conversations has he had with the EU on that matter?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman wants to get into negotiations that have not yet started. I underline the shared will and commitment of ourselves, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to support the common travel area and to ensure we do not return to the borders of the past. That is the work we have ahead of us.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): We have already heard the huge concerns in Northern Ireland about the specific problems posed by Brexit. One fundamental issue that has not been addressed so far is the fate of the Good Friday agreement, which is an international agreement formally registered with the United Nations. Will the Secretary of State tell the House today what specific measures he and civil servants in Northern Ireland have taken to ensure that this important issue is not left behind in the wake of Brexit?

James Brokenshire: The Government remain fully committed to the political settlement and the institutions set out in the Belfast agreement and all its successors. The key principles established there, the details that have been taken over successive Governments, are things that we do not want to unsettle and that we will maintain. I assure the hon. Gentleman of the focus we are giving to this matter.

Leaving the EU: Northern Ireland Economy

5. Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the Northern Ireland economy of the UK leaving the EU. [906761]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): Following my appointment, I established an advisory group to ensure the voice of business is heard. It is clear that our focus now needs to be on what we can achieve in terms of trade, jobs and exploiting the opportunities of the UK’s exit from the EU.

Toby Perkins: The Secretary of State referred a few minutes ago to taking a whole-country approach to the EU referendum negotiations. The Chancellor recently spoke to the British Bankers Association about the specific needs of the banking industry. If special privileges in terms of the single market are afforded to the City of London, will the Secretary of State be asking for the same privileges for Northern Ireland?

James Brokenshire: I set up the advisory group and am speaking to individual sectors within the Northern Ireland economy precisely to ensure that their voice is heard as part of those preparations and are reflected in the negotiations.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend not agree that leaving the European Union will enable the Northern Ireland economy to be rebalanced in favour of the private sector rather than the public sector? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There are far too many noisy conversations taking place in the Chamber. I could scarcely hear the dulcet tones of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), and I feel considerably disadvantaged.

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend identifies—I think rightly—the opportunities for bringing about greater focus on enterprise in the Northern Ireland economy, where there has been significant reliance on the state to support employment. We need to work with the Executive on skills and opportunities, which is precisely what we will be doing. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We are discussing matters appertaining to Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland Members must be heard.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sure that the Secretary of State would agree that the innovation and entrepreneurial spirit of the businesses in Northern Ireland, especially the small and medium-sized enterprises, are second to none, and that whatever they face with Brexit, they are up for the challenge.
James Brokenshire: I have heard that message very clearly. There are some fantastic, innovative businesses and some great family businesses in Northern Ireland. We want to support them to take that next step, to grow their business and to look at the new opportunities for exports. I think they now have a great opportunity to do that.

Leaving the EU: Northern Ireland Economy

8. Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): What discussions has he had with the European Commission and Governments of other EU member states on the free movement of people, goods, capital and labour between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland after the UK has left the EU. [906764]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (James Brokenshire): The Government take part in regular direct discussions with the Irish Government through a number of forums, including the upcoming British-Irish Council. We will ensure that we engage closely with all relevant partners to secure the best outcome for Northern Ireland.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Secretary of State’s earlier comments about the increase in employment, which is very important, but in light of the significant damage to the British economy, the dramatic fall in the value of sterling and the increase in the price of food and fuel as a result of the referendum, does he accept that many businesses in Northern Ireland are frightened that damage to the Northern Ireland economy will be magnified relative to the British economy?

James Brokenshire: I reiterate for the hon. Gentleman the strong base that we see, with record levels of employment, exports that have grown significantly and continuing foreign direct investment. I will continue to champion business in Northern Ireland and to underline the fact that Northern Ireland remains open for business. A number of firms are continuing to invest and create jobs, which we will continue to welcome.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Four counties in the Republic of Ireland border my constituency, so what specific issues will the Secretary of State raise with his counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that cross-border trade can continue?

James Brokenshire: I have already had two meetings—with the Taoiseach and with the Irish Foreign Minister—and there are more meetings and discussions to come. The British-Irish Council meeting is coming up in just a few weeks’ time. Border issues such as protecting the common travel area and not seeing a return to the borders of the past are a priority, and also a shared common travel area and not seeing a return to the borders of the past are a priority, and also a shared objective between the two Governments.

Mr Speaker: If I may say politely to the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell): spit it out succinctly, man.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that over the past few months there have been reports from the retail trade in Northern Ireland of a veritable multi-million pound boom along the border in shoppers from the Irish Republic, and that we should do more to encourage that as business continues to make progress?

James Brokenshire: Yes, I have seen those reports. When I visited towns in and around the border area, they certainly underlined some of the growth in business opportunities that they were seeing—something we clearly warmly welcome.

Security

9. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the security situation in Northern Ireland. [906765]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Kris Hopkins): The threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism continues to be “severe”, meaning that an attack is highly likely. Our response to terrorism and paramilitary activity is co-ordinated, effective and fully resourced. This Government’s focus is on keeping people safe, and we will ensure that terrorism never succeeds.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Minister agree that it is damaging both to the security situation in Northern Ireland and to the peace process when former members of the armed forces who have been cleared on multiple occasions are now arrested for offences that are alleged to have taken place more than 40 years ago? Will he agree to meet me to discuss the broader issues surrounding the case of Corporal Major Dennis Hutchings?

Kris Hopkins: Criminal investigations and prosecutions are a matter for the police and the prosecuting authorities, who act independently of Government and politicians. The Government therefore cannot comment on individual cases. However, I am more than willing to discuss with the hon. Gentleman the broader issue that he has raised.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In the past two years, 1,631 police officers—a quarter of Northern Ireland’s police force—have been injured or assaulted while on duty. When will the Northern Ireland Office fund and support a new recruitment drive to return the number of officers to the 7,800 required under the Patten settlement?

Kris Hopkins: I condemn all those attacks. They are absolutely appalling. This is, however, a devolved matter, and it is for the Northern Ireland Executive to make decisions on recruitment and numbers.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Does the Minister agree that the best way of tackling paramilitarism and criminality in Northern Ireland is to adopt the community-wide approach that was outlined by the SDLP during last year’s Stormont House talks, rather than throwing money at paramilitary organisations?

Kris Hopkins: I understand what the hon. Lady is saying, but I can give her some comfort. We have ensured that £25 million is available specifically to counter paramilitary activity, and we are working with the Executive to deliver that. We look forward to seeing the report in the near future.
PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906807] James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 26 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

James Morris: In the black country, in the west midlands, we are very proud of our long industrial heritage. We are also very proud of the recent revival in the fortunes of the black country, which is seeing new jobs and investment in the local economy. Does the Prime Minister agree that one way to create an economy that works for everyone is to devolve further powers and funds to the west midlands to drive investment, and to combine that with the strong leadership and vision that can only be provided by Andy Street, the Conservative candidate for the position of west midlands mayor?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks up well for the black country, and I am pleased to echo his comments about economic growth in the west midlands. Since 2010, we have seen the creation of over 220,000 more jobs and 55,000 more new businesses in the region. However, he is right to say that the devolution deal is important. It is the biggest devolution deal that is being done for the west midlands. A crucial part of it is the election of a directly elected mayor, and I think that, given both his local knowledge and his business experience, Andy Street will drive economic growth.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Let me start by welcoming the child refugees who have arrived in Britain in the last few days. They are obviously deeply traumatised young people, and we should welcome, love and support them in the best way that we possibly can.

Irrespective of party, when Members go through health problems we reach out the hand of support, solidarity and friendship to them. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for the message that he sent through social media this morning. It showed amazing humour and bravery. We wish him all the very best, and hope that he recovers fully.

There are now to be regular sessions of the Joint Ministerial Council to discuss Brexit, but it seems that the Prime Minister’s counterparts are already feeling the same sense of frustration as Members of the House of Commons. The First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, has said that there is a “great deal of uncertainty”, but that it is clear that there must be “full and unfettered access” to the single market. Can the Prime Minister help the First Minister of Wales—and, indeed, the other devolved Administrations—by giving them some clarity?

The Prime Minister: Let me first—in response to the right hon. Gentleman’s opening comments—commend the Home Office for working so carefully and in the best interests of the child refugees so that they have the support that they need when they come to the United Kingdom. Let me also join the right hon. Gentleman in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) for his willingness to be so open about his health problem. We wish him all the very best for the future, and for his place here in the House.

On the issue of clarity on the Government’s aims in relation to Brexit, I have been very clear and I will be clear again. There are those who talk about means and those who talk about ends; I am talking about ends. What we want to see is the best possible arrangement for trade with and operation within the single European market for businesses in goods and services here in the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thought for a moment the Prime Minister was going to say “Brexit means Brexit” again. [Interruption.] I am sure she will tell us one day what it actually means. The Mayor of London also added that this is causing “unnecessary uncertainty”.

It would also be very helpful if the Prime Minister provided some clarity over the Northern Ireland border. Will we continue membership of the customs union or are we going to see border checks introduced between Northern Ireland and the Republic?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition tries to poke fun at the phrase “Brexit means Brexit”, but the whole point is this: on Brexit, it is this Government who are listening to the voice of the British people. “Brexit means Brexit” means we are coming out of the European Union. What the right hon. Gentleman is trying to do is frustrate the will of the British people by saying that Brexit means something completely different.

In relation to the Northern Irish border, a considerable amount of work was already taking place with the Irish Government to look at the issues around the common travel area, and that work is continuing. We have been very clear, the Government of the Republic of Ireland have been very clear, and the Northern Ireland Executive have been very clear that none of us wants to see a return to the borders of the past, and I simply remind the right hon. Gentleman that the common travel area has been in place since 1923, which was well before either of us joined the European Union.

Jeremy Corbyn: On Monday the Prime Minister said that the customs union was “not a binary choice”. I cannot think that whether we have a border or do not have a border is anything other than a binary choice; there is no third way on that one. On Monday her friend the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) expressed concern about the automotive and aerospace industries, while the British Bankers Association said that its members’ “hands are quivering over the relocate button.”

Every day the Prime Minister dithers over this chaotic Brexit, employers delay investment and rumours circulate about relocation. This cannot carry on until March of next year; when is the Prime Minister going to come up with a plan?

The Prime Minister: The fact that the right hon. Gentleman seems to confuse a customs union with a border when they are actually two different issues shows—
The right hon. Gentleman talks about the plan. I have been very clear that we want to trade freely—both trade with and operate within the single European market. I want this country to be a global leader in free trade; the Labour party is against free trade. I want to introduce control on free movement so that we have an end of free movement; the Labour party wants to continue with free movement. I want to deliver on the will of the British people; the right hon. Gentleman is trying to frustrate the will of the British people.

Jeremy Corbyn: There was no answer on the border, which was what the question was about. On Monday the Prime Minister told the House: “We have a plan, which is not to set out at every stage of the negotiations the details of those negotiations”. [Official Report, 24 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 31.] I have been thinking about this for a couple of days, and—[Interruption.] I think when we are searching for the real meaning and the importance of the Prime Minister’s statement, we should consult the great philosophers. [Interruption.] The only one I could come up with—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Mr Cleverly, calm yourself. You are imperilling your own health, man, which is a source of great concern to me.

Jeremy Corbyn: The only one I could come up with was Baldrick, who said that his “cunning plan” was to have no plan. Brexit was apparently about taking back control, but the devolved Governments do not know the plan, businesses do not know the plan and Parliament does not know the plan. When will the Prime Minister abandon this shambolic Tory Brexit and develop a plan that delivers for the whole country?

The Prime Minister: I am interested that the right hon. Gentleman chose to support Baldrick. Of course, the actor who played Baldrick was a member of the Labour party, as I recall. I will tell the right hon. Gentleman what we are going to deliver. We are going to deliver on the vote of the British people. We are going to deliver the best possible deal for trade in goods and services, both with and operationally in the European Union. And we are going to deliver an end to free movement. That is what the British people want and that is what this Government are going to deliver for them.

Jeremy Corbyn: Three years ago, the United Kingdom backed Saudi Arabia for membership of the United Nations Human Rights Council. On 28 October, there will again be elections for the Human Rights Council. A UN panel has warned that Saudi Arabia’s bombing of Yemen has violated international law. Amnesty International has stated that “executions are on the increase...women are widely discriminated against...torture is common...and human rights organisations are banned”.

Will the Government again be backing the Saudi dictatorship for membership of that committee?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, where there are legitimate human rights concerns in relation to Saudi Arabia, we raise them. In relation to the action in the Yemen, we have been clear that we want the incidents that have been referred to properly investigated, and if there are lessons to be learned from them, we want the Saudi Arabians to learn those lessons. I reiterate a point that I have made in this House before: our relationship with Saudi Arabia is an important one. It is particularly important in relation to the security of this country, to counter-terrorism and to foiling the activities of those who wish to do harm to our citizens here in the UK.

Jeremy Corbyn: Taher Qassim, a Yemeni man who lives in Liverpool, told me this week:

“Yemen is quickly becoming the forgotten crisis. If people aren’t being killed by bombs, it’s hunger that kills them. The UK needs to use its influence to help the people of Yemen”.

Bombs exported from Britain are being dropped on Yemeni children by Saudi pilots trained by Britain. If there are war crimes being committed, as the United Nations suggests, they must be investigated. Is it not about time that this Government suspended their arms sales to Saudi Arabia?

The Prime Minister: The issues are being investigated, and we have taken action. The right hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the humanitarian crisis in the Yemen, and this country is one of those at the forefront of ensuring that humanitarian aid is provided. That is a record of action of which I believe this country and this Government can be proud around the world. There was a cessation of hostilities in the Yemen over the weekend. It lasted 72 hours. As I said in the House on Monday, I spoke to the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi at the weekend, and one of the issues we discussed was the importance of trying to find a political solution in Yemen and to see whether that cessation of hostilities could be continued. It has not been continued, but we are clear that the only solution that is going to work for the Yemen is to ensure that we have a political solution that will give stability to the Yemen.

Q2. Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Twenty years ago, a Conservative Government agreed that the Christchurch and East Dorset Councils could retain their sovereignty, independence and control over their own destiny. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the Government will not agree to the abolition of either Christchurch Council or East Dorset Council against the will of my constituents?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to speak up for his constituents. He is also right that there is no single model that will work in every part of the country. That is why it is important for local people to come together to determine what is right for them. My hon. Friend is trying to build a consensus in Dorset on the right way forward. It is right that local people are able to respond to the consultation and that their concerns are listened to.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The Scottish poppy appeal launches today for parliamentarians, so may I take this opportunity to praise all the fundraisers, volunteers and veterans involved? I am sure that colleagues in other parts of the House will commend the efforts to raise money for the poppy appeal in the rest of the United Kingdom.
One of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of our time is in Syria, specifically Aleppo, where we expect the cease-fire to end shortly and an onslaught to begin. Will the Prime Minister tell us what important moves the UK is currently undertaking not only to support a peaceful resolution to the conflict, but to deal with those who are exacerbating the situation?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Gentleman in commending and praising the work of all those across the United Kingdom who give their time and effort to raise money for the poppy appeal. It is important that we never forget those who have given of themselves for our safety and security through many conflicts. It is important that we recognise that and give generously to the poppy appeal across the country.

On Syria, it is important to approach the matter on a number of tracks. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been involved in discussions with the US Secretary of State, Senator Kerry, on such issues, looking for the way forward. I raised the issue of Russian action in Syria, in particular the bombing of Aleppo, at the EU Council at the end of last week, where it was on the agenda only because the UK had raised it. As a result of that discussion the EU agreed that, should the atrocities continue, we will look at all available options for taking action to put pressure on Russia in order to stop its indiscriminate bombing of innocent civilians.

Angus Robertson: I commend the Prime Minister for those endeavours, but it is widely expected that the onslaught on Aleppo will be unleashed by the Russian airpower that is aboard the Admiral Kuznetsov, currently steaming across the Mediterranean with its battle group. In recent years, more than 60 Russian naval vessels have refuelled and resupplied in Spanish ports, so will the Prime Minister join me and EU and NATO allies in unequivocally calling on Spain to refuse the refuelling?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman refers to the passage of Russian naval ships. They are of course able to travel as they wish on the high seas—although they were accompanied by royal naval vessels when they went through the English channel. We have sadly seen that the Russians are already able to unleash attacks on innocent civilians in Syria. What matters is that we put pressure on Russia to do what everybody agrees is the only way that we are going to resolve the issue, which is to ensure that we have a political transition in Syria. That is where we should focus our attention.

Q3. [906809] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The independent inquiry on child sexual abuse was established to deliver long-awaited justice for victims and survivors, and to do so it must have their confidence. The Shirley Oaks Survivors Association represents more than 600 survivors of abuse that took place in Lambeth Council-run children’s homes and has recently raised serious concerns about changes to the inquiry. Will the Prime Minister meet me, my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna) and representatives from the Shirley Oaks Survivors Association to discuss their concerns and take action, so that confidence can be restored?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes a very important point: the whole purpose of this inquiry was to be able to provide justice for those whose voices had not been heard for too long and who felt that people in positions of power and institutions of the state, and other organisations, had not heard their voice, and had not been prepared to listen to them and properly to investigate what had happened to them. It is important that victims and survivors have confidence in the inquiry. Of course, the inquiry is an independent inquiry and it is up to its chairman to work with survivors and victims, as I know the inquiry chairman has been doing. But I will ensure that the Home Secretary has heard the representations the hon. Lady has made, and we will take what she has said to us today away and consider it very carefully. We all want this inquiry to work properly, and to work in the interests of survivors and victims.

Q4. [906810] Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My constituency forms part of the new west midlands combined authority, where new powers will be devolved to the authority and the mayor. Will the Prime Minister tell me how those new powers will help my constituents and local businesses in sectors such as manufacturing, the automotive industry, and bricks and ceramics?

The Prime Minister: I can confirm to my hon. Friend that the proposed deal will provide the west midlands with £1 billion over 30 years to spend on local projects that will drive economic growth. That is the important part of the deal and is why it is so important to have a mayor, Andy Street, who not only understands the local area but has business expertise to ensure that those economic projects are developed with the interests of the locality as the prime focus. The deal will deliver more jobs and economic prosperity across the west midlands. It is good for the west midlands and her constituents. It is good for the rest of the country as well.

Q9. [906815] Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that our nation’s commitment to our current and former armed forces personnel and their families by way of the armed forces covenant is a work in progress, and that although we have made important moves there is still much more to do. Will she take this opportunity to assure this House of her personal commitment to the values and promises set out in the covenant, and to pledge to lend her support to efforts to continue the good work begun, and to ensure that personnel, veterans and their families face no disadvantage arising from their service and the sacrifice they have all made for our country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I know she has championed the armed forces covenant and is a great proponent of our veterans and the armed forces. It is absolutely right to say that everybody in this House owes a great debt of gratitude to our veterans and to those serving today in our armed forces for what they do to keep us safe and secure. That is why it is so important that the covenant is not just a responsibility for the Government, but a national responsibility: we should all be working to ensure that those who have served us, and served us well, do not face disadvantages. That is why we have been doing things such as putting money into a forces Help to Buy scheme to help them with houses—I believe the figure is
Q5. [906811] Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Last year, my 25-year-old nephew Matty committed suicide after a very short period of depression. His GP had referred him for talking therapy counselling but warned him that it would be at least six months before he got an appointment. These treatments in the NHS are often a waiting game—a dangerous waiting game—and a postcode lottery. What is the Prime Minister doing to sort this crisis out?

The Prime Minister: First, I recognise and commend the hon. Gentleman for raising his personal experience of the terrible tragedy that can occur when mental health problems are not properly dealt with. He raises a very serious issue—it is a serious issue for everybody in this House—about how the NHS treats mental health. This is why we have established the concept of parity of esteem for mental health and physical health in the NHS, and why we are seeing record levels of funding. He raises the question of talking therapies, which are very effective, and we have been introducing waiting time standards in relation to them. However, I accept that there is more for us to do in this area to ensure that those with mental health problems are properly treated, and are properly given the care and attention they need. This is an issue not just for them, but for the whole of our society.

Q12. [906818] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): My right hon. Friend became Prime Minister in dramatic and extraordinary circumstances, and she has proved more than capable of rising to the many challenges and extraordinary circumstances, and she has proved. My right hon. Friend became Prime Minister in dramatic circumstances. She has proved more than capable of rising to the many challenges and extraordinary circumstances, and she has proved.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. The Chilcot report was an important task. Although it looked at and criticised the way in which information had been handled, it did not say that people had set out deliberately to mislead, and it is important to recognise that. It is important also that we sort this crisis out.

Q6. [906812] Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): The Prime Minister will be aware that much of the foundation and many of the elements of the 1998 settlement and peace agreement in Northern Ireland were referenced and rooted in EU approaches and processes of laws and that leaving the EU will significantly destabilise the foundations of that settlement. Has the Prime Minister given any consideration to the extent of the potential damage the withdrawal from the European Union could do to that Good Friday/Belfast agreement and the 1998 political settlement? Does she have any plan at this stage to protect that settlement?

The Prime Minister: There is no reason to believe that the outcome of the referendum will do anything to undermine the absolute rock-solid commitment of this Government and the people of Northern Ireland to the settlement that was set out in the Belfast agreement. There is, and remains, strong support for the entirely peaceful future for Northern Ireland. That has been determined by democracy and consent. We remain committed to that and to work with others to ensure that entirely peaceful future.

Q13. [906819] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): General Electric has shown its confidence in the UK economy and my constituents by starting construction of the second of its two new world-class research and manufacturing facilities on Staffordshire County Council’s Redhill Business Park. Will the Prime Minister meet General Electric and other west midlands manufacturers to hear just how important supply chains and markets free of tariffs and bureaucracy are to them and their hundreds of thousands of staff?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to hear of the commitment that GE has made to Stafford, but it is more than a commitment to Stafford; it is a commitment to the United Kingdom and to the future of our economy. I understand that the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade has already met GE to discuss its interests in trade and what we can be doing to promote free trade. As I said earlier, I want the UK to be a global leader in free trade. We are listening to businesses around the country and to the importance that they place on free trade as we look at the negotiations for exiting the EU.

Q7. [906813] Jim Dowd (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister aware of the recent reports showing the continuing and alarming increase in average alcohol consumption in the UK, particularly among women? Given the numerous health risks associated with excessive alcohol consumption, will her Government, together with the drinks industry, re-examine the case for mandatory health warnings on all alcoholic products?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the point that the hon. Gentleman makes from the figures that we have seen recently, particularly the figures in relation to women and the use of alcohol. As Home Secretary, I was part of the development of the alcohol strategy that the Government produced a few years ago. I am pleased to say that, at that time, we were working well with industry to encourage it to ensure that it could take steps to impact on the drinking habits of the nation.

Q14. [906820] Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Given the imminence of the final decision on the eastern route of HS2, phase two, it is imperative that we invest in new road infrastructure to support the additional traffic that that will bring to the areas around the new station hubs. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend back my campaign for a new junction 25a of the M1 to ensure that Erewash residents do not get stuck in a jam?

The Prime Minister: I seem to recall that I first met my hon. Friend when she was campaigning in relation to motorways. She is right that in order to support the
rail infrastructure, we need to ensure that the right road infrastructure is in place. That is why we are investing £15 billion in the road investment strategy, which is about boosting local economies and further economic growth. I understand that Highways England is looking at the issues in the east midlands and at bringing forward significant new road enhancements around the expected site of the new east midlands HS2 station. Going forward it is looking at an audit of roads in the area. I trust that on this issue my hon. Friend will make her voice heard, and that of her constituents, as she has in the past.

Q8. [906814] Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I take the Prime Minister back to the answer that she gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner)? The Conservative manifesto promised shorter NHS waiting times for those who need help with their mental health, but as prescriptions for anti-depressants continue to rise my constituents in Wirral who need talking therapies have to wait a month for referral and well over four months for treatment. Was that Tory manifesto just words, or will the Prime Minister ever deliver?

The Prime Minister: I gave a serious answer to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), which is that we have been looking at the whole issue of talking therapies, their availability and the waiting times for them. We do want to improve the options that people have for access to talking therapies, precisely because they have been shown to be so successful in so many cases. The Government are working on this and we will continue to work on it to provide, as we have said, that parity of esteem between mental health and physical health in the national health service.

Q15. [906821] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): As a former Wimbledonian, my right hon. Friend will understand the significance of transport for south-west London and in particular for Wimbledon. Can she assure me that the Government still support Crossrail 2, and will she ask the Secretary of State for Transport to set out the timetable for the delayed consultation?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give the commitment that we continue to support Crossrail 2. We are waiting to see a robust business case and a proper funding proposal for Crossrail 2. My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary will in due course set out the timetable for that, but as a former Wimbledonian I can assure my right hon. Friend that we are well aware of his interest in the Wimbledon to Waterloo aspects of the project, and that the needs of the local area are being taken into account.

Q10. [906816] Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): In Indian-occupied Kashmir over the past three months 150 people have died, 600 have been blinded by the deliberate use of pellet guns, and more than 16,000 injured, many critically. There have been unexplained disappearances and shortages of food and medicine. Will the Prime Minister meet me and cross-party colleagues to discuss the human rights abuses and the issue of self-determination for Kashmiri people, as was set out in the UN resolution in 1948? Will she raise the matter with the Indian Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady sets out her case and the issues that she has identified. I take the same view as this Government have taken, since they came into power and previously, which is that the issue of Kashmir is a matter for India and Pakistan to deal with and sort out. The Foreign Secretary has heard her representations and I am sure will be interested in taking up those matters with her.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Several months ago I raised with the former Prime Minister at his last Prime Minister’s questions the issue of enhanced medical assistance for the Kurdish peshmerga. I then wrote to the new Prime Minister. Now, with the campaign to liberate Mosul under way, will my right hon. Friend agree to meet with me and representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government to discuss whether we can provide specialist medical facilities here in the UK—for instance, 10 beds for seriously wounded peshmerga—and to ensure that the forces on the ground are getting all the support they need? I understand that they are short of heavy weapons and basic infantry kit such as helmets and body armour.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right and I recognise that this is a matter that he has raised before. We have seen that the coalition activity that is taking place is having some impact, and is having an impact, as we wish it to, in relation to Daesh. There are no plans at present either to do what he suggested in his question or to provide a field hospital and field medical capabilities from the United Kingdom, but we continually review what we are doing in support of the coalition, and the training that we are providing for the peshmerga includes training in the provision of medical facilities.

Q11. [906817] Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I am sure that we all recognise that the removal of the camp at Calais is not a long-term solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. What will the Government do to learn from the experiences in Calais and speed up the acceptance of vulnerable individuals, as they committed to do under Lords Dubs’s scheme?

The Prime Minister: Individuals are already being brought to the United Kingdom under the Dubs amendment, in addition to the resettlement scheme for vulnerable Syrians—the 20,000 who will be brought here over the course of this Parliament—and in addition to the 3,000 vulnerable people, children and others, who will be brought here from the middle east and north Africa. We are working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to ensure that it is right for those individuals to come to the UK and that they have support when they get here. I remind the hon. Gentleman that this country is the second biggest bilateral donor of humanitarian aid in the Syrian region, and we are able to support and provide for more people in-region, which I think is absolutely the right thing to do.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Around Heathrow legal air quality limits are being breached, and over Twickenham noise pollution has increased, according to Heathrow data. Can the Prime Minister explain how a third runway can be delivered and comply with legal pollution requirements? Does she agree that, environmentally, Heathrow is not good enough and cannot possibly be both bigger and better?
The Prime Minister: The Government looked very closely at the issue of air quality and the environmental impact of all three schemes proposed by the Airports Commission. We took extra time, from the decision to increase airport capacity in the south-east, because we wanted to look particularly at the air quality issues. The evidence shows that air quality standards can be met, as required by all three schemes, including the north-west runway at Heathrow. My hon. Friend raises an issue that is actually about more than airports, because air quality is also about road transport. That is why we are looking to do more in relation to air quality. It is why, for example, I am pleased to see that we are at such a leading edge in the provision of electric vehicles.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): The Prime Minister’s real plan for Brexit seems to be to pick winners: to cut a special deal for the City of London and let the bankers avoid the dire consequences of leaving the economic union. Wales has an exporting economy, with a £5 billion trade surplus last year, and 200,000 jobs dependent on trade with the European Union. It is a soft Brexit for her friends in the City, and a hard Brexit for everybody else. Will she cut a similar deal for Wales?

The Prime Minister: I will be cutting the best deal for the United Kingdom—all parts of it.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Every year, hundreds of people are diagnosed with, suffer and usually die prematurely from rare diseases such as cystic fibrosis and rare cancers, for which there has been no treatment, or for which the latest drugs are prohibitively expensive. This week sees the final report of our accelerated access review, which sets out a new model for the NHS to use its genetic and data leadership to get quicker access and discounted prices. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the review, which is strongly supported by patients, charities and the life sciences sector, and in encouraging the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and NHS England to implement it speedily?

The Prime Minister: I certainly join my hon. Friend in welcoming the publication of the review. This is important in enabling patients to get quicker access to drugs and treatments. The United Kingdom has established a leading role in life sciences, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the role he has played in that. I know that the Department of Health will be looking very closely at the report’s specific recommendations, recognising that where we can take opportunities through the national health service to encourage the development of new drugs to benefit patients, we should do so.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has just told us that record levels of spending are going into our mental health services. Her Health Secretary stood at that Dispatch Box on 9 December and told us that the proportion of funding going into mental health from every one of our clinical commissioning groups should be increasing. Why is it, then, that 57% of CCGs in our country are reducing the proportion of spend on mental health? Is it yet another broken promise. When will we have real equality for mental health in our country?

The Prime Minister: The fact that I set out—that we are spending record levels in the NHS on mental health—is absolutely right, but I have said in response to a number of people who have questioned me on this that we recognise that there is more for us to do in mental health, and I would have thought that we should have cross-party support on doing just that.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Speaking outside 10 Downing Street on the day she became Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend said: "If you suffer from mental health problems, there is not enough help to hand.” I welcome her commitment to mental health, expressed on that day and in her responses today. What steps is she taking to make sure the bold ambitions of the Government’s five-year forward view for mental health are achieved?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to say that, in fact, what we see—far from the impression that is given by some of the comments from Opposition Members—is that, since 2009-10, around 750,000 more people are accessing talking therapies and 1,400 more people are accessing mental health services every day, compared to 2010, so that is up by 40%. But my hon. Friend, who I know has a particular interest and a particular expertise in this area, is right that we need to do more, and that is why we are continuing to invest in mental health services and continuing to increase the standards that we provide.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Just 20 children are diagnosed with inoperable brain tumours as a result of tuberous sclerosis every year. Yet, despite earlier indications, NHS England turned treatment down for funding, despite it being affordable. Will the Prime Minister meet me, the Tuberous Sclerosis Association and families to discuss how we can get through this blockage and get the treatment that these children need?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to listen to the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised and to look in detail at what can be done to take that forward.
Maternity and Paternity Leave  
(Premature Birth)

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

12.42 pm  
Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab): I beg to move,  
That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend Part 8 of the  
Employment Rights Act 1996 to make provision about maternity  
and paternity leave for parents of babies born prematurely; and  
for connected purposes.

Having a premature baby is one of the most traumatic  
experiences that any parent can go through. Instead of  
bringing home the healthy baby they had longed for,  
their tiny baby is put inside an incubator, fighting for its  
life, surrounded by tubes, wires and bleeping monitors.  
Instead of holding their baby close, these parents can  
only watch as their baby struggles to breathe, dependent  
on life support and intensive care. This can go on for  
weeks and months before a baby is well enough to go  
home. The stress, anxiety and worry lead two in every  
five premature mums to suffer mental ill health. Parents  
fall into debt from the unplanned expense of daily  
journeys to hospital, overnight accommodation or eating  
in expensive hospital cafes.

One mum told me her baby spent three months in  
intensive care, and that time was all taken out of her  
statutory maternity leave. So her baby suffers twice:  
first, from the serious health complications of being  
born too soon and, secondly, from having less time at  
home with mum and dad—vital bonding time that can  
affect a child’s development for many years to come.

I spoke to another mum who told me that once she  
had gone back to work, her employer would not give  
her the extra time off she needed to deal with her  
premature child’s frequent illnesses. She lost her job,  
and her family lost that vital extra income. I spoke to  
a dad who had to go back to work the day after his  
baby was born three months too soon and was fighting  
for her life in an incubator. Most people would agree  
that his family needed him more at that time than his  
employer did, but the law did not give him the support  
he needed to be there with his family. We should give the  
parents of premature babies all the support they need to  
cope at one of the most traumatic times they will ever  
experience.

I pay tribute to a Croydon mum and tireless campaigner,  
Catriona Ogilvy, who started campaigning on this issue  
after her two beautiful little boys were born prematurely.  
Over 100,000 people have already signed her online  
petition. I should also like to recognise the outstanding  
work of the charity Bliss, which campaigns for the  
rights of premature babies and their families.

It is time the law recognised the special needs of  
premature babies’ parents by extending their leave so  
that they can give their vulnerable, tiny babies all the  
love and care they need and deserve. This measure  
commands growing support in the country, it is the  
right thing to do, and it deserves the support of this  
House.

Question put and agreed to.  
Ordered.

That Mr Steve Reed, Norman Lamb, Heidi Allen,  
Chris Philp, Wes Streeting, Dan Jarvis, Stella Creasy,  
Mr Gareth Thomas, Jenny Chapman, Lyn Brown, Heidi  
Alexander and Lisa Nandy present the Bill.

Mr Steve Reed accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on  
Friday 16 December, and to be printed (Bill 81).
Concentrix

12.47 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that Concentrix has not fully met the performance standards set out in its contract with the HM Revenue and Customs to correct tax credit claims, and welcomes the announcement that the services performed by Concentrix will be brought back in-house to HMRC next year; and calls on the Government to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the performance of Concentrix under its contract with HMRC, which includes a consideration of the potential effect on other HMRC services, take urgent action to compensate people who have erroneously had tax credits withdrawn by the company, and in doing so mitigate any adverse effect or reduction in service for claimants.

The topic of today’s first Opposition day debate affects every single hon. Member’s constituency. I have received many case studies from Labour Members, and I thank them for their hard work on this issue. I welcome the comments in the amendment tabled by Scottish National party Members; I am very pleased that we are on the same page on this issue. We have heard how constituents of Conservative Members have been affected by this scandal too. My own inbox and postbag have seen a surge in the number of anxious and distressed people who have received no response. The lady pointed out that there was absolutely no truth in that allegation and sent all the requested documentation, after Concentrix appeared to have lost the originals, and sent a request for mandatory reconsideration, to Concentrix. By this time, she was running very short of money and contacted her Member of Parliament for help. When the parliamentary office investigated the matter, it was told that there was a backlog of mandatory reconsiderations, so it could take six weeks for the case to be looked at.

By this time, the lady in question had been waiting for three months for a resolution to her case—that is three months in complete stress and turmoil, on the breadline, when she should have been enjoying those precious early moments of her child’s life.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so early on. I was contacted not long ago by a woman in a similar situation. Her tax credits were cut because Concentrix accused her of having a lesbian relationship with her sister. It took her coming to me as her Member of Parliament and calling Concentrix myself before it started to believe the truth. Is it not absurd that it takes a direct intervention from a Member of Parliament before this ridiculous company takes these people seriously?

Rebecca Long Bailey: Thank you to my hon. Friend for his comments. The term, “It beggars belief” springs to mind. Unfortunately, his case is not an isolated one.

After much chasing, it was eventually confirmed that the lady had no connection to this mystery woman. She was paid all the money she was owed, and the demand to repay the £4,100 was withdrawn.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We all have examples of constituents with similar stories, but the Government are showing a complete lack of urgency. People are left destitute by these decisions, for no good reason. We want to hear the Government say that they are going to put in extra resources to expedite investigations so that these people are paid and compensated, if necessary at the expense of Concentrix.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I could not agree more. The case to which I have referred is not an isolated one. According to the Government’s own figures, the company has considered about 667,000 cases, of which 103,000 have been amended. That means that 15% of investigations have wrongly pursued perfectly legitimate tax credit claimants, and they are simply the ones who have had the strength to come forward and present themselves, including to their MPs, as we have heard.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): In every single one of the Concentrix cases that has been taken up by my office so far and that has been resolved, the payment has been put back in place. In other words, they have been 100% wrong. What does my hon. Friend think that the Government ought to do about that?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I think that the cases we have seen so far are the tip of the iceberg. The Government have a responsibility to ensure that all cases are adequately investigated, and that no one has fallen through the cracks and not presented themselves either to their MP or directly to Concentrix.
Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I have spoken in previous debates about Capita’s failures in delaying the payment of disability benefits to some of our most vulnerable people. It seems to me that the only difference this time is the name of the corporation involved. Is not the fundamental issue that private profit-making companies are failing to deliver critical Government services?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I will come on in due course to the issue of the contract and how it is delivered, because there needs to be a wider investigation and discussion about that.

In 2014-15, there were no appeals against a decision. In 2015-16, there were 365, and from April to August 2016, there were 176. A similar spike is clear in the number of mandatory reconsiderations, which more than quadrupled between 2014-15 and 2015-16. It is even more shocking that that number almost quadrupled again in the period up to mid-August.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should commit to an official investigation into Concentrix’s conduct since it was awarded the contract in 2014, so that we know how what she has described was allowed to happen?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is hard to believe that the number of fraudulent tax credit claimants suddenly increased so dramatically in those two years. What is clear, however, is that there is an ever-growing evidence base suggesting that Concentrix has been unfairly and unjustly stopping people’s tax credits, leaving them in financial difficulty, along with the anxiety that that causes.

I am pleased that the Government have accepted that the contract was not working. Indeed, they were forced to concede that point in an answer to a parliamentary question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley early last month. The response revealed:

“Since mid-October 2015 there has been 120 instances where Concentrix has not fully met the performance standards set out in the contract out of a total of 1625.”

Following mounting pressure from Opposition Members, the Government announced that they would not renew the Concentrix contract when it ends in May, and that they would redeploy 150 members of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to clear the backlog of cases.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic point. A whole section of my speech is devoted to particular clauses in the contract that may or may not have been enforced by HMRC and the Government. I will come on to that in due course.

Labour welcomed the announcement that 150 members of staff would be redeployed and that the contract would not be renewed, but we still had serious concerns that Concentrix would continue to handle cases and that the Government had not stated that they would bring the operation back in-house. Following further pressure from Labour and the Public and Commercial Services Union, the Government backed down last week and PCS confirmed last week that the operation will, indeed, be brought back in-house, with Concentrix staff in Belfast being transferred to HMRC.

We of course welcomed that action, but it does not even begin to address the wider issues. How did this situation arise? When did the Government first become aware of it? What action did they take? How will they ensure that it does not occur again? Most importantly, when and how will the victims be compensated? Media reports were surfacing as far back as 2015 in relation to erroneous tax credit decisions pursuant to the contract, and, as I have outlined, the figures indicated an unusual spike in appeals. The red flags were there and they should have been acted on.

I would like to direct the Minister to the contract between HMRC and Concentrix, which provided a number of tools that the Government had at their fingertips. Section 13.1 of the contract provides that where HMRC is concerned with the delivery of service, it can investigate. Was HMRC concerned, and if so, when? If the Minister cannot answer just yet, I will, to help her to pinpoint the information, illustrate further machinery in the contract that would have helped the Government and HMRC to find out about any problems pretty swiftly. Section E7.1 and schedule D provide for the right to challenge the effectiveness of the contract. Schedule D4.1 states that “prior to…Go Live”, HMRC would work with Concentrix to establish and agree a “robust Governance Framework” including contract management, communications, quality and assurance, payment risk management, performance management, change control and, most importantly, reporting. Will the Minister confirm the details of that “robust Governance Framework” for the benefit of the House?

If the Minister cannot do so, I can reassure her that fall-back options were still available. Schedule D12.1 states that HMRC would have full access to individual cases and, further, that Concentrix was under an obligation to let HMRC observe its working methods. Pursuant to that provision, were individual cases reviewed by HMRC, and did HMRC investigate the methods used by Concentrix? If so, how often did that happen and what were the findings of those investigations? It is clear that the Government had the tools that they needed to monitor service delivery, but perhaps they simply did not use them. The Minister will confirm in due course.

If the Government had found failings after exhausting the quite reasonable dispute process in the contract, they could have exercised the break clause found at section G3 by giving only three months’ notice. Will the Minister confirm whether and when that was considered, and did HMRC investigate the methods used by Concentrix? If so, how often did that happen and what were the findings of those investigations? It is clear that the Government had the tools that they needed to monitor service delivery, but perhaps they simply did not use them. The Minister will confirm in due course.

If the Government had found failings after exhausting the quite reasonable dispute process in the contract, they could have exercised the break clause found at section G3 by giving only three months’ notice. Will the Minister confirm whether and when that was considered, and tell us the outcome of that consideration? If, however, her answer to all my contractual questions is, “I don’t know,” I would ask whether she is really sure that HMRC had the capacity to monitor the contract effectively. She will be interested to know that PCS is due to publish a report on HMRC shortly, which suggests that “the department is at breaking point…staff are hugely demoralised, 25% want to leave the department immediately or within a year and the department scores below average in all of the measures on the Civil Service’s annual staff survey.”

The report does not paint a happy picture.

The report does not paint a happy picture.
Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a forensic case. Behind these facts and figures are very real human cases of people, particularly women and single mothers, who are being absolutely hammered by Concentrix. I have constituents who are going hungry, and whose children are going hungry, because of the incompetence of Concentrix. That is what we need the Minister to answer about.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point; he is 100% correct. This is not simply a case of rapping Concentrix on the back of the hand. These contractual failings have caused real human suffering, and the Government need to address them urgently.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Is the hon. Lady aware of the spikes in such claims that she talks about arising in the week before conference recess and in the days following, when Concentrix was stripped of the contract? We all know what is happening here: drilling down into the contract to avoid exit penalties. Will the Government shed any light on that?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I hope that the Minister will address the hon. Gentleman’s question in her speech because we all want to hear the answer.

Several provisions in the contract relate to payment by delivery. The head of the National Audit Office stated in June 2015:

“While its supporters argue that, by its nature, Payment by Results offers value for money, these contracts are hard to get right, which generates risk and cost for commissioners—the increased risk and cost may be justified, but this requires credible evidence. Without such evidence, commissioners may be using this mechanism in circumstances to which it is ill-suited, to the detriment of value for money.”

Under schedule A6.1 of the contract, HMRC required Concentrix to deliver, over the duration of the contract, some £1.03 billion in savings in annually managed expenditure. I appreciate that the contract used estimates to forecast potential savings, but given the model, how could anyone have been certain about the position without a crystal ball? In answer to parliamentary questions, it was revealed that total savings in annual managed expenditure were £2.3 million in 2014-15, £122.3 million in 2015-16, and £159.5 million in 2016-17, to mid-August 2016.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that these savings were made by my constituents facing a similar situation—100% of them have had their benefits paid back—going to food banks for the first time in their lives? The place-based team in Platt Bridge has seen a spike of some 50 families going to them because of problems with their tax credits.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend’s intervention highlights the human impact of these contractual failings. My constituents have asked me for the addresses of food banks and whether parcels could be delivered to them because they were too ashamed to be seen as struggling by their communities. To put people in such situations is an absolute disgrace.

Total savings of £284.1 million have been made since the commencement of the contract in November 2014. Anyone can see that the leap from £2.3 million in 2014 to £159.5 million by mid-August 2016 is excessive. Does the Minister therefore believe that there was simply a massive increase in fraud in the system, or does she agree that the contract was granted in the absence of a firm evidence base to justify the risks associated with an agreement based on payment by results?

As I said, there is a human impact and a human cost; it is not simply a case of slapping Concentrix on the back of the hand and saying, “Let’s all move on.” We are talking about the Government’s duty to preserve justice being abandoned as a result of the profit motive established by the contract. The risks were real human risks—families being forced into destitution, anguish and despair, with all the associated pressures on an individual’s mental health.

Earlier this year, the Social Security Advisory Committee noted that the payment model could create a conflict of interest. It recommended that the National Audit Office should examine the contract to ensure that it included appropriate safeguards to preserve justice for the claimant. At that stage, there was no investigation, but the Labour party has since written to the NAO and received the following response:

“My team has carried out some preliminary work to look into the issues. Their view is that the contract between HMRC and Concentrix merits further investigation.”

I am pleased that the NAO will investigate, but the Government must carry out a full and transparent inquiry of their own. Our motion calls on the Government to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the performance of Concentrix and HMRC’s contract with the company, in terms of both the adequacy of enforcing all the contractual terms, and the suitability of a payment-by-results model for delivering such a service. I would add that the NAO confirmed last year that the Government’s payment-by-results schemes accounted for at least £15 billion of public spending. It has stated that neither the Cabinet Office nor the Treasury monitors how payment by results operates across government.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a detailed case about the defects of the contract, including in relation to payment by results. Does she agree that the problems with that model were exacerbated by the fact that when people had a problem with their tax credits being withdrawn, they had to complain to Concentrix—they had to go back to the decision maker—and there was, naturally, no financial incentive for Concentrix to unwind a wrong decision?

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend is right. Sadly, however, when many people tried to complain to Concentrix, all they received was a dull engaged tone, so they did not get very far.

Will the Minister assure the House that she will go beyond the scope of the motion and investigate such contracts more widely? She should consider putting measures before the House that will prevent the incorrect application of payment by results. I fear that Concentrix is just the tip of the iceberg.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I have just looked at how far back payment by results goes. Will new Labour, or old new Labour, take some responsibility—payment by results was introduced in the English NHS in 2003-04—and condemn it roundly in the Chamber today?
Rebecca Long Bailey: We can all learn lessons by reviewing the handling of payment-by-results contracts. I hope that the Minister will consider those experiences when she conducts a review of the delivery of such contracts.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rebecca Long Bailey: No. I have one paragraph left before I finish.

I want to conclude by speaking about the victims of these terrible systematic failures. They did not deserve to face the hardship they have endured, and they must be adequately compensated for their losses. Will the Minister confirm that they will be compensated? On what basis will they be compensated, and what is the timeframe for that action? Will she confirm that, in addressing the problem and bringing services back into HMRC, she will mitigate any adverse effect on or reduction in service for complainants? I ask her to keep an eye out for the PCS report because it is a real eye-opener. I know that the Minister has experienced terrible cases on her own doorstep. She has seen the effects at first hand and seems to be very empathetic. As such, will she issue an apology on behalf of her Government for the distress and hardship that has been caused? That is the very least our constituents deserve.

1.12 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): During the past few weeks, there have been a number of debates in this House about the quality of service provided by Concentrix in helping HMRC to counter fraud and error in our tax system. This is an important opportunity to debate the issue again, and I hope to go a little further in providing the House with information.

It is right that we have debated the issue because during the past few months it has become clear that Concentrix, despite the best efforts of the majority of its frontline staff, was failing to meet the standards we expected and, indeed, that we had specified in its contract. This meant that many of the people whose tax credits were being investigated—we have heard about them in the speech by the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) and in interventions, and they include my constituents—have been caused needless frustration and distress in resolving their cases. I suspect we will hear more examples as the debate unfolds. I intend to address the specific points in the motion, but as the hon. Lady accurately speculated, I may need in due course to write to her about aspects of the contractual arrangements, for reasons that may become obvious as I go through my speech.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Before the Minister leaves the human suffering aspect of this debate, may I welcome the speed with which she has responded to the letter and memoranda of cases that I, like other Members, have submitted to her? If we are not only talking about learning lessons from the contract, may I ask how we can quickly get compensation to the people who have been adversely affected? Will she give an undertaking today—she may have such an undertaking in her speech—that people whose benefits have been cut by Concentrix will be informed of the hardship fund that she has established so that they can quickly apply for help?

Jane Ellison: The right hon. Gentleman is right to anticipate that I will touch on that issue. I will reflect on his point. I do not know about the arrangements for being proactive in telling people, but there are arrangements in place. When I get to that point, he can let me know if he does not think they are adequate.

Given that so many hon. Members on both sides of the House have made such efforts to support their constituents during recent weeks—the human aspects of this issue are absolutely uppermost in our mind today—I should bring the House up to date on the action taken to rectify the situation. As I informed the House last month, we decided on 13 September not to pass any new cases to Concentrix. Instead, it was intended that it should concentrate on resolving outstanding cases. HMRC staff stepped in to reinstate a quality customer service, such as making sure that people could once again get through on the phones. We know how critical it is for people to be able to get through and have their voice heard.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On 14 September, when the Minister answered an urgent question in the House, she told all our constituents to phone the number they were given. One of my constituents phoned the line that day and waited for ages to get through, only to be told, “Because of all the complaints you’ve been making, we’re getting sacked”, and the phone was put down. Does she agree that that added further to the already deep distress that people were feeling, and that it is not acceptable?

Jane Ellison: Of course it is not acceptable—not at all. I would add that, as hon. Members may be aware, the opening hours of the MPs’ phone line have for some weeks been extended to cope with the larger number of calls coming through that route.

Louise Haigh: In her response to that urgent question, the Minister reassured the House that queries would be dealt with within four working days. We know that that simply is not the case, and many of my constituents have been waiting for weeks to hear back from Concentrix or HMRC about their tax credit award. Will she update the House about the deadline for dealing with these cases?

Jane Ellison: I will come on to that, but the hon. Lady has provided me with an apt moment to be clear about what I said on that day. I said that once we had established the facts of the case, people should be paid within four working days. Clearly, some cases are complex and need further details to be provided. In response to the urgent question, I said that once we had established the facts, an automated process would authorise payment to be made within four working days. That is the timeline to which HMRC is working.

As I have said, it is absolutely critical that we get the right information, establish the facts and get payments started again. To that end, HMRC took back from Concentrix 181,000 incomplete cases, and staff have been working hard to resolve them. I can update the
House by saying that 178,000 of the 181,000 cases have already been finalised, which represents 98% of them. HMRC has already written to the people concerned in the other 2% of cases, and it should conclude those cases by the end of this month. I want to place on the record my thanks to HMRC staff for their efforts in that regard. HMRC staff are also taking on reviews that are requested of any decision made by Concentrix.

Chris Law: Is it startling that 98% of cases have been resolved within four weeks? Is there any evidence whatsoever that there were grounds to pursue people over their tax credits in those 98% of cases, or was this a bogus fishing expedition, as all of us in the House are likely to believe?

Jane Ellison: It is important to recognise that when a case is resolved, it means that a conclusion has been reached based on the facts. I cannot give the House the breakdown of cases in which payments have been reinstated, cases in which there was in fact an error in the claim that had to be corrected, or indeed cases—a very small number of them—in which claims were fraudulent. The point is that the cases have been resolved according to the facts provided and in the knowledge of the person concerned. We may be able to provide a breakdown at some point, but I am not in a position to do so today.

Kate Green: The House would find it especially helpful to know to what degree Concentrix was steered by the Government towards looking for undeclared partners, and to what degree the contract incentivised Concentrix to jump to conclusions?

Jane Ellison: I will come on to that.

Sammy Wilson: I really must make some progress, Mr Speaker, if I may not indulge me too much more. Is there any evidence whatsoever that there were grounds to pursue people over their tax credits in those 98% of cases, or was this a bogus fishing expedition, as all of us in the House are likely to believe?

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Jane Ellison: I will come on to that.

Sammy Wilson: Is there any evidence whatsoever that there were grounds to pursue people over their tax credits in those 98% of cases, or was this a bogus fishing expedition, as all of us in the House are likely to believe?

Jane Ellison: It is very difficult for me to comment on a specific case, but if the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the details I will ask HMRC to comment on it. We held a further drop-in on 19 October, and if the House feels it would be useful to hold another such Member drop-in for cases such as that to be resolved face to face, I am very happy to arrange one. If hon. Members are aware of people in hardship—I know many are—they can bring that directly to our attention. In fact, I am grateful to all those Members who have already taken action of that kind and attended the various drop-in sessions I have organised in the House. I remind everyone that there is a special hotline for MPs to raise issues and seek information, and we have allocated extra staff to make that service available over extended opening hours. We will address any such cases with the greatest of urgency.

We are making some progress towards at least putting an end to the distress and worry that some people have regrettably faced in recent times. Mechanisms are in place to make sure that anyone in hardship as a result of uncertainties or mistakes will be supported. Those two things have been our top priorities.

Maria Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: Not just at the moment—I must make some progress. Most of the data that both HMRC and Concentrix are working from are the sort of data Members would expect companies and HMRC to be using in this regard. Concentrix makes some reference to credit data. Because there are so many tax credit claims, a lot of the work on pointing to where there might be errors is based on the history of where there have been substantial errors over time, and those individuals and people—

Sammy Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: Not just at the moment—I must make some progress.

Particular individuals in particular circumstances are more prone to error. Over the years that tax credits have been running quite a substantial picture has built up of where error is more likely to exist.

Sammy Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mark Durkan: Will the Minister give way?
Jane Ellison: No, I am sorry, I am going to make some progress.

We have been working—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) says the information is duff, but there are a lot of cases of error, and some of fraud, in the system. It is not the case that all the information is, in her word, duff—far from it. I will come on to mention the figures involved, but all right hon. and hon. Members know that there are times when people give the wrong information; that is mostly because of error, but sometimes because of fraud.

Sammy Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: I will just make a bit more progress, then I will bring the hon. Gentleman in.

We are working hard to address the wider issues, many of which have been alluded to. I will move on to the three main points in the motion. We agree that Concentrix’s performance fell below the standards required in its contract. I do not want to ignore the millions of pounds’ worth of savings it has helped to deliver for the taxpayer, which might not otherwise have been achieved, but when the level of customer service is so far below what we expect, it is right that we take action.

First, then, as set out under the terms of the contract, payment to Concentrix will be cut in response to its failure to adhere to the standards required. Secondly, as HMRC announced on 13 September and I confirmed the following day, its contract will not be renewed beyond its end date in May 2017, nor will any further procurement exercise for tax credit checks be taken forward at that time. Thirdly, I can confirm that HMRC is in discussion with Concentrix to agree a negotiated early exit from the contract.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jane Ellison: I will take some interventions, but before I do I must say that, as the House would expect, while those commercial discussions are ongoing I cannot provide full details of the negotiated early exit; however, I expect it to be finalised shortly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jane Ellison: I will give way to the hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), because he has been waiting a long time.

Sammy Wilson: Although Members accept that cases of hardship have been created, does the Minister also accept that in a written answer to the House she indicated of the hardship have been created, does the Minister also accept that in a written answer to the House she indicated that all the information is, in her word, duff—far from it. I will come on to mention the figures involved, but all right hon. and hon. Members know that there are times when people give the wrong information; that is mostly because of error, but sometimes because of fraud.

Jane Ellison: I have said, both in reply to the urgent question on 14 September and in my opening remarks today, that front-line Concentrix staff have been working hard to resolve these issues. The problems of a contract like this, and of getting through on the phone, are never usually the fault of the person you finally get through to. It is right to say that people have been working hard. I suspect the hon. Gentleman represents many of the people who work there.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I also welcome the statement that we are terminating the contract with Concentrix. That is absolutely the right thing to do. I have a number of constituents who have suffered these problems. Mr and Mrs Young from Malton provided evidence that they were married. Despite that, Mrs Young was identified as unmarried and living in Whithby on her own. Members of Parliament have the emergency hotline—I have used it—and people can get emergency hardship payments. Does the Minister welcome that and should we make it more publicly known that those measures are available for people in hardship?

Jane Ellison: That is exactly right, and today’s debate is timely as it allows us to focus on that. I am now going to give way to the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who has done much work on this matter.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way—she is being very generous. As we have heard, the contract altered last year. Will she confirm how the contract was altered last October, and that it was altered because Concentrix was unable to make enough money out of it before then?

Jane Ellison: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will write to her on that. As commercial discussions are ongoing it would be best to write on something as detailed as that, and I am happy to do so.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the Minister for giving way, as I know time is precious. I appreciate that she cannot divulge the terms of the ongoing negotiations for the termination of the contract, but will she commit to coming back to the House to make a statement as soon as those terms are finalised? Will she provide the information that she can obtain—for example, when the dispute process was first examined and the outcome of that process? We are at the very end of a contractual process, and simply want to know what the timeline was.

Jane Ellison: Again, those are matters I will return to, in part because there will be a number of examinations of this situation—the National Audit Office has already talked about the work it will do. I will come on to that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jane Ellison: I will take one more intervention. I have not taken one from—

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Jane Ellison: Well, I have not taken one from my hon. Friend, but I will take one from the Scottish National party and then I will progress to the end of my speech.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I understand, with the challenges coming from the Opposition Benches, why she wishes to outsource blame purely to Concentrix, but this Government wrote the contract to incentivise
Concentrix’s behaviour and, as confirmed by the Economic Secretary last week in Westminster Hall, sent the personal data to Concentrix to investigate—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are tremendously grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I feel that he has surely concluded his intervention.

Jane Ellison: Far from saying that this is all Concentrix, I think there are lessons to be learned all round. I should signal now that, because I think there are lessons to be learned all round—for HMRC, for Ministers and certainly for Concentrix—the Government do not intend to divide the House on the Opposition’s motion. I want this to be an exercise in understanding the problems and learning the lessons. I will take one more intervention, for balance from my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), and then move on to the end of my speech.

James Berry: I have two Concentrix cases from single mothers, one of whom was required to disprove a relationship she plainly never had with a former tenant of her house, evidence she could not possibly provide. Does my hon. Friend agree that what is important now is that the Concentrix contract has been ended and a system for investigating mistakes and a hardship fund have been put in place? That is what is important.

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend rightly brings us back to the human factor. He is right to highlight that the heart of what we want to do is to get people back in payment, where they should be, and to relieve hardship. I will now move quickly towards the end of my remarks. Mr Speaker has been very indulgent.

Among the discussions happening at the moment, HMRC has agreed to the transfer of Concentrix staff to HMRC. Concentrix has begun consulting its staff on this point and anyone transferring to HMRC will be supported through further training to help us deliver a quality public service.

It is also right, as the motion suggests and the shadow Minister challenges, that we look long and hard at what went so wrong with Concentrix’s performance. Not only do we owe that to all those who were caused worry or distress as a result of these failures, but it is also of huge importance that we learn from what happened and prevent any similar issues arising in any future contracts across government. That is why HMRC will be looking at how the contract with Concentrix was managed. It accepts it has lessons to learn. It has given evidence to one Select Committee already and will be giving evidence to at least one other—learning lessons and undertaking analysis of the claims.

Members will be keen to see an unbiased, independent assessment. As has been alluded to already, the independent National Audit Office, which scrutinises public spending, has announced it will be conducting an inquiry into the Concentrix contract. HMRC will work and co-operate with the NAO very closely to support that inquiry. The investigations will undoubtedly include, as the motion suggests, a consideration of the knock-on effects that may have been caused to other services provided by HMRC. As I have outlined, HMRC has needed to deploy extra staff to address the problems encountered, but I reassure the House that it is currently managing the increased workload effectively. Again, that is a testament to the efforts of its staff. It is also a reflection of the flexibility HMRC possesses. It is a large organisation capable of moving staff around quickly and dealing with peaks of demand, which it is accustomed to handling at various points in the year.

During the debate we have touched a number of times on the point about mitigating suffering. As I set out, our first course of action is to ensure that we get people’s tax credit claims back on track. HMRC is working hard to get the information needed from claimants to put anyone entitled to tax credits back into payment, including paying any arrears to which they are entitled. In parallel, HMRC is taking forward any requests for reviews of Concentrix’s decisions. Indeed, many decisions have been overturned. I have made inquiries and it is fair to say that, largely, they have not been due to original errors, but have followed the provision of additional information that has been obtained through the process of the mandatory review. So many of these problems have been caused because people did not, or were not able to, respond to the first timetable they were given. They have now provided that information—the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) asked about this earlier—and we have been able to reassess their claims.

We have also made it a priority to address urgent cases of hardship through the usual mechanisms, but I will look at the point made by the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee. If anyone has been caused undue distress or financial loss following errors or wrongdoing by Concentrix, they should contact HMRC. Such complaints will be taken very seriously, with a thorough examination of all the evidence. Where mistakes have been made, HMRC will not only make sure claimants are now being paid correctly, but pay compensation where appropriate.

It may be helpful for colleagues to know that I have asked to be told on an ongoing basis the issues that Members are bringing up with HMRC. Someone used the phrase “early warning signal”. Members’ complaints—Members from both sides of the House have been assiduous in representing their constituents—are a very good early warning signal for when things might not be right.

In conclusion, it is undoubtedly the case that there remains too much fraud and error in the tax credits system. It is a complicated system and it is very easy for many honest people to get it wrong. Error and fraud stood at £1.37 billion in 2014-15, so it is right that the Government—any Government—are determined to spend taxpayer money sensibly and sustainably, and take action to address that. We want to ensure that those who are entitled to tax credits get them, but, as we all know, it is vital we prevent overpayments that will then need to be paid back. We have all seen the enormous distress that this causes to vulnerable people. Often, just through not supplying the right information and getting muddled up about a form, people end up owing a lot of money, and that causes a lot of distress.

Progress is being made. Error and fraud in the tax credit system are now close to their lowest levels since its introduction in 2003. We are not going to take a step back in our efforts to ensure we have a fair tax system that tackles non-compliance in all its forms. We announced an extra £800 million in funding last year to do so, but
that has always got to be balanced by the need to keep providing both the financial support and quality customer service that people, whatever their income level, are entitled to. On this occasion, the balance was not appropriate. It is for that reason we have taken the action I have outlined to put the situation right. We want to support people who are struggling with their claims and we want to reinstate payments to those who are entitled to them.

I am sure that many of the comments that have been made so far, and will be made in the debate that follows, will be fair. I will not agree with all the points made, but there has been much fair comment. For that reason, we will not oppose the motion. Above all, we want a fair outcome for everyone affected and we want to learn important lessons to ensure this sort of thing does not happen again. We must ensure that these important public services work for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the next hon. Lady, it will be obvious to the House that there are a great many Members who wish to speak this afternoon. We will start with a voluntary time limit of eight minutes for Back-Bench speeches. If that does not work, I will impose a time limit of eight minutes. This time limit, voluntary or otherwise, does not, of course, apply to the spokesman for the Scottish National party, Mhairi Black.

1.37 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): The Scottish National party will fully support Labour’s motion. I thank the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) for making the case so eloquently, but I think it is worth while reiterating some key points.

HMRC gave the contract to Concentrix, with the “additional capacity to review and correct tax credit claims that are potentially based on incorrect information.”

One of the main tasks of Concentrix was to find people with an “undisclosed partner” and to see whether they were claiming the benefit as a single person but actually living with others. That is where the problem really begins. Concentrix spent a considerable amount of money putting out “fishing” letters to try to catch people claiming fraudulently. In a written answer on 7 September, the Treasury Minister said that Concentrix sent out 381,000 letters to tax credit claimants requesting proof of single status; 254,000 letters asking for details of hours worked; and 312,000 letters asking for evidence of childcare use.

Concentrix’s logic was that, unless people replied with the appropriate evidence, their tax credits would be stopped. However, despite all those letters apparently being sent out, thousands of people had absolutely no idea they were being investigated. Quite often, they did not know that they were under investigation, or that their tax credits had been stopped.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Given the clampdown on supposedly fraudulent claims with these fishing letters, would it not be good to see the same rigour applied to aggressive corporate tax avoidance?

Mhairi Black: I agree entirely. That is something I will touch on later.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Lady also accept that, although 1.5 million cases were referred to Concentrix, it whittled them down to less than a fifth of the cases sent by HMRC? Therefore, had it been in HMRC’s control, a lot more people might have been affected than were actually affected.

Mhairi Black: Another interesting point is that, when the Work and Pensions Committee looked into the matter, we discovered that Concentrix had subcontractors—three, I believe—but it was not allowed to go into any detail about who they were or what their methods were. I hope that, at some point, the Government will answer those questions.

Like the constituents of many other Members here, all the constituents I dealt with did not discover that their tax credits had been stopped until they went to collect them from the bank and discovered that there was nothing. When I started to look into the matter, I realised that this is truly the most ridiculous level of incompetence that I have ever heard of. People were accused of being in relationships with dead tenants 70 years their senior. They were accused of being in relationships with some of their own children. In my constituency, Scottish flat numbers seemed to be a major issue for Concentrix because it could not get its head around the fact that flat 1/1 and 1/2 were across the landing from each other and were not the same house.

The best one, though, has to be the case of RS McColl. To provide a bit of perspective, RS McColl is a corner shop that is as common in Scotland as WH Smith is in England, yet people were being accused of living with this mysterious Mr McColl because their flat was above an RS McColl shop. At no point did anyone in Concentrix or HMRC think, “Wait a minute. This Casanova is getting about a bit.” This would be funny—until we remember that we are talking about people’s livelihoods and their survival.

As a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, I took part in the evidence session where we heard from claimants who had had their tax credits stopped. This is where we have to remember the human costs. We first heard from a woman called Marie, a mother of two who went six weeks with no support. She did not discover that her benefits had been stopped until she went to the bank. She said that she genuinely could not fill her cupboards with any food and she spoke of the shame of having to take her kids to a food bank and having to rely on the charity of others to be able to eat.

A woman called Sarah had no hand and suffered chronic pain every day of her life. She had two young kids, who were both under the age of five. She spent a combined total of 19 hours on the phone waiting for someone from Concentrix to answer. When she finally did get through to someone, the person at the other end of the phone just kept saying, “I don’t know; sorry about that. You need to phone back and try to get someone else.” She was asked to write a letter. She explained she could not write due to her disability, only to be told, “Well, sorry, you’ll just need to find someone else to write it.” At that point, that woman broke down in tears in front of the Committee. She was overwhelmed.
with emotion when she spoke about the fact that she had to look at her kids knowing that she did not know where the next meal was coming from.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady share my frustration about the fact that a constituent of mine who was down to her last £5 was told to send documents to Concentrix by recorded delivery? She then had to decide whether to feed her child or to send those documents. I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that that is absolutely horrific.

Mhairi Black: It is actually completely disgusting for this to be happening under the watch of Government. It is also worth remembering that, when we talk about these horrendous individual cases, they are not unfortunate or rare examples—it is happening throughout the UK. Whoever made the music that is played when people are put on hold by Concentrix must be making a fortune, because my entire office can whistle it off the top of their heads, we were kept on hold for so long—and that was on the MPs’ hotline. The fact that people who do not have access to that hotline are sometimes having to spend up to 90 minutes on the phone is ridiculous.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I wonder whether other colleagues have shared the experience of my staff. Concentrix just flatly refused to deal with them, saying that it would speak only to the MP. We are only there one day a week, and that might be when it is not easy to take the history from the constituent.

Mhairi Black: It is also worth remembering that the number of people were asked to phone was an 0845 number, so it cost an absolute fortune. I think that anyone in the Chamber would find it cost a fortune, so imagine how much pressure that will put on someone who already qualifies for tax credits, but has been told that they will not be receiving them.

When we in the office did get through, we were told that people had to apply for mandatory reconsiderations, only to discover that the contract also delegated extensive decision making powers to Concentrix, including the processing of mandatory reconsiderations. So this private company has to investigate itself to find out whether it made the correct decision. We should bear in mind the fact that the contract states that it should be paid only if 90% to 95% of mandatory reconsiderations were upheld. He said that as though it was some kind of problem that—

Jane Ellison: It is kind of the hon. Lady to let me intervene. It is worth saying that often the reason the mandatory reconsideration succeeds is that the information previously requested has been supplied to that timetable. It is not fair to say that the reason is because the previous decisions were always wrong. Sometimes the information requested has at that point been supplied and then the correct claim can be instated.

Mhairi Black: I appreciate the Minister’s point, but we need to remember that HMRC and the Government were supplying information to Concentrix, so a lot of the fault lies with the Government.

Neil Gray: I was talking earlier about Government responsibility—before Mr Speaker rightly encouraged my pithiness. Does my hon. Friend agree that the only way for the UK Government to take proper responsibility is not only by providing substantial and appropriate compensation, but by offering full apologies to those constituents who were wrongly dealt with by Concentrix and this Government?

Mhairi Black: I could not agree more.

Concentrix was saying that 95% of mandatory reconsiderations were upheld, but in the next panel before the Select Committee, the chief executive of HMRC said that it was not as bad as 95% and that 73% were upheld. He said that as though it was some kind of problem that—

Several hon. Members rose—

Mhairi Black: I want to make some progress.

It is such a farce that the Government and Concentrix cannot even agree on how many times they got it wrong. It is a ridiculous situation to find ourselves in. Meanwhile, people are having to go to food banks and to go home to their crying children, who do not want to eat Tesco’s 80p Bolognese for the fourth time that week.

I appreciate that mistakes can happen in all walks of life, whatever job one is in, but the reality is that, when the mistakes are made by Government, it is people who suffer—and often it is the most vulnerable people. Although we wholeheartedly support Labour’s motion, we have to highlight the fact that the Government have to bear some of the blame. The contract itself states that HMRC is required to monitor the exercise and remains responsible in law for the actions carried out by the contractor. I do not believe that the Government have done that adequately.

The most damning thing in this entire saga is that Concentrix was under the impression that its contract was going to be renewed. Only after the media cottoned on to this and began writing about it, and after 670-odd formal complaints were put in by elected Members to HMRC, did the heat begin to be turned up and the issue begin to be taken seriously. The vice-president of Concentrix said he was initially given only 15 minutes’ notice, before he went on a flight, that the contract was not going to be renewed. He pleaded with HMRC to give an hour in order to inform staff. An hour was the difference between Concentrix thinking it had a contract that would be renewed and the contract being taken away because of its shambolic work. The level of incompetence is truly incredible. We cannot ignore that and place all the blame on Concentrix.

So what needs to be done now? The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the £100 hardship payment, but in all my cases constituents have been told that the £100 will be taken back off their benefits. That has to be looked at. If we are all being told that at the same time, that is clearly an issue.
As for how we should deal with the overall problem, the buck has to stop with HMRC. The Government must bring services of this kind back in house, and they must once again be the Government’s day-to-day responsibility. Saying to a private company “We want you to make £1 billion worth of cuts, but we will only pay you on a results basis” is a recipe for disaster. We have to legislate so that this is never allowed to happen again. One of the main reasons that it occurred in the first place was the lack of resources and Departments’ inability to cope. The Treasury must reconsider its ongoing policy of downsizing HMRC, especially when we are in the midst of such a cataclysmic problem.

As has been said by a number of Members today, and on another occasion by my good and hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), the Government must apologise to people. There is no shame in apologising and admitting that you got it wrong. The Government need to regain a bit of trust from the people who have been hurt. Concentrix is by no means innocent of any of what has happened, but ultimately it was HMRC that signed the contract: it happened on HMRC’s watch.

Conservative Members will probably roll their eyes and stop listening when I say this, but the biggest problem that I have with issues like this is that the Government seem to think that one third of them are. The Government have not just a responsibility to the general public seem to think that one third of them are. The Government have not just a responsibility to the kind of society that many of us want.

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Kevin Foster: The focus should be on what went wrong, waiting to see what the National Audit Office comes up with—I shall say more about that shortly—observing the reaction to that and dealing with the issues, rather than getting into a debate about whether the gesture of an apology should be made. That said, I am pleased that the Government are not seeking to nit-pick the Opposition motion, that we are not going to divide the House, and that, effectively, we will support the motion. That, I think, speaks for itself.

In the light of the problems that had been raised with me, I welcomed the Government's action in making it very clear that the contract would not be renewed. It is over a month since the last new case was sent to Concentrix. I am also pleased that HMRC is moving in to resolve many of the issues.

Patricia Gibson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: Will the hon. Lady give it a moment? I shall make some more progress, for now.

I said that HMRC was moving in. It should be noted that that organisation has had its own customer service issues in the past. In fact, in the next half hour my fellow members of the Public Accounts Committee will be discussing and examining its customer service. There have been some welcome improvements recently, but many Members who are present today will have had their own experiences of sitting and waiting to get through to the “hotline”.

Sammy Wilson: It is not surprising that when HMRC was challenged to specify the number of cases it had dealt with that had involved errors and how long it had taken it to respond to those errors, it could not give the figures. We cannot even make a comparison between HMRC’s performance and that of Concentrix.

Kevin Foster: This afternoon we received a fairly detailed report produced by the National Audit Office on HMRC’s annual report, which is being discussed by the Public Accounts Committee and which goes into some depth about HMRC’s performance and customer service standards. It can be read in comparison with what we have heard about Concentrix. The PAC is also discussing the tax gap, and the need to ensure that HMRC is performing as we would expect it to in ensuring that the taxes for which we legislate in the House are paid by those who are required to pay them. I genuinely welcome the fact that the National Audit Office will be investigating this matter, and, in that context, I think that some of the comments that have been made today may have been slightly premature.

I was going to intervene on the shadow Minister when she was commenting on our having an independent and fearless inquiry commissioned by the Government. I was struggling to think how more independent and fearless an inquiry could be than a report by the NAO, which is an arm of this Parliament, not of Government. It will also go into the detail around the customer service, and certainly in previous reports it has been extremely thorough when doing so.

Kevin Foster: I encourage the hon. Gentlemen to read the HMRC report being discussed this afternoon by the PAC; it might be worth his attending the session if he gets the chance. It is worth noting that with new leadership, which has been needed for some time, HMRC is starting to turn around its customer service, by moving more staff into dealing with post, for example. There is some evidence that the customer service is improving, therefore, which is welcome, although I know that some of these assertions will be robustly tested by a number of Members, including the hon. Gentleman’s party colleague and PAC member the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell).

It is vital that the investigation is full and that we look at what comes out of it. I welcome the Minister’s saying that there is an ongoing negotiation about concluding the contract early. We cannot go into the details of that today for obvious reasons, but I hope the work being done to bring this whole sorry tale to an end will be shared with the NAO as part of its inquiry.

One of the conclusions to be drawn is that it is clear that people have been caused pain and suffering that they should not have been caused. People have been subjected to allegations that were flagrantly untrue: the “philandering shop”; the person living down the road; someone who has been dead for some years. We should think about the way the contractor went about things—sending letters with the contractor’s logo that looked very similar to official Government or HMRC letters. We might have debates about whether in future the symbol of the Crown and HMRC should be used on a letter sent by a contractor.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Many of the constituents who came to me did not appear to have received a letter at all. A letter with some strange logo on it might not register as being what it is about and therefore might get overlooked.

Kevin Foster: I understand that point, but the evidence from my constituency case load is that it cut both ways. Some people saw a logo that looked like it was from HMRC and wondered what the letter was about. This matter might require further inquiry, and we should consider the information that the NAO will bring forward. The NAO does not just look at the sums. It is not just going to work out how many people got paid for what. It will also go into the detail around the customer service, and certainly in previous reports it has been extremely thorough when doing so.
I welcome the overall tone of the Minister’s response to this motion, and I welcome the fact that the Government took clear and decisive action to bring this contract to an end and are continuing to do that and to prevent more people from having to experience the issues many Members have highlighted today. I hope the monitoring will go on because, as we have seen with past issues to do with HMRC, an in-house solution is not necessarily a magic bullet to achieving amazing customer service. We have only to look at past debates on HMRC’s performance to see that. I welcome some of the tone of today’s debate, but it is now absolutely clear that we need to resolve the outstanding cases, let the NAO do its work and then form our conclusions based on the evidence it brings to us.

2.5 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and follow the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). It is very useful to have the Minister’s detailed and constructive responses on the operation of the contract, but I want to open my remarks by drawing attention to the policy issues that underlie the difficulty we have got into.

For many years we had a social security system designed and operated in a way that served to target, judge and stigmatise single parents in particular. I thought we had stopped doing that, but certainly as far as the experiences of my own constituents are concerned that group of claimants has been particularly affected by the way this contract has been designed and operated.

Of course, single parents will in most cases, although not always, be women—women who take responsibility for raising their children alone. There is a real question for Ministers to answer about the policy design that led to that group of women being so damaged and targeted by the operation of the contract. When I raised this point with the Minister earlier, she did not really address it, but I hope the NAO report will look at it—not just at the way the contract operated, but at how it was designed and what behaviour it incentivised.

I agree with the Minister and the hon. Member for Torbay that nobody condones fraud in the benefit system—it undermines confidence in the system and denies access to the system for those entitled to benefit from it—but when the system starts to make assumptions about intimate relationships and living arrangements, which are intrinsically intrusive matters, it is incumbent on the Government and their agents to handle that with great sensitivity and care. It seems pretty clear from all the evidence of Concentrix being in error, my constituents poor customer service or were unable to get through. Explain their circumstances, they repeatedly received letters did not look very convincing. One constituent to, or, as the hon. Member for Torbay mentioned, the previous tenant’s son; a constituent who was told that her landlord was in fact her undisclosed partner; and, in perhaps the most bizarre case of all, a constituent who appeared to have been told that her mother, with whom she lived, was her undisclosed partner.

Evidence that was provided to Concentrix by my constituents was too often ignored. Sometimes Concentrix had given the wrong address for the evidence to be sent to, or, as the hon. Member for Torbay mentioned, the letters did not look very convincing. One constituent drew my attention to the fact that many of the words were misspelled and that the letters were full of errors. She drew the overall conclusion, when Concentrix got in touch with her, that she was in fact the victim of some sort of scam. Sometimes evidence could not be produced. In two cases that I have dealt with, constituents were asked to submit utility bills, even though they were living with their parents and the utility bills were not in their name. We have also heard that when constituents have tried to deal with Concentrix on the telephone to explain their circumstances, they repeatedly received poor customer service or were unable to get through.

I consider it troubling that, even when there was clear evidence of Concentrix being in error, my constituents were told that they would have to go through a formal process of mandatory reconsideration—an extra barrier—when in fact Concentrix should immediately have said, “We have made a mistake, we will get the situation put right.” The Minister has told us of the commitment to get tax credits into payment within four days of an investigation being concluded. Of course I understand that time needs to be taken to look into the circumstances of a claim, but we need an overall time limit for these investigations. We cannot leave constituents waiting for weeks and weeks without these matters being resolved.

The consequences for all our constituents have been extremely harsh. Housing benefits have been stopped. In one case, I had to intervene to prevent a constituent from being threatened with eviction. Debt has been sent to it by HMRC, and that in the mandatory review it reviewed 95% positively? That militates against the incentivisation argument. In addition, when cases went to appeal, fewer than 0.005% were overturned, which would indicate that Concentrix was well aware that it had to abide by certain rules in dealing with these cases.

Kate Green: Assuming that there might be fraud in a fifth of cases and looking into them is a very high proportion, because we know, and the Minister acknowledged, that fraud in the social security system is very low. I am not sure I completely accept the hon. Gentleman’s analysis, therefore. I have concerns—and the whole House has expressed concerns about this in this debate, as has the SSAC and the NAO—that a payment-by-results model has to be designed very carefully if perverse incentives are to be avoided. In this instance that was not achieved.

As a result, constituents of mine and of Members across the House were put in the impossible position of having to prove a negative—to prove that they did not live with somebody, often somebody they did not know, and sometimes someone who did not even exist. Cases that I have seen include: a woman being asked about an undisclosed partner who turned out to be a previous tenant of the property who had moved out nine years earlier; a constituent who was accused of living with a previous tenant’s son; a constituent who was told that her landlord was in fact her undisclosed partner; and, in perhaps the most bizarre case of all, a constituent who appeared to have been told that her mother, with whom she lived, was her undisclosed partner.

Evidence that was provided to Concentrix by my constituents was too often ignored. Sometimes Concentrix had given the wrong address for the evidence to be sent to, or, as the hon. Member for Torbay mentioned, the letters did not look very convincing. One constituent drew my attention to the fact that many of the words were misspelled and that the letters were full of errors. She drew the overall conclusion, when Concentrix got in touch with her, that she was in fact the victim of some sort of scam. Sometimes evidence could not be produced. In two cases that I have dealt with, constituents were asked to submit utility bills, even though they were living with their parents and the utility bills were not in their name. We have also heard that when constituents have tried to deal with Concentrix on the telephone to explain their circumstances, they repeatedly received poor customer service or were unable to get through.
mounting. We have heard about women being forced to go to food banks for the first time. One mother in my constituency who was unable to pay her nursery fees was told to remove her child from the nursery. In another case, children have had to be sent away to live with relatives because the mother was no longer able to feed them or to heat their home.

Another policy point to which I draw the Minister’s attention relates to how especially damaging this contract has been in terms of its impact on children. The Government really have to face up to the fact that policies and their execution must be underpinned by an obligation to prioritise the wellbeing of children. In this contract, that clearly did not happen. It is iniquitous that the brunt of this chaos should have been borne by women and children. An equality impact assessment of the policy and its execution ought to have addressed that fact, but the Minister did not mention that this afternoon, and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby) did not mention it in the Westminster Hall debate last week either. I really hope that, in summing up the debate this afternoon, the Minister will tell us what equality impact assessment was carried out and what adjustments were made to the policy as a result.

This has been a disgraceful catalogue of error and mistreatment. I am pleased that the contract has been terminated, and I am very pleased that the National Audit Office is to carry out a full review of what went wrong. I echo the questions asked by colleagues around the House. What compensation is going to be paid to Concentrix? What has been the cost of the spike in appeals? That should be on the record. It is credit to how efficiently and service of third-party contracts as against the right way. We also expect the European Union to account correctly for the money it receives from its taxpayers, including our own.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) is absolutely right to say that rich people, and every company, should pay the right amount of tax. I would add that this is not a case of either/or. It is a case of both. The Government were absolutely right to increase HMRC’s resources for collecting the right amount of tax from those who have tax to pay and to ensure that the right amounts of welfare benefits are received by the right people. It is worth noting that the £270 million recovered through this programme will make a decent contribution to reducing fraud and we must ensure that it is made available to the people who need it most.

Secondly, there has been a cost during this process to our hard-working, not-well-off constituents. In each of the dozen or so cases that I or my office staff have replied to, there has been a degree of hardship and, in some cases, considerable hardship. HMRC’s response to such cases is therefore important. My sense, from our Select Committee inquiry, is that HMRC’s chief executive, Jon Thompson, is looking at how quickly HMRC has responded. It is true, however, that the moment HMRC took a grip, beefed up resources and put extra staff on to the MPs’ hotline, my office—and, I suspect, those of other MPs—was able to resolve these tax credits cases very fast. I am unsure whether all the cases were resolved within 48 hours, but all were done within three or four days, and some within a few hours. Indeed, the Work and Pensions Committee Chairman, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), said that he could not recall an experience where, thank goodness, the Executive, whether Government or delegated, has acted so quickly when they have seen a crisis.

That should be on the record. It is credit to how HMRC responded. In the evidence we took from affected people, there was one particularly gracious “thank you” to HMRC for resolving one individual’s crisis so quickly.
My third point relates to contracts to third parties and the incentive system within them. The National Audit Office recognised this as a complex area, and the jury is still out on how successful the system has been over the past few years. HMRC’s chief executive responded to my question on that with an interesting remark about “the balance of incentives on third parties in these kinds of contracts” which “is essentially based on commission earned.”

He asked:

“Is that the right kind of incentive mechanism for this kind of public service delivery?”

It is a valid question, and other Members have mentioned it. The HMRC chief executive reflected on it. I also have no doubt that the NAO investigation will discuss whether bringing this sort of contract in-house would ensure better quality control, more experience of handling citizens who are on tax credits, and possibly even a reduced cost. From the evidence to the Committee, it broadly looked like Concentrix will have been paid about £27 million by the time its contract comes to an end on £270 million of fraud or error identified, implying a 10% commission. That feels high, but the figures are probably hypothetical at this stage and will need to be confirmed in due course by the investigation.

In all of this, the Government, HMRC and Concentrix have been absolutely right to start with an apology to those who have suffered. When mistakes are made, it is important that they are recognised immediately. HMRC and Concentrix started the Select Committee sessions by making their apologies—the Minister has added hers on more than one occasion—and that was important. There is the issue of compensation for those most affected, and the fact that, as the amendment states, the Government should “ensure that those people”—people on tax credits—

“are treated by HMRC in future with dignity and respect.”

That should happen all the time for everyone with whom the Government deal, particularly where monopolies such as HMRC exist. We all have a duty to treat our constituents with dignity and respect. That is what happens most of the time. My experience is that HMRC is helpful on every occasion with constituent issues.

In conclusion, today’s debate has been measured and the tone has been reflective and thoughtful across the House. Clearly, there are lessons to be learned. It is correct that tax collection is done, that welfare benefits are spent in the right way on the right people, that mistakes are responded to rapidly and that agencies such as HMRC should hold contingency plans. Poor service should be treated and amended as quickly as possible. I therefore welcome this opportunity to discuss some preliminary thoughts on the lessons that can be learned and I look forward to the NAO report in due course.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Although the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke for precisely eight minutes, the previous speakers did not, so I must now impose a formal time limit of seven minutes.

2.23 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): The Government have made it clear that the burden of austerity must be borne primarily by the most disadvantaged in our society. They made that clear through their repeated assaults on the welfare state, in their victimisation of the disabled, in their system of sanctions and in their attacks on benefits for our young people. They have made it clear that tax credits cost too much and are a drain on the public purse. They made it clear in their handling of the Concentrix contract that the suffering and hardship caused by this fiasco is not their concern. The Government did not seem to care about the indiscriminate targeting of single parents, the “fishing” letters, working parents being forced to give up their jobs, or families being forced out on to the streets as they lost their homes.

Strangely, none of those reasons was cited as a contributing factor to the withdrawal of the Concentrix contract. The statement given by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury explicitly said:

“Despite the best efforts of the staff manning the phones, Concentrix, with the high volume of calls in recent weeks, has not been providing the high levels of customer service that the public expect and which are required in its contract. HMRC has therefore given notice that this contract will not be renewed beyond its end date in May 2017.”—[Official Report, 14 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 904.]

It seems that it was all about call handling. I am sure that I am not alone in having a list of constituents who are seriously out of pocket from waiting to speak to someone at Concentrix, but providing call waiting times as the main reason to ditch the contract is ludicrous.

This Government devised the model to target low-income families indiscriminately. The contract awarded to Concentrix was based on payment by results, creating a clear conflict of interest and encouraging bad practice. It was this Government, through HMRC, that supplied Concentrix with 1.5 million claimant records flagged as high risk—claimants like my constituent, Lauren. Lauren is the mother of two and a prime example of someone whom the system has failed, finding herself at the centre of a perfect storm. She suffers from anxiety and panic attacks and, despite having a line from her doctor, lost her job for being off ill. Her employer did not pay her statutory sick pay, and she was told that she would have to wait at least two weeks for employment support allowance. In a bizarre twist of fate, she found that both her working tax credits and her child tax credits had been stopped.

When Lauren first came to my office, she had no food and no money for gas or electricity. She had called Concentrix 48 times that day and had run out of credit on her phone. Rather than the state providing Lauren and her children with a safety net in their time of need, Concentrix had left them near destitute. Why? What was the key factor in determining that Lauren was one of the 1.5 million high-risk claimants? Someone had glanced at her file and decided that she could not possibly be working 16 hours a week and be paid so little. They had calculated her weekly income and then divided it, coming to the conclusion that she must have been working 15 hours a week, ignoring the fact that Lauren had spent a month out of work the year before—a change in circumstances of which she had diligently notified HMRC. A cursory glance was all it took to
turn this young mother’s life upside down at a time when she was at her most vulnerable. My staff and I have been deeply affected by the number of cases in recent weeks, in which people have been plunged into utter misery. We have felt sheer frustration at not being able to get a quick resolution. I doubt whether a single person on the Government Benches has ever experienced going without food.

We can stand here all day and trade stories like Lauren’s, and the Government can dish out platitudes and pat themselves on the back for acting so swiftly and decisively on the Concentrix contract, but that cannot detract from the fact that families have been driven further into debt and poverty by Concentrix’s actions. Families have been forced to beg for food by the actions of HMRC. Families are being forced to choose between heating and eating by this Government’s policies. It is time for the Government to accept their role in this fiasco and to step up and take some responsibility for the carnage they are causing in people’s lives. They must apologise for the hardship and suffering faced by people such as Lauren. They must look again at the ongoing and demoralised. They must introduce a freephone number for tenants and take account of the costs of seeking mandatory reconsiderations. They must legislate to amend the compliance regime in respect of annual declarations and high risk renewals.

Earlier this month, leading figures from this Government stood up at the Conservative party conference right in front of a background that read: “A country that works for everyone”.

Let us see them match their policy to that sentiment and step back from this destructive and failing drive to impose austerity on the many while allowing riches for the few. Those on the Government Benches should take a leaf out of the Scottish Government’s book and start treating people with fairness, dignity and respect.

2.29 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for the state of my voice, but it is important that I speak in this debate on behalf of the many constituents who have contacted me about, and who are suffering as a result of, this scandalous Concentrix shambles. I commend the Opposition Front-Bench team for calling the debate, and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) for her forensic analysis of what the Government could have got right when enforcing this contract and the problems that have led us to this point. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who has done so much work to drive the debate forward. I also thank the staff in my office. We all have fantastic constituency staff who do so much to assist our constituents, and I particularly want to thank Shira, Lily and Ruba for the work they have done in dealing with a number of distressing cases involving individuals who have been in deep hardship and have been greatly upset. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said, the people affected have often been single mothers. I also thank Citizens Advice and other local advice charities, which have been faced with a deluge of these cases.

I wish to reflect on a few of these cases. In one, a single mother had a long-standing claim suspended after Concentrix said that she was living with another named woman in her rented property. It was suggested that a third woman was also living at the property, but both were actually previous tenants of the home, one from as far back as 2010. The information had come from the electoral register, even though my constituent had lived in the property only since 2014. The claim was eventually reinstated. Another case involved a single mother and homeowner who had her claim suspended after Concentrix said that she was living with “a couple”. She is the sole owner of the property and had provided evidence to demonstrate that. Again, the claim was eventually reinstated.

The citizens advice bureau referred the case of another single mother to us. Her award was stopped pending an investigation. She was left with no income and we had to refer her to food banks, which is a deeply distressing experience for anyone. Her son is diabetic and requires a specialist diet, so that contributed to her stress and unhappiness. Again, that claim was eventually reinstated. A further case involved a single mother in work who had both her tax credit claims stopped after she was told by Concentrix that her half-brother, who had once sent post to the property, was in fact her partner. That case has not been resolved and she has been without money since August. I have two to four such cases, and I question some of the assurances that we have heard about how long it takes to resolve these cases. I have written to the Minister about a number of cases and we are contacting the helplines. I hope that she will assure us that she will fast-track some of these deeply distressing cases.

Jane Ellison: I am happy to give that assurance. Once again, I urge Members with particularly long-running and difficult cases to get in touch, and I will make sure that HMRC prioritises them.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for those comments, which will provide some reassurance. We will certainly follow up cases with her office.

All the cases have common themes, one of which is their impact on single mothers and families with complex needs, often including children with health problems. These people are suddenly being left without food and money. Individuals with mental health issues are facing additional stress and anxiety. People have contacted me in desperation, by every possible means. Often they had not realised that their MP was the person to go to, but I have been contacted on Twitter and on Facebook, and by email and by phone. These people have been through the agony and desperation of not being able to get through on the helplines and, in some cases, they have found that the phone has been put down on them, as I outlined earlier. Obviously that is completely unacceptable, and I am glad that the Minister recognises that.

We need to deal with the problem of the final responses that people receive. Those responses often do not explain why the claims were stopped or reinstated, leaving constituents unsure about whether the same thing will happen again, and they do not give an apology. I appreciate what the Minister has said today, but we need to apologise directly to the individuals and families who have been affected. I have talked about the long
delays, but an inability to speak to someone directly about the situation creates frustration and distress. We have heard examples of people receiving contradictory and confusing correspondence, and that adds to the pressure and concern that they experience. We have had to refer many constituents to food banks, which causes deep distress to anybody who has to go through it. These people, through no fault of their own, have found themselves in that terrible situation at the end of these erroneous investigations.

**Sammy Wilson:** Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in many cases this has happened simply because, as the Minister indicated, Concentrix was following the processes, guidance and requirements of HMRC? The worrying thing is that if the situation does not change, it will not matter whether we change the contract between Concentrix and HMRC, as the same things will happen again.

**Stephen Doughty:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that shows why we need a full independent investigation into what has gone wrong. Such a situation applies not just to Concentrix. We can look at what has happened with Capita, with contracts such as that for Clearsprings asylum accommodation, and with Atos. There is a common theme across Government contracts whereby things are contracted out but then not properly monitored and followed up. The people who suffer in the end are some of the most vulnerable and the poorest. A common thread is that some of our constituents in the most difficult situations are affected, so the Government need to take a wholesale look at whether they should even be contracting out these sorts of services. When they should be, and there is a legitimate reason for doing so, the Government need to monitor and follow up what is going on, down to the level of the experience that individuals face. That is the real thing that matters in all this. These people often have extremely complex lives and face many pressures.

**Dr Philippa Whitford:** The hon. Gentleman mentions the problems with Atos and now we have Maximus. I know of a case of someone who has been waiting for a work capability assessment for almost six months. Can we not foresee that we will have a similar debate in another half year’s time?

**Stephen Doughty:** I would not be surprised if we were to have that debate. I am frustrated by the Clearsprings case. People can see companies making a huge profit out of these contracts, and individuals making hundreds of thousands and sometimes millions of pounds, as a result of providing the most shoddy and inappropriate services. People suffer, but these companies often get away without so much as a slap on the wrist, and often with payments at the end. When people look at this, and particularly at HMRC, they say, “We are being chased down for these relatively small sums, completely erroneously, through these fishing expeditions, but then we see sweetheart deals with major corporations over their non-payment of tax.” This is not just about tax credits. Small businesses in my constituency come to me with complex VAT cases and say, “It is one rule for those at the top and another for us.” They are often put into severe hardship and face deep complications as they try to resolve these cases. By the time people arrive at the doors of Members of Parliament, they are often in severe financial difficulties, be that as an individual or as a business.

I want to be absolutely assured that the Minister will not just hold a full investigation into this case and resolve the issues for individuals in my constituency and others that we have heard about today, but will raise in government the wider issue of the contracting out of such services and how they are monitored because, in the end, it is the people of this country who suffer. The situation is not acceptable. This has been an absolute disgrace and it has to stop.

2.37 pm

**Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. In common with other hon. Members, I have been appalled by the complaints that my office has received about Concentrix from worried constituents who have faced extreme hardship following its actions. I understand that a provider may want to conduct checks to ensure that money is provided to the right people, but stopping money to parents in this way while checks are carried out is wholly unacceptable. As many Members have said, Concentrix’s action has caused extreme hardship to many of my constituents and people across the country. People invariably use this income to provide food and essentials for their children, and it is totally unacceptable for them to be without that money for a period of time. As we have heard, the situation has resulted in many families relying on food banks—that has certainly been the case in my constituency—and in some cases people have been going without. This is utterly shameful.

It is not as though Concentrix has been quick about some of its checks; the majority of people seem to have had money withheld for two months or longer. How can people, many of whom are already on a low income, be expected to cope for long periods of time? One of the many cases my office staff have dealt with relates to a constituent who had her tax credits stopped because it was believed that she had an undeclared partner—we have heard similar stories this afternoon. Following much stress, and my constituent having to provide extensive evidence that she did not have an undeclared partner, it transpired that the basis of the action by Concentrix was out-of-date records of a previous tenant at the address. In a similar case, a constituent had her tax credits stopped because Concentrix required evidence that the tenant lived alone, as a random check on the electoral register had shown a previous tenant. It transpired that that previous tenant was now in prison. In yet another case, a constituent wrote to Concentrix to confirm and provide evidence that she was a single parent, yet it still took two months to investigate and reinstate the claim.

I could highlight a good many more cases, but I accept that a number of Members wish to contribute to the debate and that many of these cases are similar. The common factor is the lack of understanding or compassion on the part of the contractor engaged by HMRC. We know that many payments were stopped but that the decision was successfully overturned in around 90% to 95% of cases that went to appeal. Although Concentrix must bear its share of responsibility for the hardship that people have faced in recent months, HMRC, too,
2.41 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Like other Members, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) for introducing the debate and setting out her points so cogently, particularly in relation to some of the details of the contract itself, and the opportunities and responsibilities that that contract gave to HMRC to better deal with the problems that did emerge. Both HMRC and the then Financial Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), must have been aware of those problems, given the number of representations and complaints that were coming through from Members, and the range of questions that were being asked. None of those questions was properly dealt with, and all the complaints were treated fairly dismissively along the lines of young Mr Grace—“You’ve all done very well!” There seemed to be no problem whatever as far as that Minister was concerned. I am glad that, today, the current Financial Secretary to the Treasury is indicating that she will take a more personal interest in how these details are handled in future.

The motion could have been wider. It could have put into its sights the role and rationale of HMRC itself, as well as the responsibilities of Ministers. This debacle happened in the context of a progressive rundown in the capacity and character of HMRC, which then led to it outsourcing bits of work. It is the nature of that work and outsourcing that really raises questions about the mentality in HMRC.

In a written answer yesterday, the Minister confirmed this to me:

“during the course of the contract, HMRC delegated a total caseload of 2,209,500 cases for high risk renewal checks by Concentrix.”

It was HMRC itself that decided that more than 2 million cases could be appraised as high-risk renewals. When Concentrix received those cases, 1,635,676 of them were not the subject of further investigation for fraud or error, which means that it screened out 74% of the caseload that had been identified by HMRC. I ask Members to think about what we would have been dealing with if there had not been that screening. We would have had multiple versions of this problem—the adversity endured by our constituents; and the absurdity in the grievous conjecture that was being used against people.

The high-risk cases referred to Concentrix were placed in three main risk categories, and those three categories were decided by, and designed by, HMRC, not by Concentrix. The first was an undeclared partner, which accounted for 1,398,908 cases. The second was work and hours, which accounted for 564,983, and the third was childcare, which amounted for 245,609 cases. Now that this work is returning to HMRC, I hope that Ministers will ensure that there is a change of culture there so that there is no longer such hostility and suspicion towards HMRC’s customers.

Sammy Wilson: The incentive for Concentrix was that it got paid only for those cases in which, eventually, it could be shown that there was genuine error or fraud. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that if that incentive does not rest with HMRC, the situation could become even worse, because HMRC will have no incentive to screen out any of those cases?

Mark Durkan: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question about future performance. Many of us have had our own difficulties when dealing with HMRC about tax credits. Certainly in my constituency, I have had some particular issues in relation to the plight of cross-border workers, whose position is constantly mishandled by HMRC. At times, it seems that there is no end in sight to the difficulties.

On the hon. Gentleman’s question, I note that payment by results is the outcome after the mandatory reconsideration stage, so some of the arguments about the degree of incentivisation have to be measured against that point. Let us remember that what drove the cut-off of tax credits for most people was the application of the compliance requirement of 30 days. Therefore, officials using the HMRC system and the HMRC standard that was contracted to Concentrix sent letters to people saying, “Unless you return information within 30 days, your benefit will be stopped.” Most of the stops were made because information was supposedly not received within 30 days. That is why many cases were overturned on mandatory reconsideration, because by that stage the information had been provided.

That raises questions for us as legislators in the House. Where does the 30-day rule come from? It was introduced in the Tax Credits Act 2002. We have here a gross misapplication by HMRC of the terms of that Act, especially in terms of the high-risk renewal regime, the high-risk change of circumstances regime and the annual declaration. The Minister did not address the fact that thousands of people had their tax credits stopped this summer by HMRC directly. That had nothing to do with Concentrix. HMRC was terminating benefits because people had not returned their annual declaration on time. Compliance grounds were being used directly against people by HMRC. When those people were cut off in August—45,000 of them in the week beginning 8 August—they naturally assumed that that cut-off was being implemented by Concentrix. They were ringing Concentrix and we as MPs were ringing Concentrix, but it was actually HMRC that had implemented the cut-off, although some of those cases might have previously been referred to Concentrix. We had the daft anomaly of HMRC handing work to
Concentrix, saying “Investigate these people as high-risk renewal claims,” while, at the same time, it decided to go against those same people on compliance grounds for annual declarations. It is no wonder that confusion, hardship and hurt was caused, and there are fundamental questions for HMRC as well.

I hope that the Minister will look at this again. She says that lessons will be learned. I hope that this will not be like Brexit means Brexit: “lessons will be learned” should mean that lessons will be learned. We hope that those lessons will be learned within HMRC itself, and that they will include looking at whether there has been particular misuse of provisions of the 2002 Act.

Regulation 32 of the Tax Credits (Claims and Notifications) Regulations 2002 states that the period of notice given for a person to submit information or evidence “shall not be less than 30 days after the date of the notice.” The period does not have to be 30 days—that is the minimum—but who decided that it should be 30 days? HMRC took that decision, and it passed that on to Concentrix, saying that that statute set out how the system works and how it had to proceed.

Did Ministers sign off on the 30-day period? Were they notified that those were the terms that HMRC was operating? Were they notified that those were the terms that Concentrix was operating? If we know that the 30-day cut-off was responsible—the Minister has said this herself—will it be reviewed? There is the question of whether we, as Parliament, need to review that, because some of these flaws are sourced in the legislation itself and its over-rigorous application by HMRC.

Many people have voiced their criticisms of Concentrix and its performance, and have spoken about their difficulties getting through to it. By means of this debate, we need to get through to HMRC, which is where the core responsibility lies. A culture change is needed there, and I welcome the Minister’s commitment to keep an eye on that in the future.

2.49 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I have spoken a number of times in Parliament on this subject, and every time I speak I listen to the many stories from across the Chamber and elsewhere about individual cases. My constituency is no different in the way that individuals have been affected by Concentrix, which is contracted by HMRC on behalf of this Tory Government. As I said in my early-day motion 396, the contract with Concentrix is driving families into immediate poverty.

Let me offer the House a few examples. One of my constituents who I spoke with had only part of her address held on the Concentrix system. When background checks were run on the address, a number of people were named as living at the same property. As a result of a needless investigation by Concentrix, this person struggled to feed and clothe her children for over a month. Another lone parent was judged to have made a false claim as a single parent. Following my complaint, it was discovered that an incorrect address had instigated the investigation and, in fact, HMRC owed this constituent a considerable sum of money. Sadly, this was not uncovered before the constituent had to give up her home due to financial hardship. Such cases reinforce the points that have been made in the debate.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that another aspect of this shambles is the at times near-complete breakdown in communication between Concentrix and HMRC, as exemplified by my constituent Dionne Walker, a mother of three, who supplied Concentrix with every single piece of information it asked for, only to find out subsequently that Concentrix had not passed it on to HMRC? Her tax credit application was cancelled, leaving her having to seek crisis loans and go to food banks to feed her three children for the rest of the week. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is unacceptable, and that people such as Dionne Walker and countless thousands of others are owed an apology by this Government?

Chris Law: Indeed. I hope to hear such an apology from the Minister this afternoon. My hon. Friend’s example makes the point that I was about to raise—make no mistake, many of these people are single parents, who are already struggling to make ends meet and are the target of this Government.

Evidence has now emerged that Concentrix, on behalf of this Government, sent out, over a two-year period, almost a million letters asking for information about people’s circumstances, in what can only be described as a fishing expedition to detect potentially irregular tax returns. It is up to the constituent to prove that they are innocent before tax credits are reinstated. In other words, they are treated as guilty until proven innocent. It does not end there. Reports suggest that staff at Concentrix are regularly dealing with suicidal callers who threaten to kill themselves. How desperate does the situation have to get before urgent action is taken and the contract is ended?

The social and health impacts of the Concentrix contract, on both members of the public and employees, are horrific. That has been reinforced in the recent report of the Work and Pensions Committee, which found evidence of humiliation of claimants and appalling customer service, and appeal success rates of between 73% and 95%, described as “a terrible indictment of the original decision-making process.” Unsurprisingly, this is not the first time that Government outsourcing has failed to meet expectations. I made the point earlier that these payment-by-results contracts go back to 2003, when Labour introduced them for NHS England. I am sure everyone in this Chamber remembers Atos, whose shambolic and cruel tests were designed to strip away benefits from sick and disabled people.

Under the contract that this Government have with Concentrix, Concentrix is paid on a payment-by-results basis—in short, commission. The more tax credit payments Concentrix puts a stop to, the more money it pockets. Our constituents, who are very often in low-paid, part-time work, find themselves at the rough end of a contract that many of us would never sign up to in jobs in our everyday lives. How different the decisions made by this Government would be if Government Members were put on payment-by-results contracts.

It is hard to believe that this Government continue to cut HMRC jobs in Dundee and right across Scotland, while at the same time privatising and outsourcing
contracts. HMRC departments, which are already understaffed, have been left to pick up the pieces and have spent months restoring backlogs of claims and errors. It is time to end this madness.

Although Concentrix certainly has questions to answer, I believe that the disastrous implementation of the Concentrix contract by the Tory Government has implications that go far beyond that specific company. This Government have created a system designed to place the burden of their failing austerity agenda firmly on the shoulders of those most disadvantaged in our society. The contract with Concentrix has not been renewed, which is a step in the right direction, and it looks as though it will shortly be brought to a close, which is good news. However, the Government need to go further.

Alongside the ongoing investigation of the Concentrix contract by the Work and Pensions Committee, an inquiry has been initiated by the National Audit Office. I welcome these developments, albeit at a time when too many of my constituents have already suffered. I urge the Government to set up a public inquiry to examine the conditions under which Government Departments award public contracts to private sector providers. Such an inquiry would offer reassurance to members of the public who are weary of hearing disaster stories from the NHS, HMRC and the Department for Work and Pensions. Among the aspects that I believe deserve particular attention are how to devise contracts that ensure value for money and efficiency without allowing companies to profit by manipulating results and ignoring the well-being of people in our society; a clear statement of ethical principles to emphasise justice for individual citizens and parliamentary accountability; and representation of consumer and service user groups in decision making at all stages of formulating, awarding and monitoring contracts.

In the end, everyone in this House must remember that we are privileged to be here and serve the public. In that spirit, I urge this Government to re-examine all their contracts with private companies and ensure that dignity and respect, rather than profit and price, are at the heart of procurement.

2.56 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I want to set out the experience of some of my constituents with Concentrix and their tax credits. Having listened to colleagues around the House and from around the UK, I know that it is a familiar story.

Normally, my constituents have waited five to seven weeks before they come along and see me to try to get a problem sorted. We can then get it sorted, although I do still have eight Concentrix cases that have not been resolved. The Minister said that she was resolving them all very quickly, but that is not the case. It is four or five weeks since we took up many of these cases and they have not yet been resolved, so there are outstanding cases.

We saw a rapid increase in cases from August onwards. Before that we had a drip, drip, drip of cases that were just wrong, but from August something happened—something at HMRC or something at Concentrix. It would be interesting to know what it was and who initiated it, because suddenly there was an influx of cases, all wrongly decided and all coming in in a rush. The contract has been running since 2014, so what happened in August? We want to press the Minister to tell us what caused that sudden spike in cases.

All my constituents who have come to see me are single mums with children. They have mainly been accused of having an undisclosed partner. Some have been told that they did not have childcare costs that they had claimed. Occasionally they have been told that they do not have children, when they do. Most had simply had money stopped, without receiving any prior notification. They found out that there was a problem because there was no money in the bank. When they tried to get through on the telephone they could not do so, and then they received a letter that said, “You have an undisclosed partner”, but it did not say who that undisclosed partner was supposed to be.

The letter said, “Prove that you don’t have an undisclosed partner. Send us evidence to show that you don’t.” However, without knowing who the undisclosed partner is supposed to be, how can anyone do that? Worse, when my constituents have discovered who that undisclosed partner is meant to be, it turns out to be a previous tenant of their home whom they have never met and who left years ago, or a family member, who they never imagined would be construed as an undisclosed partner because they were related. What duff information is being used to make the lives of these people a misery? I have said it is duff once and I will say it again. If Concentrix turned down 80% of the cases sent to it because it decided that there was not an issue, what kind of information was it looking at for those 80%, given the kind it was looking at for the cases it decided to act on? It beggars belief.

In all these cases, my constituents were told to prove that they did not have a partner, but no name was given—in all the cases that have been resolved so far, the determination has been reversed and claims have been put back into payment—and that seems to me to be a complete reversal of any proper burden of proof. You prove that you do not have an undisclosed partner, Madam Deputy Speaker—not at this moment, Madam Deputy Speaker. That is what these people are being told, and it is not fair. They are already in financial difficulty, which is why they can get tax credits. They are usually living on the financial margins, working part time and in low-paid work. I have constituents who have had to take their children out of childcare and are in danger of losing their job because they have been told that they do not have children.

It is taking far too long to resolve these issues. The worry and stress is particularly difficult when dealing with an unreachable and harsh bureaucracy. That is what makes this experience particularly Kafkaesque. There are secondary impacts that go beyond getting these claims right, including severe debt problems, rent arrears and threats of eviction. There are bank charges, damaged credit histories and massive mobile phone bills. It is all very well saying that these cases have been put right, but what about those ongoing impacts? What can the Minister say about putting those right?

I think that there are cases where people ought to receive compensation. It is distressing enough to have this done without the ongoing financial problems that result from it. What about control of the data that HMRC is passing on, or that it will look at itself in
future? Why are those data so poor? How is it possible that previous tenants, including those who may no longer be alive, can be suggested as undisclosed partners? What kind of quality control is there for those data, because obviously it is not working?

It is wrong for the Government to incentivise maladministration in their contracts. That, in effect, is what has happened here. I think that my constituents who have suffered in these cases have been subjected to maladministration. If they are not properly compensated, I will suggest that they make a claim to the parliamentary ombudsman because of this maladministration. The Government could stop that happening by compensating them before they have to make any such claims.

The worst of it—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on this—is that this has been specifically targeted at a population largely made up of financially vulnerable single mums who are trying to do the right thing by going to work. They are excessively impacted upon by this kind of behaviour by bureaucracies that they cannot even begin to reach. I think that it is incumbent on the Government now to compensate and apologise to those people and ensure that the information they use in future is not so poor.

3.3 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): We are extremely hopeful that this sorry state of affairs marks the beginning of the end of payment by results in our welfare system. It has no place there, it creates perverse outcomes, and it has ruined the lives of thousands of people. Our social security system should be there to support people in their time of need, not to allow unaccountable conglomerates to make easy money chasing the voiceless and the vulnerable. Now is the time to draw a line under the grotesque profit model in our welfare system, because that model has failed: it has failed the individuals it was set up to help; it has failed employees; and it has failed the taxpayer.

All of us have horrific stories of individuals who have fallen foul of Concentrix. In my constituent’s case, her tax credits were cancelled while she was in a coma. Rather than answering for these failures, which lie squarely on the Government’s door, Ministers have preferred to throw this hapless contractor under the bus. However, as one senior Concentrix employee wrote to me:

“Every single action we took was directly informed by HMRC and was compliant in full with their guidance... there will be no investigation because there are paper trails after paper trails showing that we have only ever followed client instructions on amending claims.”

I was pleased to hear today that that is no longer the case and that there will be an investigation, because from start to finish this has been a mess entirely of the Government’s own making, and one for which they have not yet answered.

“The company that conducted the trial that preceded Concentrix, Transactis, incorrectly removed entire awards regardless of evidence provided to the contrary. Despite the alarm bells that should have been ringing loud and clear in their ears, Ministers decided to push on. It was the beginning of a pattern that is now all too familiar.

Ministers have still not answered for structuring a contract that put maximising revenue at its heart in attempting to assess error and fraud—not accuracy, not meeting quality service standards, and certainly not customer service, but making as much money as possible off the backs of the vulnerable. Ministers have not answered for the measures they included in the contract to maximise revenue. HMRC “profiled”—that is the Government’s own word—1.4 million vulnerable individuals and then unleashed Concentrix to carry out its dirty work.

We do not know—they will not tell me, despite repeated requests—what indicators the Government used to establish which groups to target. Given what we have heard today, it is clear who was in that demographic: single mothers with children. It is some measure of justice that it was women like that—thousands of them across the country—who brought this contract crashing down with their articulate, brilliant campaign.

That is not the only issue with the contract, because the process also turned the burden of proof on its head. HMRC was asking tax credit claimants to prove that their claim had not been made in error. They were asking people to prove a negative, as my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) explained so eloquently. The Tax Credits Act 2002 clearly states that HMRC can amend or terminate tax credit awards only if it has significant grounds for believing that they are erroneous. It does not allow them to shift the burden of proof on to the claimant to disprove that a tax credit award has been made erroneously. That led one young mother to say to me, in tears, that she felt that she was being “treated like a criminal” and that Concentrix was treating her as “guilty until proven innocent.” One mistake like that would have been unacceptable, but 11,000 people had to apply for mandatory reconsideration in the past year alone. That cannot simply be passed off as a mistake; it was the deliberate design of the contract itself.

HMRC employed a contractor with just 500 staff to target over 2 million people. That meant the company’s pressured, poorly trained and low-paid staff were being instructed to open dozens of highly sensitive cases every day, leaving the phone lines permanently engaged, as we have heard. Concentrix staff have told me that the call volumes were such that the company would have needed to triple its staff in order to answer the phones.

Astonishingly, despite the failure of the trial, despite the highly sensitive nature of the contract, and despite the sheer volume of individuals a completely untested private sector provider had been designated to pursue, we now know that the Government did not actually monitor the performance for the first year of the contract. HMRC had no idea how many performance failures the contractor was incurring. Once it started monitoring that, it soon found out: over 120 breaches in the space of just nine months; and 13 black performance failures. Ironically, HMRC is up for an award this year for analysis and use of evidence. I very much hope that this is not viewed as best practice across Whitehall.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the chaos she is outlining will end up costing the taxpayer a whole lot more than any money that was saved in the first place?
Louise Haigh: That is a major concern, not least because HMRC has now had to allocate hundreds more staff to deal with the backlog that Concentrix caused, because that gross failure on a monumental scale from start to finish. It seems that Ministers did not pay the blindest bit of notice until the scandal reached the media, because we now know that HMRC was about to renew the contract before the scandal hit.

The Government have traded on welfare as a dirty word, and now they are seeing the desplicable consequences of their political attacks: single parents and families who have done nothing wrong being ruthlessly pursued by an unaccountable US firm for profit. Could this contract have been drawn up had the Government not fuelled a contemptible narrative about those on low pay and those who rely on tax credits to get by?

We welcome the fact that the National Audit Office will be investigating the drawing-up of this contract. Can we be assured that that will include the management of the contract and the profiling assumptions underpinning it? Will the NAO release any impact assessment that must have accompanied the contract? Will the Minister assure us that any compensation awarded will not be counted towards tax credit awards?

Kevin Foster: Does the hon. Lady agree that the National Audit Office is independent and works for this Parliament, not for the Government? Therefore, the NAO would structure how it conducted its inquiry, not necessarily a Minister. That is the core of what we want: somebody independent who will get to the nub of this and present evidence to this Parliament, not necessarily the Government.

Louise Haigh: I completely agree, and it is vital that this is an independent review, because, as we have heard on both sides of the debate, these problems originate from the Government themselves. However, we need to know that this information will be published, and if the NAO does not do that, we would call on the Minister to publish it alongside this inquiry.

Above all else, if the Government’s rhetoric is worth a penny, they will surely pledge to call time on contracts such as this, which target innocent single parents and families, and encourage the private sector to profit from them. That has no place in our welfare system.

3.11 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): Like many Members on both sides of the House, I have been inundated by constituents since the official Opposition—particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh)—exposed the disgrace of what Concentrix has been doing.

One concern for me is that this seems to be a deliberate attack specifically on women—often innocent single mothers—and that is completely unacceptable. One case that was brought to my attention in my constituency involved a single mother living in a property with four flats. She was told on three separate occasions that she was living with each of the other tenants. She was then told that she was living with another tenant in the next block. Unsurprisingly, my constituent found it rather difficult to prove that she was not living with these people, particularly when she did not know the other people living in the other flats. That is not uncommon when someone is living in supported housing and focusing on bringing up their children, which is what we would think would be the whole point of a tax credit, allowing these women to work.

The key thing to remember is that none of us who have been helping constituents impacted by this travesty has any idea how many others in our communities have been affected but have not reached out to us, as Members of Parliament. It is important to recognise that, in contrast to how the Government may view people in receipt of tax credits, the vast majority are hard working and proud, with many affected by Concentrix having suffered in silence.

Ultimately, there are two forces to blame for the scandal: Concentrix and the Government. The actions of Concentrix can be labelled only as atrocious, yet, last month, when it learned that it would no longer have the contract renewed, its response was that it came “as a significant shock”. We can only conclude, therefore, that it saw little wrong with what it was doing.

The Government are, however, ultimately to blame. We should, of course, hold Concentrix to account for what it has done, but we should recognise that the true fault lies with the Government. Concentrix acted in a way that, because of the Government contract, was based on a payment-by-results model. The Government agreed to a deal with Concentrix under which they would pay more and more depending on how many people’s tax credits were removed, so it is no wonder that Concentrix acted so inappropriately.

If the issue surrounding Concentrix was isolated, the Government might have been able to claim that this was an honest mistake. The reality is, though, that the horror stories we are hearing today are indicative of this Government. Along with the bedroom tax, ruthless benefit sanctions and a handful of other policies, the hiring of Concentrix is yet another action by this Government that has led to record numbers of people being reliant on food banks. In Pencoed, in my constituency, a food bank will be opened at the end of this month. Ultimately, the blame for there being such demand lies with the Government.

The Government have shown yet again that they treat people in receipt of social security as a resource they can harvest money from, with no concern for the consequences of their actions. They have shown that they are happy to see more and more people reliant on food banks if that will save them just a few thousand pounds.

Although we may have a new Prime Minister, the attitude towards people in receipt of social security remains the same. As yet another food bank opens in my constituency, and yet another scandal passes, I hope the Government will learn from their mistakes, as I hoped they would learn from their previous errors time and time again. I am afraid to say, though, that I do not hold out much hope.

3.15 pm

Ms Tasmima Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): This has, indeed, been a very passionate debate. I would like to take this opportunity—I am sure I speak for all Members on both sides of the House—to thank our staff members in our constituency offices who have had to deal with people who have been at the very end of their tether. Many have had no training and have met
people in the most dire circumstances. I would like to place on record our thanks to all the staff of all Members on both sides of the House.

As we know, tax credits are a vital financial lifeline for many families who are struggling to get by on low wages. They allow single mothers and fathers the dignity of work, by ensuring that their income is enough to pay for rent and food and for heat for their homes. Without these payments, families have been plunged into immediate poverty, with all the financial and emotional stress that comes with coping with such a situation.

Despite many parliamentary questions and two debates, we are still no closer to finding out the facts or achieving a proper settlement to this sorry situation. At the same time, families know that their situation was entirely caused by the mistakes of others and as a direct result of faulty administrative processes and procedures, all of which must be fixed. Compensation must be paid.

I would like to refer to a particular case study. A constituent in Airdrie was referred to my office just yesterday by the citizens advice bureau. Seven weeks ago, she had her money stopped without warning. She was accused of living with three different partners at the same address. Advised by Concentrix that she had been sent a letter in May—a letter she said she did not receive—she was then told the evidence she was required to submit. She submitted what she could: two bank statements and a council tax statement. She was told that that was not enough. She could not afford, however, to provide the bank statements requested, as they cost £5 per statement.

The realistic timeline for Concentrix cases needs to be known. Despite the assurances I was given by the Financial Secretary on 14 September, it is still taking around eight weeks from the submission of evidence by those falsely accused by Concentrix for payments to be reinstated. That is two months without vital payments—payments that are stopped without warning and with no good cause.

On the phone yesterday, HMRC advised my office that the burden of proof remains on the individuals accused of claiming tax credits incorrectly, not on the accuser. That is contrary to the laws of natural justice and contrary to the view of the upper tribunal, which has already considered similar issues.

For the Member’s benefit, I would like to set out a timeline for an individual who is accused. On day one, their money is stopped. They call Concentrix to find out what has happened, and they are advised of what action is needed. It can take days to get an answer. On day two, they start to collate the evidence required. On day seven, the evidence arrives at the HMRC and Concentrix offices. On day 28, HMRC begins to look at the case. People in previous cases have told us that it would take two to three weeks before the evidence could be looked at, due to a backlog in processing cases. On day 56, the evidence is processed by HMRC. Once the evidence pack is opened by HMRC staff, it takes 15 to 20 days to process. On day 60, there is a positive result—if the person gets a result—as money will be paid to them within four days. That is eight weeks’ processing between the submission of documents and payments being reinstated.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): In the intervening period, many of the individuals affected have experienced grave mental health issues. I am aware of at least two cases where people have gone on to self-harm as a result of the stress endured. Does my hon. Friend agree that the targeting of the most vulnerable is not something that should be happening under Government contracts?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. She has huge experience in the area of mental health. I am sure it is a matter of great concern and disturbance to us all to hear that people are resorting to self-harm.

My constituent continues to wait, as HMRC refuses to act until it has received a year’s worth of bank statements that she cannot afford to provide. HMRC did not inform her of the hardship payment. Will the Minister advise us on the guidelines with which HMRC is working in relation to the hardship payment? Is it not offered in all circumstances? Are not all people in positions of hardship once they have had these payments stopped?

In order to support those affected, we must immediately take a number of actions to remove the financial barriers to justice for these victims, and I ask the Minister to consider committing to these today. HMRC should immediately provide a free telephone line for victims to use. As things stand, if someone wants to ask a question or appeal a decision, it is up to them to phone the call centre, and that can cost 10p a minute. Some callers have had to wait for hours, as confirmed in many speeches. Over and above this, HMRC should now act to provide a free call-back service for tax credit inquiries. HMRC should also meet the full cost of sending people all documents with postage-paid envelopes so that they can send back the information that is required on the basis of incorrect decisions that have been made on their part. Those changes are achievable, deliverable and fair, and should be implemented without delay. That is the right thing to do in these circumstances.

When this exercise is complete and people have the opportunity to access justice, at no cost to themselves, neither should there be—nor can there then move our attention on to securing full, fair and proper compensation for all victims, some of whom have lost their jobs and homes as a result of this fiasco.

3.22 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. Like other Members, my constituency casework is full of examples
of the mismanagement of the tax credits contract. I thank my constituency team back up the road—Iain, Colin, Jenn and Louise—who have dealt with a large volume of cases, always with great sensitivity and professionalism.

Over a long period, Her Majesty’s Government have created a system that they charge Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to administer. HMRC outsources the process but not its responsibility, and this time its chosen enforcer was Concentrix. However, it is unfair to lay all the blame at the door of Concentrix staff, or, indeed, HMRC staff. The current welfare system, as designed, is flawed—seriously flawed—and while we continue to support it, the blame is ours. Far from enabling people and giving them the financial security to build their own lives, the welfare system has made life more complicated for those who need support.

Dealing with poverty is an ongoing struggle in constituencies such as mine, where deep-rooted inequality continues to stifle ambition and opportunity. Yet, as with so many other policies, my constituents are once again disproportionately affected by the UK Government’s inadequacies. We have heard excellent contributions from Members who outlined specific examples of how the public services have been so appallingly mismanaged. However, the saddest indictment of UK Government welfare and tax policy is that there are still so many people in desperate need of tax credits in the first place.

Concentrix is clearly not blameless in this situation; its faults and mistakes are well documented. However, while the UK Government may solve the problems inherent in this contract by bringing it back in-house, we are still left with the wider problem of Government services being delivered by private companies. Private companies should never be in the position of delivering vital public services. Citizens and Governments should have a direct relationship with each other. Taxpayers contribute directly to the Government, but when the money is going in the other direction, it should not be filtered through a private company before it gets to the individual.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I agree that these human issues are far too sensitive for private companies to be profiting from them. Interestingly, when I first raised this in January with the Leader of the House in asking for a debate or a statement, I was told, “Just send me information about the problem with a case.” Why did it take eight or nine months and the involvement of the BBC to finally get a Minister to the Dispatch Box to do something about this?

Ronnie Cowan: The hon. Gentleman makes his point very eloquently.

Companies bid for UK Government contracts not on the basis of how they can deliver a fairer and more equal society, but of how they can save money for the Government. Companies are incentivised to deliver these results, and ultimately their first loyalty is to owners and shareholders. By off-loading services to private companies, the UK Government and HMRC are trying to absolve themselves of responsibility when there is a problem. We have seen these problems appear time and time again. G4S, Atos and Concentrix are not names that inspire public confidence in the delivery of high-quality public tax credit contract has been so appallingly mismanaged. However, the saddest indictment of UK Government welfare and tax policy is that there are still so many people in desperate need of tax credits in the first place.

3.26 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan).

We have heard many interventions and speeches. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) talked about a fishing expedition on the part of Concentrix. She enlightened us about the real Casanova of Scotland, R. S. McColl—I thank her for that—but more importantly, the cataclysmic effect of this flawed process. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), in a thoughtful contribution, gave us the experiences of his constituents and welcomed the Government’s actions in relation to the renewal of the contract.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) focused on the policy design that has led to single women, in particular, being affected or targeted, talking about the effects on their children and setting out a series of questions that went to the heart of the matter. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) discussed the relative value and efficiency of the contractor’s services, the role of HMRC, and the role of incentives in contracts of this nature. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) talked about a conflict of interest and the bad practice of Concentrix.

The hon. Member for Foray (Mark Durkan) welcomed the personal intervention of the Financial Secretary, but questioned HMRC’s role in the process and spoke of the need for a change in its culture. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) gave a number of examples of how people are being pushed into poverty. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) mentioned the influx of cases in August and asked what had caused that spike. She also talked about phantom tenants, the unreachable, and the harsh and inaccessible bureaucracy.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said that we want a system that supports people, not conglomerates, and a Government who will ensure that people, not corporates, are at the top of the agenda. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Tappin) talked about the effect on single mothers, but also asked the key question of how many others have been affected, have not been able to reach out to their MPs and have suffered in silence.
The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) suggested providing support for free communication with HMRC, and the hon. Member for Inverclyde said that the responsibility lies within the Government and that the citizen’s relationship should be with the state, not individual contractors.

I welcome the Minister’s mea culpa, but it does not go far enough. In last week’s Westminster Hall debate, I said that I, like other hon. Members, had been contacted by distressed constituents who had had their child tax credits stopped, with scant attention paid to due process. In effect, the plenipotentiary powers given by the Government to Concentrix to act as it saw fit to punish and penalise tax credit claimants were used with an alacrity bordering on the enthusiastic and manic. It has come to something when it is difficult to put a cigarette paper between the question of who, out of the Government and Concentrix, has been the bigger of the two culprits, but, following the principle of, “Whoever pays the piper calls the tune,” I opt for the Government.

As I said in last week’s debate, it does not take a genius to work out that, if a company is paid on the basis of bonus or commission to find tax credit error and fraud, it will start with the easy targets. In pursuit of a business model approved by the Government, Concentrix pursued people, mainly working women, to provide information. It was nothing short of overbearing state intrusion into private lives, but it was done under the guise of reclaiming taxpayers’ money from fraudsters and cheats, which is how many people felt that they were treated.

The plain fact, however, is that there was no evidence. In many cases, the victims of that intrusion were left penniless and had little capacity to fight back, as many Members have said. Meanwhile, the Savings (Government Contributions) Bill, which is currently in Committee, encourages people to save money. One agent of the Government administers the giving away of taxpayers’ money while another takes money away, by diktat, from working women. What a topsy-turvy state of affairs.

The whole process was deeply flawed and, as has been said, operated on the presumption that people were guilty until proven innocent. Apparently, a claimant would be sent a letter by Concentrix indicating that they were not meeting the standards for a child tax credit claim, and requiring them to provide evidence of their occupancy arrangement. Some attempted to call Concentrix, only to find that the number was engaged, but if the company did not hear from the claimant, their tax credits were stopped summarily.

I do not know whether Ministers were consulted on, or asked to sign off, that process. I asked that question last week, but did not receive an answer, so I ask them to enlighten us. Even Atos did not have the power to withdraw benefits. Concentrix was given carte blanche to do so, in a licensed way, by the Government, who were in the throes of renewing the contract for a job well done, which is remarkable. Did Ministers ask why Concentrix had so many savings on its books, and did they listen to the complaints of many of our constituents at an earlier stage?

Last week, the Economic Secretary claimed, very creatively, that it was the Government who stepped in to get things back on track when they realised that the service being provided by Concentrix was not good enough. That rewriting of history would be risible if the matter was not so serious for thousands of mothers all over the country. In reality, it was the Opposition who originally asked the National Audit Office to investigate, and we pushed for oversight and demanded action for the thousands of families who have still not received payments from Concentrix. The Government took action only under duress and pressure from the Opposition and the national media.

Kevin Foster: Does the shadow Minister agree that, given earlier comments, it is important that the National Audit Office leads the investigation into what happened, because it is independent and answers, ultimately, to this House, not to the Government?

Peter Dowd: That is a statement of the situation as it is. The key thing is that we need an independent investigation to get to the bottom of this.

The Government have said that the contract will not be renewed beyond the end of May 2017, but that still leaves us seven months. I am pleased that staff have been brought into HMRC, and I would like to know what measures the Government are putting in place to ensure that there is total oversight of Concentrix throughout the period and to make sure that nothing else goes wrong. When all is said and done, this is a question of the performance management of a government contractor, and a clear lack of oversight by the Government.

I deduced from the Economic Secretary’s inadequate response to the Westminster Hall debate last week that HMRC handed over third-party data to Concentrix and left the company to it. There was no oversight and, in the Minister’s own words:

“Concentrix...then chose who to pursue from those data.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 261WH.]

The Government have given Concentrix a free hand to intimidate and falsely accuse hard-working mothers of fraud. The Opposition want to know who signed off that decision and why there was no accountability. The Government have announced a £100 hardship payment for those affected, but no amount of money can make up for the struggles that those women faced after their tax credits were wrongly stopped, and we need an apology. As many other Members have done, I ask the Government to give that apology.

Concentrix will have the contract for a few more months, but it does not seem to have suffered any sort of penalty for its actions. We would like to know what is happening in that regard. Can we have a precise figure for how many decisions Concentrix got wrong? In how many instances was payment reduced because Concentrix failed to meet its performance standards? Perhaps the Government’s refusal to answer such questions and release the relevant information is because even with deductions for poor performance, Concentrix has still made huge profits on the backs of desperate and vulnerable people. We need answers to these questions. Perhaps an independent investigation—maybe by the NAO—will give us those answers, but whoever gives them to us, we need them as soon as possible.

3.37 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): This has been a thoughtful debate. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions and efforts to support...
their constituents. It is right and appropriate that I thank MPs’ staff, who have worked hard to help constituents with their tax credit claims.

It is clear—that there is no doubt—that mistakes were made in HMRC’s partnership with Concentrix. As my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said, it is right that we take action to stop errors and fraud in the tax credit system. That was why HMRC entered into a contract with Concentrix to support that action, which—let us be clear about this—delivered millions of pounds of savings and achieved close to the lowest level of fraud and error in the tax credit system since it began.

I reiterate that this is all about people. It is about making sure that the most vulnerable people are paid appropriately and that errors are not made. It is often very difficult for the most vulnerable people to deal with overpayments.

**Maria Eagle:** Given the poor quality of some of the information that Concentrix has used—information about tenants, previous tenants, people who are dead and people who live in the same block but not in the same house—how can the Minister justify putting our constituents through the pain of having their payments stopped on such very poor information?

**Simon Kirby:** I will cover that matter later, but there are clearly lessons for all of us to learn.

**Kevin Foster:** Given the number of people affected, what work will the Government—the Treasury, working with HMRC—carry out to help local advice centres that, like Members of Parliament, may be approached by people for advice about what to do if they receive such letters?

**Simon Kirby:** I will certainly ask HMRC to look into that. The important point is that this is about helping people. It is easy to stand in the Chamber citing figures and trying to pretend that something is not what it is. This is about making sure that the most vulnerable people get the money that they deserve, and about clearing the backlog as quickly as possible.

This issue is about customer service. Everyone has a right to expect a good level of customer service. There is no doubt that the customer service provided in recent times was simply not good enough and not up to the standard clearly specified in the contract. As a result of that poor performance, a great deal of worry and distress has been caused to the often vulnerable people who claim this benefit. We heard lots of very good examples of that today. I do not think that any MP is in any doubt that vulnerable people have suffered worry and distress. I advise anyone who has been adversely affected to get in touch with HMRC, which will take all complaints seriously and provide compensation where appropriate.

I move on to specific issues that hon. Members raised. The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) suggested that Concentrix targeted people at random and engaged in fishing expeditions, which the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) also mentioned. That was not the case—Concentrix was not allowed to engage in fishing expeditions. It is important to note that when information was incomplete or suggested that something was wrong, customers were asked to provide further information to enable an informed decision to be reached.

**Maria Eagle:** Would this be an opportunity for the Minister to tell the House why the information used was so very poor?

**Simon Kirby:** Some of the information used was very poor—some of it applied to people who no longer lived at the address—but, at the end of the day, the review will provide lessons for us all to learn.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South said that the evidence was flimsy. HMRC sent Concentrix cases to review if it thought that they were worth checking because there was an indication that the tax credits claim might be incorrect. Concentrix and HMRC will never be able to screen out all cases that do not involve error or fraud through data analytics alone. That is why—this point is important—HMRC and Concentrix write to customers to ask for more evidence to inform decisions.

The hon. Lady asked for an apology. At a sitting of the Work and Pensions Committee on 13 October, the chief executive of HMRC apologised for the worry and distress caused to claimants. On behalf of the Government, I echo that apology today.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) said that she thought that the letters were unconvincing and misleading. This is an area in which there are lessons to be learned. It was said that customers could not provide the evidence requested. Most people were able to provide the information asked for, but we want to make it easier and cheaper to supply information in the future, so we are looking at ways of improving the customer journey on tax credits.

**Louise Haigh:** Will the Minister give way?

**Simon Kirby:** I will keep going, if I may.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston also asked whether the contract unfairly discriminated against women. It is important to note that as of April 2016, 88% of single claims were made by women, and 80% of single claims sent to Concentrix to check with regard to high-risk renewal were from women. I recognise this—

**Kate Green:** Will the Minister give way?

**Simon Kirby:** I will not—I have to respond to a lot of people.

I recognise that sensitivity is needed on tax credit claims and that claimants should be treated with dignity and respect. The hon. Lady also asked about penalties. The figures that will and have been deducted from payments, and the detailed calculations, cannot be disclosed at this point as they are commercially sensitive, but the amounts will be fair and appropriate.

The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) said that Concentrix was getting a rap on the knuckles. I point out that it is actually losing the contract.

My hon. Friends the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) made particularly thoughtful and considered contributions. They have obviously given the matter great thought.
The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) asked whether the contract was ended only because of poor call handling. That was not the case. The poor call handling had an impact on customers and resulted directly in tax credits being stopped. She also mentioned the downsizing of HMRC. An extra £800 million has been announced for HMRC. Using a private company in this way offered a cost-effective method of reaching a large number of people.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) asked whether this situation spelled the end for outsourcing. This is about cutting down on errors and some fraud, but HMRC will evaluate each case on its merits to deliver value for money for the taxpayer. It is fair to say that the lessons learned from this situation will help to inform future contracts.

Louise Haigh: That is the central point. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said, the information was duff, and was acted on incorrectly, because the contract was designed to incentivise Concentrix through profit to incorrectly target people and strip them of their tax credits. Will the Minister commit to reviewing payment by results across our welfare system?

Simon Kirby: I will not commit to that. The hon. Lady’s points will be picked up by the NAO. Not all the information was duff, but there are clearly lessons to learn from the exercise.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) talked about the 30-day cut-off. Tax credit regulations require a claimant to be given a minimum of 30 days to respond to a request for information. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) mentioned training. I assure him that Concentrix staff are trained in the same way as HMRC staff.

The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) asked about unresolved cases. I am not sure whether the Financial Secretary was in the Chamber to hear that, but if the hon. Lady writes to my hon. Friend, she will, I am sure, do her very best to help to resolve those cases. The hon. Lady also asked about the significance of August. August was a particularly busy time.

Mark Durkan: The Financial Secretary told me in a written answer yesterday that between 1 August and 31 August, HMRC automatically stopped 365,483 tax credits—in just that one month—as a direct result of customers failing to comply with the requirements of the annual renewal process. How many stoppages were made by Concentrix and how many were made directly by HMRC itself?

Simon Kirby: I am happy to commit to look carefully at that matter and to get back to the hon. Gentleman.

I clarify that hardship payments are effectively tax credits brought forward. Compensation, however, is not offset against tax credits and is a separate payment. That is an important distinction to make.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) mentioned the timeline. It is important to understand the timeline, and she makes valuable points about how we can ease the customer journey and introduce new measures. That is work in progress, and I do not think there is a lot of disagreement about some of her more sensible suggestions.

In response to the hon. Member for Bootle, I would say that a lot of issues have been raised in the debate. They will be looked at very carefully by the National Audit Office. We are giving careful consideration to the balance of the contract with Concentrix to make sure that nothing else goes wrong. This is about making sure that the most vulnerable people who need help get it, and that we move forward and learn from the exercise.

Although we recognise that the service provided was simply not good enough, it was right to review people’s claims for tax credits. That must go hand in hand with quality customer service that minimises distress and disruption to the people involved. Concentrix fell short of providing that standard of service in recent times, and, as a result, a large number of people were caused undue distress and worry. We have taken immediate action to restore a fast, fair and efficient service to anyone claiming tax credits. We will take further action in the days and months ahead. We will look at what went wrong, and at the NAO report, and learn from those lessons. We want to ensure that we provide the kind of quality tax and benefits service that the British public deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that Concentrix has not fully met the performance standards set out in its contract with the HM Revenue and Customs to correct tax credit claims, and welcomes the announcement that the services performed by Concentrix will be brought back in-house to HMRC next year; and calls on the Government to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the performance of Concentrix under its contract with HMRC, which includes a consideration of the potential effect on other HMRC services, take urgent action to compensate people who have erroneously had tax credits withdrawn by the company, and in doing so mitigate any adverse effect or reduction in service for claimants.
Yemen

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I inform the House that I have selected amendment c tabled in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.53 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House supports efforts to bring about a cessation of hostilities and provide humanitarian relief in Yemen, and notes that the country is now on the brink of famine; condemns the reported bombings of civilian areas that have exacerbated this crisis; believes that a full independent UN-led investigation must be established into alleged violations of international humanitarian law in the conflict in Yemen; and calls on the Government to suspend its support for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces in Yemen until it has been determined whether they have been responsible for any such violations.

When we discussed Yemen in this House last week, we did so in the hope that the 72-hour ceasefire negotiated by the UN envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ahmed, could lead to a lasting cessation of hostilities from all sides and desperately needed access for humanitarian aid. These hopes, unfortunately, were dashed almost immediately.

Regardless of who was first responsible for breaking the ceasefire, it is the ordinary civilians of Yemen who will pay the price. It is distressing to learn that on top of all the other threats they face from air strikes, cluster bombs, acute malnutrition and the risk of famine, the Yemeni population now face an epidemic of cholera. I believe that, wherever any Member stands on the justification for this conflict, on the UN mandate for the Saudi-led military action and on the threat to regional stability caused by the Houthi uprising, the lives of tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of children are directly at risk if this conflict carries on in its present form—and none of us can tolerate that.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right that the ceasefire was critical. The efforts of the Foreign Secretary, John Kerry and the Saudi Foreign Minister as well as the special envoy were vital to ensuring that we had that ceasefire. Does she agree with me that the involvement of the British Government and the American Government is crucial to ensure that we get a permanent ceasefire?

Emily Thornberry: I applaud my right hon. Friend’s commitment on this issue. I know that he was born in Yemen and that he feels very strongly about it. His approach is, of course, absolutely right: the British and the Americans have a very important influence, although most important of all is the fact that we support the efforts of the United Nations.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Emily Thornberry: Let me make a little progress, and then I will give way.

Let me make it clear that this debate and today’s motion are not about the causes of the conflict or whether it is justified. Today’s debate is about the grave concerns that many Members of all parties share about the way in which the conflict is being conducted and whether those concerns are being taken seriously.

Emily Thornberry: My hon. Friend has moved on from the point I wanted to raise, but I thank her for giving way. She said that whatever people think about the origins of the conflict, we can debate how terrible the situation is for Yemenis on the ground, and I agree entirely. Is there any debate, however, about the origins of the conflict or the UN Security Council resolution? I thought that we were pretty much agreed across the House that we should support that resolution.

Emily Thornberry: Of course no one is saying at this stage that we should not support the UN resolution. However, further action needs to be taken in respect of the conflict. For example, it has been suggested that the UN resolution of 30 September has already mandated UN experts to work alongside the joint incidents assessment team—perhaps my hon. Friend is referring to that.

The difficulty is that if we look at the history, we find that in August the Office of the UN Commissioner on Human Rights “called on the international community to establish an international independent body to carry out comprehensive investigations in Yemen”.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am not sure whether my hon. Friend has received, as many MPs have, a letter from the deputy speaker of the Yemeni Parliament, in which he says that the compromise resolution was agreed on 30 September, the Commissioner’s Office said that it was disappointed at the outcome, stating:

“We did not have any say in the final text.”

If that resolution was not what the Commissioner’s Office wanted, I do not think that we should be satisfied with it either.

Mr Kevin Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am not sure whether my hon. Friend has received, as many MPs have, a letter from the deputy speaker of the Yemeni Parliament, in which he says that the compromise resolution was agreed on 30 September, the Commissioner’s Office said that it was disappointed at the outcome, stating:

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Emily Thornberry: Yes, I would. I have seen the letter, and I think it is important to condemn any breaches on both sides. It is also important to note that the UN has stated that 60% of civilian deaths have been a result of actions by the coalition. In this debate, it is important for us to examine what it is that we are doing.

Mr Jones rose—

Emily Thornberry: I appreciate that many Members wish to speak, and I have already taken three interventions. I would like to make some progress before giving way again.

In view of all these grave concerns and dire consequences, the debate is about whether Britain should continue to support the Saudi forces leading one side of the conflict. The shadow Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), will later address the humanitarian consequences in detail, but I want to focus on concerns about the way in which the conflict has been conducted and whether those concerns are being taken seriously by the Government or indeed properly investigated.

Last week, I said that there had been “thousands of airstrikes on civilian targets in Yemen”.

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Last week, I said that there had been “thousands of airstrikes on civilian targets in Yemen”. 
In response, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), said:

“...—that is to mislead the House”—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 667]

Let us look at the facts. In August, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report on the conflict in Yemen, which stated that between 1 July 2015 and 1 July 2016, 2,067 civilians had been killed in that conflict. On the basis of careful investigation of each incident, it said that 60% of those deaths—as I have said—had been caused by Saudi airstrikes. The report concluded—and this is important—

“In several of the...documented attacks, we have been unable to identify the presence of possible military objectives.”

In September, the independent Yemen data project went further. It examined more than 8,600 airstrikes that had been conducted between the start of the conflict and the end of August 2016, and found that 3,158 of them had struck civilian sites, while a further 1,882 had struck sites of undetermined use.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Emily Thornberry: I must make some progress. I know that many other Members wish to speak.

John Woodcock: It is on that very point.

Emily Thornberry: I will give way later, but I will not do so now.

John Woodcock: It is really important.

Emily Thornberry: May I just catch up with myself?

All those airstrikes took place before the recent devastating strikes on a wedding party and a funeral hall. So when I say that there have been thousands of airstrikes against civilian targets and thousands of civilians killed, I am certainly not misleading the House, as was suggested by the Under-Secretary. I would respectfully suggest that perhaps someone is misleading him.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emily Thornberry: I will of course give way to the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Crispin Blunt: The Yemen data project, which looked at the numbers, pointed out that the identification of the targets as civilian or otherwise referred to their original use. No further assessment was made of the time of the airstrike or the circumstances that led to it. We must try to be very careful with the use of data.

Emily Thornberry: I respectfully agree. Indeed, I think that that very good point supports the argument that we are advancing today about the need for an independent investigation, so that we can establish the facts rather than going on assumptions and presumptions. We must all be satisfied that whatever investigation takes place is independent and internationally recognised.

There is evidence of a further disturbing trend in the way in which the conflict is being conducted. According to Yemen expert and London School of Economics professor Martha Mundy, detailed examination of Government agriculture statistics has revealed hundreds of cases in which farms, livestock, water, infrastructure, food stores and markets were targeted by Saudi airstrikes.

Her analysis suggests that the extent of the bombing in rural areas where there is little activity besides farming is clear evidence that Yemen’s agriculture sector is being deliberately targeted. Some Members will doubtless argue that what was effectively a blockade imposed on Yemen in 2015 has helped to exacerbate the starvation crisis that we are seeing today, but Saudi Arabia did at least claim some UN mandate for that action. There is no UN mandate for the destruction of Yemen’s agriculture sector, which, if it is indeed deliberate and targeted, represents a clear breach of the Geneva convention.

That brings me to the question of how alleged violations of international humanitarian law in Yemen are being investigated. In September, the House discussed the fact that the Government’s position had changed from saying that, according to their assessment, there had been no violations of international humanitarian law to saying that they had made no such assessment, and that it was for the Saudi-led coalition to investigate any such incidents.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Saudi Foreign Minister was recently reported as saying that, although they do not play a role in choosing the targets, United Kingdom military officials in Saudi Arabia have access to the list of those targets. If that is true, does the hon. Lady share my bewilderment about how the Government can claim not to have reached a conclusion in respect of the very serious breaches of international humanitarian law that are taking place in Yemen?

Emily Thornberry: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I heard only half his intervention, because there is a certain amount of noise coming from behind me. Perhaps I will take another intervention.

John Woodcock: It is so gracious of the shadow Secretary of State to give way. I welcome the fact that this subject is being raised in the House today and I agree with her calls for an independent investigation into this matter. The coalition is precisely focused on training Saudis to be better able to be in compliance with international humanitarian law so that our interventions, if effective, will create fewer civilian casualties. Can she explain why she has insisted, despite a number of us asking about this, keeping in the motion the fact that the UK should withdraw support for the coalition, making it very hard for many of us to vote for it?

Emily Thornberry: I take on board what my hon. Friend says, and I considered that in advance of this debate. I read something said by California Congressman Ted Lieu:

“When its repeated air strikes that have now killed children, doctors, newlyweds, patients, at some point you just have to say: Either Saudi Arabia is not listening to the United States or they just don’t care.”

and I fear the same might be true for the advice we might be given.
A Pentagon spokesperson has said: “Even as we assist the Saudis regarding their territorial integrity, it does not mean that we will refrain from expressing our concern about the war in Yemen and how it has been waged.”

I will talk later about why I believe there may be a particular reason why, although I hear what my hon. Friend says about advice that may be given in relation to some of the targeting, there may not be advice in relation to all of it, and if he has some patience he will get an answer to part of his question.

My concern is that we are therefore putting our faith entirely in the Saudis’ joint incidents assessment team to give us the truth on these alleged violations. I showed earlier that there had been thousands of documented airstrikes on civilian sites and thousands of civilians killed as a result, so we would expect JIA T at the very least to have published reports on hundreds of these incidents, but it has published just nine. That is less than 0.002% of all airstrikes documented by the Yemen data project up to the end of August.

And how credible are those reports? The United Nations protests that four World Food Programme trucks have been attacked; JIA T blames the officials in charge of the convoy. The UN protests that 73 civilians were killed and injured in a market in Sana’a; JIA T says there have been no direct attacks on civilians and no fault on the part of the coalition forces. The UN protests that another 106 civilians were killed in a market in Hajjah; JIA T disputes that there were civilians and finds no proof of fault. The UN protests that 47 civilians were killed and 58 injured at a wedding in Dhamar; JIA T says no such bombing took place.

In only two of the nine incidents it has reported on, and the thousands more it has not, has JIA T accepted there was any fault on behalf of the Saudi-led coalition: the bombing on a residential complex in July 2015 and the airstrike on the funeral hall in Sana’a this month.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that, despite the frank admissions over the funeral bombing, when we have met representatives of the Saudi Government they have refused to even give a timetable for giving information on these investigations, let alone answers that might be satisfactory? Does she agree that they must come forward as soon as possible and that there should be an independent investigation?

Emily Thornberry: I was at the same meeting and heard the Saudi Foreign Minister telling us he was not able to give us a timetable on the investigation and I share my hon. Friend’s grave concern about that.

When asked at the weekend about the latter incident, the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East, called it “a deliberate error”, by which I believe he meant at least one individual within the coalition forces was able to deliberately unleash this terrible attack killing 140 civilians without the authorisation of the coalition command in Riyadh.

This raises major questions. Members on both sides of the House have spoken to experts on this conflict who say that there are essentially two coalition forces operating in Yemen. One is run from the capital and carries out pre-planned operations based on strong intelligence under the direction of the Americans and UK advisers. There is, however, another centre operating out of southern Saudi Arabia, which carries out dynamic reactive operations, often based on sketchy evidence, often without thinking through the so-called collateral damage and inevitably often with significant civilian casualties. I hope that that answers the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) has just raised.

If any coalition forces are acting in a reckless or indiscriminate manner in carrying out airstrikes on civilian areas, that would be a clear violation of international humanitarian law, and it should cause the whole House grave concern. The Minister’s explanation that the Sana’a funeral bombing was a deliberate error raises the prospect that there has also been intentional targeting of civilians by elements of the coalition forces, but he cannot tell us—because he does not know—how many of those thousands of airstrikes against civilian targets have also been deliberate errors.

That brings me to the crucial point of today’s motion: the need for a full independent UN-led investigation into all alleged violations of international humanitarian law in Yemen. There must be an investigation into all the thousands of attacks on civilian sites, not just nine of them, and into all the thousands of civilian deaths, not just a few hundred of them. We need to know whether Yemen’s agriculture sector has been deliberately targeted in breach of international humanitarian law. We need to know whether elements of the coalition air forces are routinely operating in a reckless and indiscriminate way. We need to know whether that deliberate error in Sana’a was a one-off or part of a more systemic problem.

Finally, from a UK perspective, if there have been violations of international humanitarian law, we need to know whether UK-manufactured weapons and planes have been used to commit those violations. With all due respect to the individuals who make up Saudi’s JIA T, its output to date—whether in terms of volume, speed or content—gives no confidence that it can carry out this type of comprehensive investigation, let alone an independent one.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend’s argument. In making the case for an independent UN-led investigation, will she make it clear that it should investigate alleged violations committed by both sides in this conflict?

Emily Thornberry: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is quite right to suggest that there have been violations on both sides. I stated that at the outset of my speech, and it is important to make that fact absolutely clear to the House. It is also important that when we are giving support to one of the sides, we should hold that fact up to the light of day.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making the case very well for an independent investigation, but given all that we know, and what she has outlined, would it not be right to suspend arms supplies to Saudi Arabia while that independent investigation takes place?

Emily Thornberry: I fully understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but let me turn that question round. At present, we are unclear—perhaps the Government will tell us definitively today—whether the weapons and planes sold to Saudi Arabia today will be used in Yemen tomorrow. Until we have an answer to that question, it is impossible for us to say what type of support we will
be giving to the coalition. Should that support include the sale of arms that could be used in Yemen next month?

It is manifestly clear that we need a UN-led investigation. It is equally clear to me, and I hope to all Members, that until that investigation is concluded, it is right for the UK to suspend its active support of the coalition forces. That is partly a matter of our own moral protection, but, we should not be actively continuing to support those forces while their conduct of war is under investigation. It is partly about the pressure that such a decision—[Interruption.] If I can just finish this sentence, I will give way in a moment. It is partly about the pressure that such a decision would place on the coalition forces to avoid further civilian casualties, to engage constructively in peace talks and to allow full access for humanitarian relief.

Emily Thornberry: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. The question is about whether it is right at this stage, given the impact on our economy, for us to be suspending our support for Saudi Arabia. Given the amount of arms and planes that we sell, is it right for us to suspend arms sales to Saudi if that is part of the support that we are giving the coalition? We have always complied with international humanitarian law when selling arms to our allies. We have regulations about who we sell arms to and in what circumstances. The Foreign Secretary himself said that the test for continued arms sales

"is whether those weapons might be used in a commission of a serious breach of international humanitarian law."

We have rules on arms exports and we must make sure that we abide by them. We are a proud country that does our utmost to abide by international law. The questions that we are raising today are important because if our support means supporting a coalition that is acting in contravention of international law, we must reconsider that support. That is the right position.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. I urge her to think for a moment about the impact that such a suspension would have on our credibility as an ally in this dangerous, fractured part of the world. There is a great difference between saying that civilians have been killed because terrorists are perhaps sheltering around what were civilian facilities and actually alleging that there is a deliberate programme of mass slaughter.

We have been doing an awful lot of historical commemoration and it is worth remembering the huge number of French civilians whom we killed in the build-up—
First I should remind the House how this tragic conflict began and, in particular, how Saudi Arabia and a coalition of Gulf states came to intervene, because, contrary to the impression given in some quarters, they did not act out of some spontaneous desire to invade Yemen and attack its civilian population. Saudi Arabia and its allies were responding to a crisis that was forced on them and that posed a grave threat to international peace and security. This round of the conflict began in September 2014, when Houthis rebels overran Yemen’s capital, Sana’a, in collusion with Ali Abdullah Saleh, the previous President, and with the reported backing of Iran. Their aim was to overthrow Yemen’s legitimate Government. In January 2015, President Hadi, the serving leader, was forced to flee his own capital for the safety of Aden, a move that availed him of nothing, because two months later the Houthis attacked the south, striking as far as the outskirts of Aden and forcing President Hadi to flee his country altogether.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that ex-President Saleh has also been asking for backing from the Russians?

Boris Johnson: The situation in Yemen is potentially disastrous, and it is vital that we stand by the people of Yemen and by the coalition that is trying to sort it out. The position when President Hadi was forced to flee was potentially disastrous. Yemen is a country of 26 million people, more than half of whom are under the age of 18. There is a long-standing presence of al-Qaeda in that country, which has a history of fratricidal bloodshed and chronic instability. At that moment, there was a clear risk that the country would fall into the hands of forces avowedly hostile to Saudi Arabia, which shares an 800-mile border with Yemen, one that is vulnerable and porous. It was against that background that the Saudis and their allies took a decision to intervene in Yemen in March 2015—a decision that was not only justified, but legally sound.

Several hon. Members rose—

Boris Johnson: I will give way in a moment.

President Hadi had formally requested military action to restore his Government, while the Arab League and the Gulf Co-operation Council had both called for “all means and measures to protect Yemen and deter Houthi aggression”.

Their fears have plainly been borne out: mortar bombs and rockets have frequently been fired over the frontier and into Saudi territory. Only two weeks ago, the Houthis launched a Scud missile which flew 300 miles into Saudi Arabia, exploding outside Taif, a city the size of Birmingham that has a population of 1.2 million and lies close to Mecca. The last time Saudi Arabia came under bombardment from Scud missiles, the weapons were fired by Saddam Hussein.

As the House will readily appreciate, this conflict has wider regional and global ramifications. Yemen sits beside the Bab el-Mandeb straits, running between the Red sea and the Indian ocean. On the same day as the Scud was fired at Saudi Arabia, the Houthis launched two other missiles at an American destroyer passing through the Bab el-Mandeb. On earlier occasions, they had fired missiles at civilian vessels plying this vital shipping lane. Every trading nation in the world, including this one—particularly this one—has a vital interest in safe passage through those straits.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is laying out his case in a forensic manner. Does he recognise that the argument from these Benches is not that there was not a legitimate political and strategic security crisis in Yemen, but that the reaction of Saudi Arabia and the coalition forces is out of all proportion to the crisis with which they were trying to deal?

Boris Johnson: It was absolutely right to support President Hadi and to recognise the scale of the crisis that Yemen faces. As I have been explaining to the House—I am glad that the hon. Gentleman accepts that I am laying out the case in a forensic manner—Britain has important interests at stake. By the way, it is right that we should be discussing this subject this afternoon. Furthermore, I can assure the House that, over the past few months, this country has been leading the way in a sustained diplomatic effort to try to settle that conflict.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Like the hon. Lady, I recognise the closeness with which he follows this issue and his deep personal interest in the crisis in Yemen. What we are saying to our representatives in the UN—

Boris Johnson: I give way with pleasure to the right hon. Gentleman, the former Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee.

Keith Vaz: I am chair of the Yemen all-party group, which is much more important to me.

I thank the Foreign Secretary for giving way and commend him for the efforts that he has made. The critical date was 16 October when, together with John Kerry, Ismail Cheikh and the Saudi Foreign Minister, we achieved the three-day ceasefire. Next Monday, the Security Council will be discussing the issue again. What are the right hon. Gentleman’s instructions to our permanent representative to ensure that that three-day ceasefire becomes permanent?

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and elsewhere is that it is the road map on Yemen that offers the route forward. As he knows full well, that road map has been presented to both sides of the conflict—both to the Houthis and to President Hadi and the coalition. It is up to them now to seize that opportunity. Of course they will not agree on every aspect of it, but it is that road map that offers the way forward.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Boris Johnson:** I will make a little more progress.

I say to the Houthis and those loyal to former President Saleh who say they want peace—that is what they say—that their actions suggest otherwise. They promised to obey UN resolution 2216, joined the framework for the talks and turned up in Kuwait for the negotiations, but, at the same time, they have taken a series of unilateral steps that have gravely damaged the cause they claim to espouse. The Houthis have announced the creation of a Supreme Political Council and set up a shadow Government to rival the legitimate Administration of President Hadi, which is emphatically not the way forward.

**Stephen Doughty:** I do not find myself in disagreement with much of what the Foreign Secretary has said so far, but does he accept that the issue for many Members on both sides of the House is the conduct of the operation in Yemen by the Saudi coalition, and whether or not UK weapons and ammunition have been used, in violation of our legal obligations? Does he consider that we are acting legally under our obligations under the arms trade treaty, notably article 6?

**Boris Johnson:** I will come to the hon. Gentleman's point in a moment.

Let me conclude my point about the Houthis and the Saleh loyalists. It is very important that the matter is solved politically. The single most important thing they can do is withdraw their forces from Sana’a by agreement with the UN special envoy. That is where our diplomatic energies are currently engaged.

I come to the point that the hon. Gentleman raised, which the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury also raised. I know that many Members on both sides of the House and people throughout the country have concerns about UK defence sales to Saudi Arabia. Let me say a few words about the general context. Saudi Arabia has been a key strategic and defence partner of this country, as Members on both sides of the House have rightly pointed out in this debate.

In the course of her contribution, the hon. Lady substantially retreated, I thought, from the text of the motion before the House in her name. Under questioning from my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) as to whether she would support the immediate suspension of arms sales to Saudi Arabia and to the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces, as is specified in the motion in her name, she refused to say that she would. She was very wise. There is a wide measure of agreement, therefore, between our parties. The hon. Lady spoke very wisely about our export control regime and she was exactly right in what she said.

**Emily Thornberry:** May I refer the right hon. Gentleman to the motion? That would help him, if he could take a moment—perhaps we could read it together. It states: “This House supports efforts to bring about a cessation of hostilities and provide humanitarian relief in Yemen”, and goes on to say “and calls on the Government to suspend its support for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition forces in Yemen until it has been determined whether they have been responsible”.

I hope I have given the right hon. Gentleman enough time to read the motion.

**Boris Johnson:** Most fair-minded Members of the House will recognise that under pressure about whether she would suspend UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the huge economic damage that that would entail, the hon. Lady retreated in the course of her remarks. I thought that was very striking and her judgment was entirely correct.

We take our arms export responsibilities very seriously indeed. This country operates one of the toughest control regimes in the world. All export licence applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis against the established criteria. The most relevant test is whether there is a clear risk of those weapons being used in a serious violation of international humanitarian law. We keep this under careful and continuous review.

**Alex Salmond:** I think the Foreign Secretary has confused the SNP amendment with the Labour motion. Why will he not accept the concept of an independent investigation? What will undermine our case against the Russians’ breaches of humanitarian rights in Syria—will it be newspaper columnists praising President Putin’s ruthless efficiency, as the right hon. Gentleman did earlier this year, or it is the thought that UK weapons are being used illegally in south Yemen? What undermines our case more?

**Boris Johnson:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Of course we are pressing for a full investigation, particularly of the attack on the funeral hall in Sana’a on 8 October, which shocked so many people around the world. The following day I raised this country’s concerns with the Saudi Foreign Minister and pressed for a full investigation. I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), to visit Riyadh to underline the strength of our feelings. An investigation is now taking place—the interim findings were announced on 15 October—and we look forward to its completion. I welcome Saudi Arabia’s public commitment to review their rules of engagement and their command and control system and to take action against those responsible.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Boris Johnson:** I am afraid that I must make some progress, as many Members wish to speak in the debate.

The Saudi Government have thus far approached the matter with the great seriousness it deserves—I think that those who have had the chance to interrogate the Saudi Foreign Minister in this House would agree. However, the House should be in no doubt that we are monitoring the situation minutely and meticulously,
and that we will continue to apply our established criteria for granting licences with fairness and rigour and in full accordance with UK law.

Those who say, as apparently the Opposition now do in their motion, that we should simply disregard those legal procedures should be in no doubt that we would be vacating a space that would rapidly be filled by other western countries that would happily supply arms with nothing like the same compunctions, criteria or respect for humanitarian law. More importantly, we would, at a stroke, eliminate this country’s positive ability to exercise our moderating diplomatic and political influence on a crisis in which there are massive UK interests at stake.

To the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury, who sought to draw ill-informed and inapposite comparisons, in what I thought was a singularly inappropriate analogy, between what is happening in Yemen and what is happening in Syria, I respectfully say that all wars are horrific and involve loss of innocent life, but important distinctions need to be made with the carnage taking place in Syria, where poison gas and barrel bombs are being used on the civilian population in a campaign of barbarism that has cost 400,000 lives and driven 11 million people from their homes. She should not let analogy replace analysis in what she says.

Britain is at the forefront of efforts to hold the Assad regime in Syria to account, and we are at the forefront of delivering humanitarian aid to the entire region. We can be proud of our efforts to address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen—the whole House can be proud of what we are doing. As the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury said, some 7 million people in Yemen face severe food shortages. Last month my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development hosted an event in New York that raised £100 million for the people of Yemen, on top of the £100 million contributed by the people of this country. We in Britain stand ready to do whatever we can to alleviate the suffering of the innocent, and the best service we could perform would be to help them secure a peaceful settlement.

The Government’s position is clear: the conflict in Yemen must end; and a political agreement between the Yemeni parties must be found. I agree with the hon. Lady: for that, we need a durable ceasefire and a return to negotiations. I agree with what she says, in that we should do everything we can to support the UN envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. But in the end, it is the Yemenis themselves who must also compromise. Peace is what the Yemeni people need and deserve, and that can only come from a political and a diplomatic solution. In helping to bring about that political and diplomatic solution, I believe this country, once again, is helping to show the way.

4.40 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): If I may, I would like to stick to what the motion actually says. Many points have been made on which we can agree, but it is important to drill down to what the motion is actually asking the House to do.

Of course we all agree that a humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Yemen. The responsibility we all have, as has been said, is to help restore peace and bring stability to the country and the wider region. There is no doubt that the crisis continues to grow. By June 2016, health facilities in the country reported that nearly 6,500 people had been killed, and more than 31,400 have been injured since March 2015. That is an average of 113 casualties a day. At least 7.6 million people, including 3 million women and children, are suffering from malnutrition, and at least 3 million people have been forced to flee their homes. So far, according to Save the Children, 747 children have been killed, and more than 1,100 injured. More than 2.5 million children have been displaced, and 3.4 million are out of school. This year, more than 848 children were forcibly recruited as child soldiers. More than 600 health facilities and 1,600 schools remain closed due to conflict-related damage.

The human stories behind those terrifying statistics are tragic and horrifying, so it is the view of the Scottish National party that the UK Government have a moral responsibility to act now and to do what they can to protect lives in Yemen. However, in addition to that inherent moral responsibility, which should put human lives at the centre of our decision making, the UK Government have legal responsibilities in relation to the conflict that they are failing to act on.

That is because of the actions of the coalition forces backed by the Saudi Arabian Government, which have faced serious and sustained evidence that they have acted in a manner that is at odds with international law. I understand that many atrocities have been carried out against Yemeni civilians by al-Houthi rebels, who have also shelled civilian homes, and deployed snipers who have targeted women and children. That is evil, wicked and wrong, and of course we do not agree with it. However, it is the actions of the Saudi coalition that concern me most today, because it is in that respect that the UK should be able to make decisions and use its influence for good.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I visited the air operations centre in Riyadh, where British air force personnel are helping the Saudis in their target planning. I have also talked to the pilots and the operational planners there. They assure me—and I believe them—that they are doing everything in their power to stop innocent civilians in Yemen dying. We should get that point across.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I will actually make reference to that work in a few moments. I simply cannot understand, though, why the Government are so averse to an independent UN-led inquiry into what is happening. What is the problem? What is there to hide if there is so much confidence on the Government Benches about how we are conducting ourselves?

It is clearly and undeniably the case that the Saudi-led coalition forces have bombed funerals, weddings and markets, and used banned cluster bombs on populated areas and on protected sites such as power stations. They have systematically targeted Yemeni’s agriculture economy—as alluded to by the shadow Foreign Secretary—in what academics have called a programme for the destruction of the rural livelihood of Yemeni civilians. They have killed men, women and children who have been gathered at family celebrations, and they have specifically targeted bombs and missiles on sick and dying hospital patients.
The reason why that is materially different from the actions of the al-Houthi forces is that the UK does, indeed, train and support Saudi pilots. We have military personnel embedded in Saudi Arabian military command and control rooms giving advice on the selection of targets. We sell Saudi Arabia the weapons and bombs it is using and the jet planes that deliver them. We have a material stake in this disastrous conflict. We therefore have a responsibility to the people of Yemen to do the right thing. On this, the Government are failing—but do not take my word for it.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Let me make some progress, and then I will.

According to the January 2016 UN Panel of Experts report on Yemen, the coalition airstrikes have failed to uphold the cornerstone principles of proportionality and distinction in any armed attack, and have clearly failed to take all necessary precautions to avoid civilian casualties. In March this year, Amnesty International released new field-based research documenting the further use of cluster munitions by the Saudi-led coalition, including the first reported use of UK-manufactured cluster munitions in any conflict for nearly two decades.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I just want to finish my point about the report.

Cluster bombs are an illegal weapon banned under international law since 2008, and the UK is a state party to the 2008 convention on cluster munitions.

So what does this mean for the UK? A legal opinion prepared by Matrix Chambers in December last year detailed how UK arms transfers to Saudi Arabia constitute a clear violation of our national, regional and international arms transfer obligations.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank the hon. Lady for that point, which was made during the urgent question. There is absolutely no definitive position on this, nor can any guarantee be given that these weapons are not being used. The question has been asked on a number of occasions.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: If I can make some progress, I will give way in a moment.

The legal opinion prepared by Matrix Chambers in December last year detailed these UK arms transfers.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way on this point?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Specifically, the opinion states that the UK is in breach of article 6.3 of the arms trade treaty because the UK Government ought to have had the necessary knowledge that serious violations of international law were taking place.

Mr Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I know that the Government do not like hearing legal opinion, or indeed the opinions of experts, unless it suits their case, but I will continue to make my case. [Hon. Members: “Give way!”] I understand. Mr Deputy Speaker, that I am within my rights not to take interventions unless I so wish. I shall therefore proceed. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We all want to get through today’s debate. Shouting means that I cannot hear the hon. Lady. That is not helpful to me, and it should not be helpful to you.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The UK is also in violation—[ Interruption. ] For those who are clearly not listening, this is legal opinion. The UK is also in violation of article 7 of the arms trade treaty on the basis of a clear risk that future weapons supplies could be used to commit or facilitate serious breaches of international law.

What have this Government done to address and investigate these serious and widespread concerns? By their own admission, they have done nothing. After spending most of 2016 telling Parliament that assessments had been conducted and that they were confident that no breach of international law had occurred, they changed their story to declare that no investigation had been carried out at all, and now appear to have changed their mind again. On 4 January 2016, the then Foreign Secretary told this House—I am glad that I now have the Government’s attention—the following:

“I regularly review the situation with my own advisers and have discussed it on numerous occasions with my Saudi counterpart. Our judgement is that there is no evidence that international humanitarian law “has been breached, but we shall continue to review the situation regularly.”

However, the written statement published by the Government on 21 July this year stated that it was important to note that the Government had not reached a conclusion as to whether the Saudis were guilty of international humanitarian law violations in Yemen. They said:

“This would simply not be possible in conflicts to which the UK is not a party, as is the case in Yemen.”—[Official Report, 21 July 2016: Vol. 613, c. 42WS].

Then last month the current Foreign Secretary, who is in his place today, completely contradicted his own ministerial colleagues—a frequent occurrence—in an interview with “Channel 4 News”. He definitively stated...
that, after taking evidence from a “very, very wide” range of sources, the UK Government do not believe that Saudi forces have broken humanitarian law, despite the fact that his own Ministers withdrew previous similar statements to Parliament.

Who are we to believe—the previous and current Foreign Secretaries, who say that there has been a UK investigation, or the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who is in his place and has been sent out to defend the indefensible once again? Do they really believe the assurances given to them by the Saudis? Have this Government really not properly independently investigated the claims? Do we really have no idea at all, given the close links that clearly exist between our Government and the armed forces, whether our closest ally in the middle east is using our weapons in this conflict, as the Prime Minister herself suggested last week to my right hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Angus Robertson)? This matters, because when the UK is presented with serious and widespread evidence of breaches of international law, we simply cannot take for granted the words of those who are accused of it.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady is right to mention the letter of international law and the question of knowledge and clear risk. Does she agree that it is absolutely incredible, not least in the light of the funeral bombing, that some claim that there is no knowledge or clear risk that actions may be taken against civilians? Does not that get to the heart of the matter?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Three Committees of this House—the Select Committees on Foreign Affairs, on International Development and on Business, Innovation and Skills—are of the uniform view that we cannot rely on the assurances of the Saudis and that there must be an independent, UN-led inquiry. Why are the Government not listening to the Select Committees of this House?

We agree with the Select Committees, which are unified in their view that there must be an independent inquiry and that we cannot rely on the Saudis to give assurances.

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Through sheer generosity and kindness of spirit, I now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You are too generous!

Mr Kevan Jones: I just want to help inform the debate. I put the point about cluster munitions directly to the Saudi Foreign Minister when he came here. He said that, yes, they had bought them, but that was 30 years ago; that they are not usable, because they are 30 years old; and that it would not be possible to use them anyway, because they cannot be integrated with modern jets.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. I note the points that he has made and his questioning of the Saudi Minister, but does he not agree with the view of the Select Committees of this House that the UK Government cannot meet their obligations under the convention on cluster munitions by simply relying on the assurances to which he refers? I agree with the Committees.

Mr Jones rose—

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman, and I will not give way to him further. He has an opportunity to make a speech if he so wishes.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree with the views of Penny Lawrence, the deputy chief executive of Oxfam, who said a few weeks ago that the UK had gone from being an “enthusiastic backer” of the international arms trade treaty to being “one of the most significant violators”?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I hope that hon. Members and the Government were listening to my hon. Friend’s point. This is a serious issue, and it should come as no

Mr Kevan Jones: We do not believe that the UK Government can meet its obligations under the Convention on Cluster Munitions by relying on assurances from the Saudis.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I have indicated that I am not going to give way to the hon. Gentleman. The report continues:

“In the case of Yemen, it is clear to us that the arms export licensing regime has not worked. We recommend that the UK suspend licences for arms exports to Saudi Arabia, capable of being used in Yemen, pending the results of an independent, United Nations-led inquiry”.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that it is critical that we see evidence of whether any stockpiles of cluster bombs have been destroyed?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: We have read tragic reports of cluster bombs being happened upon by children and of the terrible damage that they cause, so I welcome and agree with the hon. Lady’s intervention.

I agree with the proposition of all three Select Committees, which are unified in their view that there must be an independent inquiry and that we cannot rely on the Saudis to give assurances.
surprise that people in this debate speak with such passion and concern about the loss of life and the Government’s inability to hold themselves to account. One wonders what the Government are afraid of.

There is a clear and overwhelming case for halting UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia. As the shadow Foreign Secretary pointed out, if the Foreign Secretary read the motion he would see that the amendment on halting UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia was ours. The amendment was not selected, but it remains our position that unless and until it can be confirmed categorically that these weapons are not being used on civilians, we should not be selling arms to Saudi Arabia. There is a moral and a legal case for that position, and the Government should act now. We need full disclosure over whether UK personnel have played any part at all in the conflict in Yemen. We support calls for an international independent inquiry into violations of international law in Yemen. It is the duty of all of us—all states—to uphold international law, and we should not be afraid to argue for that. Let us be absolutely clear: the UK must immediately suspend all sales to Saudi Arabia.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just advise Members that we are going to have to be very brief and very concise? I will be a bit more lenient with the first two Members; I have asked them to take only seven minutes. After that, the limit will be five minutes.

4.57 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is probably essential that I follow the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) because she quoted extensively from the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report on this subject. My critique is that she took the comments about the cluster munition incident and extended them considerably more widely, and that is at the heart of the problem with the assessment of this issue.

Although the Committee felt that there should be independent verification around the cluster bomb incident, and we did say that a “United Nations-led investigation of alleged violations by all parties to the conflict is necessary to supplement the internal investigations of the Saudi-led coalition”, it is standard international practice that the Saudis should be given the opportunity to investigate these incidents in the first instance; that is an established principle. We said in the report:

“We agree with the Government that it is appropriate for the Saudi-led coalition to investigate these allegations in the first instance.”

We went on to look at the detail of the operation of the joint incidents assessment team, saying:

“Further progress is needed to ensure that JIAT is transparent, credible, and publishes its investigations in a timely manner. We recommend that the UK Government offer its support to the JIAT where appropriate so that it can meet these ends.”

In the rather limited time available, I want to refer briefly to the allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law. We have imposed on ourselves through the law the toughest set of conditions around arms licences. The proper place for those laws to be tested is in a court, and that is what will happen. More widely, in relation to our interests both in Yemen and the Gulf as a whole, the Government are charged with the responsibility of promoting our national interest and the international interest, as well as the wider promotion of our values.

No one will disagree when I say that there are, of course, challenges in this area. The Yemen conflict represents an immensely difficult challenge on a number of levels. However, as the Foreign Secretary said, the conflict did not come out of nowhere. We have to look at the issue of intent. I disagree with the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire when she says that the Saudis are targeting women and children. The judgment we have to make is whether the Saudi-led coalition, in executing a unanimous United Nations Security Council resolution to restore some kind of order to the recognised authority in Yemen, is trying to do so with the best of intentions. What is the Saudi interest in committing breaches of international humanitarian law while progressing a very difficult military campaign in the most unbelievably difficult geographical circumstances, given that the coalition is relatively immature and has never done this before? We should be thinking about what support to give our ally in picking up its responsibility for the delivery of regional security, because if it was not doing so, where would that responsibility sit?

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Gentleman mentioned intent. Does he not accept that arms trade law is based not on intent, but on the clear risk of violations of international humanitarian law? Like me, he supports an independent inquiry. If that found that international humanitarian law had been violated by the Saudi-led coalition, what action would he support?

Crispin Blunt: As I have just made clear, that is a matter for the courts. It is a matter of law that should be judged in the courts. The judgments that we need to make are policy ones. As far as the conduct of the operation in Yemen is concerned, it is in our interests to give as much support as possible to the Saudi-led coalition, which is, in effect, acting on our behalf, so that the coalition is able to conduct the operation successfully and within international humanitarian law.

Would that aim be achieved by pulling all support from the Saudi-led coalition, as the Opposition’s motion proposes? Would it be assisted by suspending arms exports, as the Scottish National party’s amendment suggests? It is pretty clear to me that either of those actions would seriously damage the sensible and proper conduct of the operation in Yemen by making it more difficult for the coalition to execute the operation with the advice and support of both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Despite the limited time, I want to put this issue in the context of our wider relationship with Saudi Arabia. What lessons would the Saudis take, and what message would it send to Saudi Arabia if, in these circumstances, we pre-emptively—in advance of any legal challenge to the basis of the licensing regime—pulled support from Saudi Arabia? Whether they are acting under international humanitarian law will be tested in the courts, but I believe at least that their intent is to make sure that they progress the operation within international humanitarian law.

What is happening in Saudi Arabia today, and in what direction is the state going? We have had a long-term strategic relationship with Saudi Arabia, and I invite
hon. Members to examine what is happening there. They should look at Vision 2030. They should look at the people who are now in charge. Anyone who has listened to the Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir—he has been to the House twice recently to give a presentation to MPs—will have seen how impressive a Foreign Minister he is. The deputy crown prince who is now leading economic reform in Saudi Arabia has put extremely impressive technocrats in charge of that process. It is all part of a wider modernisation process, not just economically but socially. It is absolutely in our interests that that direction for Saudi Arabia is supported and is successful.

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Crispin Blunt: I will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Can I just say to the hon. Member for Reigate—sorry Mark, because I am sure you want to come in shortly—that he has had eight minutes. I want to bring Keith Vaz in. When other Members have no minutes left, they are then going to wonder who to blame. Is the hon. Member for Reigate going to give way?

Crispin Blunt: I will.

Mr Hendrick: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee for giving way. I ask him quite simply: what is the alternative to the Saudi royal family as a Government—liberal democracy or an extreme Islamist Government? I think it is rather the latter. This country, Government—liberal democracy or an extreme Islamist is the alternative to the Saudi royal family as a Committee for giving way. I ask him quite simply: what benefit of our advice. I am aware that I have now operations in the Yemen in the way that they are or with support, they will not be getting laser-guided bombs, things more difficult. If they have to turn elsewhere for on that extremely difficult journey, rather than making I believe that we should try to be alongside its Government face huge challenges in doing that, but in Saudi Arabia is probably taking the country in a general direction that we can all approve of. The Saudi Government face huge challenges in doing that, but we shall not necessarily deal with the current Saudi Government whether we like it or not.

Crispin Blunt: We have seen the consequences of the uncontrolled loss of governance in the region, and they are pretty ugly. The truth is that the current leadership in Saudi Arabia is probably the country in a general direction that we can all approve of. The Saudi Government face huge challenges in doing that, but in Saudi Arabia is the most important country in the Gulf. I believe that we should try to be alongside its Government on that extremely difficult journey, rather than making things more difficult. If they have to turn elsewhere for support, they will not be getting laser-guided bombs, but weapons that will not enable them to carry out operations in the Yemen in the way that they are or with the benefit of our advice. I am aware that I have now run out of the time you allocated me, Mr Deputy Speaker.

5.6 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Although my heart is breaking looking at the violence and humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, I am very proud of this Parliament. In the past seven days we have discussed Yemen twice, and 60 Members of the House are here today.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and for Edmonton (Kate Osamor), the shadow Foreign Secretary and shadow International Development Secretary, for agreeing to hold this debate. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his pivotal role in ensuring that we got a ceasefire when he met John Kerry and the Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister on 16 October. I also thank the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), for the way in which she and her party have raised this issue over a number of months since the last election.

In the brief time that I have, I will concentrate on the ceasefire and the UN resolution that I hope will come on Monday. The ceasefire announced last week lasted only 72 hours. Fighting and bombings have swiftly returned at an intensity identical to that seen before the brief cessation of hostilities. The ceasefire had allowed food and humanitarian supplies to reach areas that had otherwise been completely inaccessible. The special envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, begged both sides for an extension to the ceasefire, but violations by both sides rendered those efforts fruitless.

We are now at a critical stage in the history of Yemen. We have said this so many times before, but now, more than at any previous time, Yemen is on the brink of disaster. That is why our concern in this House should be to bring about a permanent ceasefire in Yemen, and why all our efforts should concentrate on that critical UN meeting that will take place on Monday in New York.

I am sorry that we are going to divide on this subject this evening. I put forward an amendment that I hoped would be selected. If the House could only vote as one in favour of peace in Yemen, I would be very happy.

Tom Tugendhat: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Keith Vaz: I will. The hon. Gentleman has been to Yemen; indeed, he learned Arabic when he stayed there.

Tom Tugendhat: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for mentioning that. Peace is absolutely essential. May I remind hon. Members of the various elements of the combat in Yemen and the situation regarding arms? We are talking about Saudi Arabia in this debate, but the Houthis are being backed by Iran, so Iranian weapons are going in there. Can we remember that there are two sides and two foreign parties involved?

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—that is much more complicated. There are many sides to this, not just two. Anyone who has dealt with Yemen or lived there for a while will know that the tribal system is extremely important. It is important that we do not make this simplistic. What is very clear is the scorecard of shame that Members have talked about today: the 21.2 million people who require urgent humanitarian assistance, 9.9 million of whom are children; the more than 10,000 people killed in the last 18 months; and the 14.1 million people at risk of hunger, the equivalent of the combined populations of London, Birmingham and Glasgow.

I welcome what the Government and the International Development Secretary have done to ensure that more money has been pledged to Yemen, but it is critical that the money is used for supplies, and that those supplies reach the people who are hungry. Otherwise, all the money we raise will not be enough to deal with the crisis. Oxfam’s chief executive, Mark Goldring, who addressed the all-party group last week, called the situation in Yemen “Syria without cameras”. I thank the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), who was born, as I was, in Aden; the hon. Member for
Charnwood (Edward Argar), another officer of the group; and the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) for all the work they have done.

On Monday, the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is not in the Chamber, said to the Prime Minister that when 7,000 people were killed in 1995 in Srebrenica, the international community acted. That is why it is so important that we not only debate today’s motion, but follow through with a resolution that will be taken on board by the whole United Nations. Despite the incredible work of Islamic Relief, Oxfam, UNICEF, Médecins sans Frontières and many others, they simply cannot get the aid in. I hope that when the Minister, who has engaged fully with the all-party group, comes to wind up the debate, he will tell us more about what can be done to ensure that the aid gets through. He will say, I think, that unless we get the ceasefire, people will starve. I commend the international community for all the work that it has done to try to ensure that the ceasefire occurs. The issue of investigations has been raised, and while it is important that we get the investigations, we need to have the ceasefire. Once we have that, any investigations to deal with violations on all sides will need to be addressed, and we will need to address the question of what arms are being used.

What concerns me and what should concern the House—I know it concerns the Foreign Secretary—is what is going to happen on Monday. In my debate last week, we were told that Britain holds all the pens as far as Yemen is concerned. That is why the instruction that the Foreign Secretary gives to our permanent representative—the excellent Matthew Rycroft, who is leading for us in New York—will be so critical. I wish that the Foreign Secretary could go to New York on Monday and argue the case, but I do not manage his diary. I think that the presence of the British Foreign Secretary at the United Nations on Monday would be critical.

Members will raise all kinds of issues, all of them important, but unless we have a permanent ceasefire, Yemen will quite literally bleed to death while we discuss them. I beg everyone involved in the process to please move together in a united way, without dividing opinion, and concentrate on that one critical issue: getting the United Nations to back a permanent ceasefire. Then the people of Yemen can actually survive.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I just remind Members that the time limit is five minutes.

5.13 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I apologise to the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) for not being in the Chamber at the beginning of her remarks.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak. Without going all the ground, because there is too much to talk about, I would just like to say two or three things. I speak from the experience of having been a Minister who visited Yemen and understands a little bit about it, and who also had the responsibility of signing off arms control applications in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I speak as someone who I think on occasion got it both wrong and right.

The FCO has some incredibly difficult choices to make in dealing with any of these issues. The focus of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who made a typically excellent speech on this subject, was absolutely right. It is understandable that the motion is before us, and the sentiments behind it are well understood. Is it the most significant thing at the moment? Probably not, because ending the conflict was what the right hon. Gentleman focused on, and in getting to the end of a conflict, some incredibly difficult choices have to be made. The balance between our values and the practicalities of the issues surrounding decisions in the middle east has never been more finely balanced or more difficult.

I repeat that I understand the sentiments behind the motion, but I do not think that it is the right answer to the problems we have. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary set out well the complexities and some of the background that is essential to understanding where Yemen is today.

Two things about the kingdom of Saudi Arabia might be usefully known. First, as the right hon. Member for Leicester East and others know, Yemen has been in a state for a long time. It was the king of Saudi Arabia who picked up Yemen and sent money over a lengthy period of time. This friends of Yemen process was started by the Labour Government when they were in office. A lot of money was put into Yemen; it did not get through to the people because of the actions of the then President, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who is a constant factor in the difficulties created in the region. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been extremely generous in trying to support Yemen and pick it up.

Secondly, we need to be aware of the openness with which the Saudi Foreign Minister addressed the issue of the dreadful bombing attack on the funeral recently. That is relatively new, and it indicates, as my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, a different approach in Saudi Arabia, which is of huge significance in the region.

With that in mind, we come to what we are trying to say and do today. The hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury said that our values would come forward from what the House did. With all due respect, that is not necessarily so. It is not just our interpretation of our values that is important; other people’s interpretation of our values is important as well. I know from tough experience that what we sometimes say and do here with the best of intentions is not always seen in the same way elsewhere. Sometimes what we hold to be dear can be seen as naively misjudged by those who are closer to the action and have difficult judgments to make themselves.

What is most important is that in a region where friendships have been changed in recent years—most notably by some of the actions of the United States leaving people wondering whose side they were on, and who was going to be a balance in the regional interests and conflicts—for the United Kingdom to be seen to make a similar judgment at this time would undermine the efforts being made for peace.

Let me quote from the letter sent to Members from the ambassador to Yemen before today’s debate. In respect of the peace efforts being made, he said:
“We hope the Houthis who control Sana’a may be persuaded to engage seriously in peace talks”—which is obviously what we all want. He continues, however, by saying:

“They hope instead to weaken the Coalition by undermining relationships with its Western Allies”.

That is what we might, unwittingly, fall into.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman not also appreciate that although the UK is doing good work by providing aid, we are undermining that good work by also selling bombs that are landing on the heads of people in Yemen?

Alistair Burt: No, but I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. The great work that we are doing on humanitarian relief is well respected, but the issue of who is supportive in a situation that, as my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary said, is not of the Government of Yemen’s own making is a complex one. The undermining of a constitutional process that is absolutely vital to the further development of Yemen and the issues between north and south are further complicating issues. I went to both north and south and I went to Aden; I met the southern leaders; the constitutional process was getting somewhere—but it was undermined by the Houthi attacks and then the support of Ali Abdullah Saleh. Only when that is stopped can the constitutional talks continue and the efforts for peace be delivered, because that is what is most important for the people who are suffering in Yemen. With the best will in the world, this action by the United Kingdom would not achieve anything on the ground, and it might make the process more difficult. We want to see a ceasefire as quickly as possible, but I do not think that by withdrawing our support from one of the parties that can actually make that happen and by giving false hope to others to continue the conflict, we would be doing our best for the people of Yemen.

I greatly appreciate not only being given the opportunity to speak, but some of the difficult judgments that my colleagues have to make. Sometimes it is not easy to get the balance right. I think that on this occasion my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and, above all, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), are doing the very best that they can for the people of Yemen, and that we should back them up.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Unfortunately, because Members have been giving way, I shall have to reduce the speaking time limit to four minutes in order to accommodate Members. I am sorry about that. I call Kevan Jones.

5.20 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): It is right for us to support the legitimately elected and UN-backed Government of Yemen. It is also important for us to work tirelessly to bring about the ceasefire to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) referred, because without it we shall not be able to get humanitarian aid into the country or advance a political settlement. However, I cannot support the motion, because my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), concentrated on only part of the story, which she does quite a lot when it comes to this conflict. She condemned the actions of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, but completely ignored what is being done by the Houthis and the Iranian-backed weapons that are being taken into Yemen to fuel the conflict and help the Iranians to destabilise the region.

War is a horrible thing, and if there are violations on either side, I strongly believe that they should be investigated. It is sad that it was only in response to an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) that my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury said yes, we should investigate all sides.

Emily Thornberry: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Jones: I will not, because time is limited.

The Iranians are fuelling the conflict with millions of pounds’ worth of weapons. That is not a sign that a regime wants a peaceful settlement. As for their involvement in the peace process, there is evidence that they undermined the ceasefire that was in operation in the past few days. That is not helpful.

I accept that there are people, in the House and elsewhere, who take a moral stance against either the manufacture or the export of arms. Do I respect those people? Yes, I do, but I do not agree with them. I take what is perhaps, in the Labour party, the rather traditional view that we should be able to manufacture weapons, and that individual countries should be allowed to protect themselves when that is possible. I am proud that our legislation on arms exports was one of the achievements of the last Labour Government. The Export Control Act 2002 was the first such legislation for 50 years. We have a robust system in this country, and we should not shy away from it.

Let me say to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) that if Members want to comment on certain matters in the Chamber, they should consider them in detail first. When the Saudi Foreign Minister came here, I asked him about cluster munitions. However, I did not simply take his word for it. I knew from my own experience that using a 30-year-old cluster munition would be unsafe—and, in any case, how could it actually be delivered? I entirely agree that those issues should be investigated, but I do not think that they should be represented as facts when there is evidence to show that it might not be possible for such munitions to be used.

The situation is complex, but I do not think that the motion does anything to support the peace process, which I think is what we all want to do. I agree with the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) that a united voice from the Chamber this evening would be the best way of achieving what we all want to achieve. I am thinking not just of peace in Yemen but of the need for us to support our allies in the region, who are important not just to stability in that part of the world, but to the prevention of terrorism and other threats to us at home here.

5.23 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I do not regard myself as an expert on Yemen, but I have had a long association with the region, both as a banker and...
as a Member of Parliament. I am a former Defence Minister who was responsible for defence exports, and a Member of Parliament for Aldershot. I represent the headquarters of the fourth largest defence company in the world, BAE Systems.

As we heard from the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones)—and I agreed with everything that he said—it is important for us to understand that the United Kingdom has enjoyed a very long and mutually beneficial relationship with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There have been occasional differences between us, but those are to be found in any relationship.

We have got to understand the big picture. The kingdom is a key player in a region currently facing massive challenges, not least from Iran. In the case of Yemen, the kingdom has assembled an Arab coalition to take action against Houthi rebels following the ousting of President Hadi by Houthis widely believed to be supported by Iran. The coalition is operating under UN Security Council resolution 2216 and is composed of a pretty formidable array of Arab states: Morocco, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain and Qatar. That is a not-insignificant Arab grouping.

The coalition is also taking action against Daesh and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as demanded by the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), and the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) when she was a shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, who said that the UK needs to “work with the Saudis to ensure that we stop the flow of funding and support to ISIL/Daesh.”—[Official Report, 30 November 2015; Vol. 603, c. 122.]

The Saudis should be commended for what they are doing, not criticised.

As the hon. Member for North Durham said, the Houthis have a long record of atrocities, including recruiting child soldiers, using civilians as human shields and preventing aid groups from delivering medical supplies. Members should also know that the Houthi flag reads: “God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on Jews, Victory to Islam”—a motto partially modelled on that of revolutionary Iran and almost word for word a translation of Ayatollah Khomeini’s slogan. So we should be doing all we can to support our key ally in dealing with these disrespectable people.

So, what about the criticism of Saudi Arabia? There was indeed an attack on 8 October on a funeral party which tragically killed some 140 innocent people, but the Saudis ordered its joint incidents assessment team, a body formed of representatives from the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Yemen as well as the kingdom itself, to undertake an immediate inquiry which established that the air operations centre in Yemen directed a close air support mission to target the location without obtaining approval from the coalition command to support legitimacy and without following the coalition command’s precautionary measures to ensure that the location was not a civilian one. JIAT concluded that action should be taken against those found to be responsible.

We all make mistakes. I have had responsibility for targeting, and the Americans are not without criticism in this regard; they attacked a hospital manned by Médecins Sans Frontières. To suggest that the UK should suspend defence exports to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is at best SNP grandstanding and at worst a kick in the teeth for an important ally, as well as doing a disservice to the hundreds of highly skilled workers at Raytheon and Leonardo plants in Scotland which supply equipment to the BAE-led Salam programme of defence exports to Saudi Arabia—but I suspect SNP Members do not care about the employment prospects.

Like the Al Yamamah programme before it, Salam has made a significant contribution to the maintenance of the defence-industrial capability of the UK, generating prosperity across the UK, including Scotland.

5.27 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am sad to say that I will be unable to back the motion my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) has introduced today. I think this is the first time I have not supported an Opposition day motion, and God knows I have backed some rubbish—only joking. There is much in the motion that I agree with, but I fear it is ultimately undermined by the abandonment of our commitment to the UN Security Council resolution, and I fear that while it may make us feel better, it will not make the situation on the ground better.

The situation in Yemen is appalling and is quickly becoming the greatest humanitarian challenge stalking the planet in what is a most difficult time. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) spoke movingly about the scale of the human catastrophe in Yemen and I agree with him that it is a shame that we are seeking to divide the House on this issue.

There are legitimate concerns about the actions of Saudi Arabia in the Yemen. There is little doubt that the recent bombing of a funeral in the Yemeni capital constitutes a war crime; it was an appalling act that sickens us all, and I am pleased that the Saudis have accepted culpability and that an investigation into this incident is ongoing. I hope that as the investigation continues those responsible for this awful incident will be brought to justice and tried by the International Criminal Court.

There are other allegations against the Saudis that should concern us all. My hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury referred to the reports of deliberate strikes against agriculture infrastructure and the bombing of recently besieged areas in which aid is being provided. For that reason, I support the call for an independent inquiry to establish what has been done, by whom and on whose orders. My hon. Friend is right to push the Government and the international community to do more to ensure clarity on this matter, and we should be attempting to use our influence to ensure that a legitimate UN-sanctioned campaign in Yemen is not undermined by inexcusable actions. She posed some important questions, but I have to say that I was not certain what support she was asking us to withdraw.

The motion clearly does not refer to arms exports. So if I were to support it, I would not be clear exactly what I was asking for.

It is true that our relationship with Saudi Arabia is not an easy one, but we do wield some influence and our security is enhanced by the relationship. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, once a secretive, suspicious and insular country, now sends its Ministers here to be scrutinised.
by MPs in the Houses of Parliament. Other Members have referred to our significant economic interest in continuing to have positive relations with the Saudis, and to the fact that they have been a useful ally for our own security in the past and today. For years, the west has asked Saudi Arabia to take on more responsibility for what happens in the region, and it is now doing so. None of this means that we should ignore or underplay the significance of infractions of international humanitarian law, but we should think very carefully before isolating Saudi Arabia in the way that the motion suggests.

We should also be clear about the true threat posed to the people of Yemen, and indeed to the wider middle east region, by the Houthis. They are a terrorist organisation and they are unapologetic in their slaughtering of civilians. The hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) has just referred to the words inscribed on their flag, and those words tell us everything we need to know about the true motives of that organisation. It is for precisely that reason that, in April 2015, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2216, which mandated military action. It would be a huge mistake for us to turn away from that. As everyone in the House is aware, thousands of Yemeni women, children and old people will sleep fitfully tonight, never knowing what horrors tomorrow might bring. Now is not the time to throw away the influence we have. It is time to use it to help to create a safer middle east.

5.32 pm

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I see that the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) is on the Front Bench. I welcome the Government’s commitment to addressing the humanitarian situation in the Yemen, which has made the UK the fourth largest donor this financial year by committing £100 million to provide food, clean water, and medical supplies. However, those emergency supplies do nothing to abate the arguably more serious, yet still intertwined, threat to the humanitarian situation: the war crimes and human rights abuses of which the evidence speaks volumes. Such evidence has implicated all parties involved in the conflict in abuses of human rights.

Let me be clear. Even if you are a legitimate Government in exile struggling to reclaim your country from aggressors, or a foreign state charged with assisting in that recovery, and even if you have the backing of the United Nations itself, you are never exonerated from the duty to uphold human rights. Human rights abuses are always unacceptable, illegal and totally barbaric, and they must be called out and stopped. I am of course completely in favour of an independent UN-led investigation into the accusations of human rights abuses made against the Saudi-led coalition—one that can support Saudi Arabia’s own investigations—but to say that we should withdraw our support for the coalition until such investigations have gone ahead would be, quite frankly, ludicrous.

Sir Simon Mayall, a former middle east adviser in the Ministry of Defence, said, when giving evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee that it was likely that without Saudi intervention, groups such as ISIL would have gained a similar footing in Yemen as they have in Syria and Iraq. The Houthis would also have been able to expand throughout Yemen far more freely. Indeed, we would have seen an Iranian-backed militia having huge influence over the security of the vital Bab el-Mandeb shipping strait. With more Houthi territory under poor and unstable government, the opportunities for al-Qaeda to gain territory would have been greater still, adding to the substantial Yemeni regions it already possesses.

It could not be clearer that without Saudi military aid the situation would be far worse. Time and time again, Saudi Arabia has proved a crucial ally of the United Kingdom. We have worked together in Iraq and Syria, and in providing relief for Syrian refugees. The regional stability in the middle east that our close connection with Saudi Arabia has engendered is also of particular note. I ask the whole House to recall the first Gulf war and the location from which the then military coalition launched its offensive against Saddam Hussein’s illegal occupation of Kuwait. No Member of this House would disagree that it was illegal and that the offensive needed to happen. Saudi Arabia hosted the US-led coalition that liberated the country. It is staggering that we should be less safe without our ties to Saudi Arabia, and so would the Yemeni people.

In the limited time remaining, I want to turn to the future, because the only way to resolve or alleviate the crisis is by reaching a political solution. In this conflict, and in so many across the middle east, the sectarian divide plays a huge part in the political process. Whether Yemen, Syria, Iraq or Lebanon, the Shia tradition of Islam, spiritually led by Iran, and the Sunni tradition, led by Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both need to learn to reconcile with one another. From my background in Baghdad, I know that Sunnis and Shi’as can exist harmoniously and that religious divides need not be exploited as they have been across the middle east. I hope with all my heart that such a future awaits the people of Yemen.

5.35 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): Last Saturday in Liverpool, I helped to organise a vigil for peace in Yemen, at which we launched the “Liverpool Friends of Yemen”. The scale of the humanitarian crisis is truly appalling. Thousands have been killed. Three million are acutely malnourished. As the motion says, it is a country “on the brink of famine”.

More than 21 million Yemenis require humanitarian assistance—80% of the population. Over 1 million children are internally displaced. More than 14 million are in need of basic healthcare.

I pay tribute to DFID and the Government for their humanitarian relief work. This country has committed £100 million at a time when the UN appeal, according to my latest figures, is only 47% fulfilled. I also pay tribute to the many NGOs that are doing fantastic work in relieving the appalling crisis.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that if there were more population flows towards this part of the world, we might be taking the crisis in Yemen more seriously?

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many describe the situation as a forgotten crisis—although I welcome the fact that this is the second debate on Yemen in this House in the space of just a week.
The International Development Committee’s inquiry into the Yemen crisis reached a number of conclusions. The first thing to say is that the evidence is clear that appalling atrocities have been committed by both sides in the conflict. We heard not only that over 62% of the killings have been caused by the Saudi-led coalition, but that Houthi have recruited children to armed groups and have sieged towns such as Taiz, denying basic access to humanitarian aid and medicines. There is no suggestion in the motion or in my Committee’s reports that we are taking sides with the Houthis; this is about a balanced approach.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is right, and we no doubt agree on where the responsibility lies for starting this conflict and for many of the atrocities. Does he agree that we are neither an ally of the Houthis nor selling arms to them?

Stephen Twigg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is clear that negotiations and a peace process are needed, that we need a lasting ceasefire and that humanitarian work and civilian protection must be prioritised. The International Development Committee started with the view that this was a humanitarian crisis, but as we took evidence it became clear that we simply could not divorce the humanitarian position from the alleged violations of international humanitarian law by both sides. In turn, we could not divorce that position from the fact that we are arming one of those sides.

There are widespread reports of violations of international humanitarian law. The UN documented 119 abuses, and Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have documented substantial numbers more. The Government, however, have been rather dismissive of the evidence from such organisations. Saferworld told the Committee:

“In other contexts, the Government will cite their reports. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty will be cited in Syria; they have been cited in Libya and Sudan in support of the Government position. Here, they are referred to as not good enough to be considered evidence compared with a reassurance from the Saudis, one of the belligerents to the conflict, that there are no violations of international humanitarian law.”

I welcome the fact that at the recent UN Human Rights Council the UK position did shift and we signed up to an EU common position that enabled there to be a greater independent element in the investigation of abuses, but I support what this motion says, which is that we need a lasting ceasefire and that humanitarian work and civilian protection must be prioritised.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Lady is an excellent member of the Committee and she is right that in our earlier report we did indeed say that, but in the later report in September, after the CAEC discussions, we then agreed a report, jointly with the then Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills, that advocated a suspension of arms sales while the independent investigation was undertaken.

I wish to finish on the following point—the clock seems to be being rather generous to me and I thank it for that.

Mr Speaker: There might be human forces involved as well!

Stephen Twigg: I am even more grateful to those human forces. The Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee spoke about intent, and this issue is vital. What European Union, United Kingdom and international arms trade law says is that licences cannot be granted if there is a “clear risk” that the arms may be used in the commission of violations of international humanitarian law. This is not about intent; it is about there being a clear risk. That is the test we face, and my major concern is that the approach that the Government have taken is inconsistent with the UK’s global leadership role on the rule of law and international rules-based systems.

A point was raised earlier about reputation, which is very important. Our reputation as an upholder of international humanitarian law is very important. We can be proud of the active role this country played in the shaping of the arms trade treaty, and I simply do not believe that that test of “no clear risk” is the one being applied. I agree with colleagues on all sides of this debate who have said that we want a ceasefire and a political process, and that this conflict will be settled diplomatically, not militarily. However, crucially, the reason why I support this motion is that I really do believe that we need a fully independent UN-led investigation into all of these appalling alleged violations of international humanitarian law—on both sides.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow some very learned speakers, including my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth). Today’s debate comes after a recent Adjournment debate in this Chamber about humanitarian aid to Yemen and a number of other debates, including a Backbench Business Committee debate and a Westminster Hall debate, and after the report by the International Development Committee, of which I am a member.

All of this highlights the seriousness and complexity of the situation, but it also raises awareness of what is often described as the “forgotten war”. It is worth remembering that the conflict in Yemen has its roots in the failure of a transitional process that it was hoped would bring stability to the country. Following the uprising in 2011, that has, sadly, not been the case and now, despite nearly two years of conflict, neither side appears close to a decisive victory. The UN estimates that more than 4,000 civilians have been killed, with more than 7,000 injured, that 3.1 million Yemenis are internally displaced and that 14 million people are suffering from food insecurity. But this humanitarian crisis was going on before the current situation began. So in calling for humanitarian relief, we should recognise
the tremendous work done by the Department for International Development in Yemen, as well as that of all the non-governmental organisations. This is a country in which the challenges of getting aid to those who need it most is great. Whenever and wherever UK aid is sent, the importance of an unimpeded passage cannot be underestimated, not just for those in need, but for the safety of those NGOs and DFID staff who work in-country.

On 21 September, the Secretary of State announced an additional £37 million of aid to support Yemen, which brings the UK’s total humanitarian funding for the crisis to £100 million this year. DFID and the UK Government should be commended for that. The UK is now the fourth largest donor, which shows that it certainly has stepped up to the plate. However, the aim above all must be to seek a political settlement and a cessation of hostilities. The Government must use their leadership role and influence as much as possible and remain fully involved in diplomatic efforts to bring about peace. The UK’s strong relationships with a number of important players in the region is vital. Our influence in the middle east must put us in a unique position to help bring about the lasting peace settlement that we all so desperately want.

There is no doubt in my mind that the security situation in Yemen is serious. This conflict is brutal. The UN has reminded all parties that they have a duty of care in the conduct of military operations to protect civilians. Yes, concerns and questions remain, particularly around the airstrike that hit a funeral hall in Sana’a on 8 October. It is for the Saudis to investigate and report back in the first instance. We must remember and recognise that, at the UN Human Rights Council in September, the UK supported a strong resolution, which included a commitment to increase the number of international human rights experts in the Yemen office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights.

Surely a political solution and an immediate, unconditional ceasefire between Houthi rebels and Government forces must be the way forward—a way forward in the pursuit of a long-term solution to this conflict. As the embassy of the Republic of Yemen has pointed out, this conflict did not begin with the arrival of the Saudi-led coalition in March 2015. It began much earlier.

There is much more that I would like to say, but I appreciate that I am short of time. Let me end by saying that I will not support the Opposition motion, but I will support the Government’s amendment, because it is the right and proper thing to do.

5.46 pm

Mr Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): The situation in Yemen is appalling and indeed devastating to the population. It is right that we hold our friends to higher standards, but to withdraw our support from Saudi Arabia is to remove ourselves from being a critical friend and ally of a regime that we want to reform and that is going through a process of change which will only improve its governance and its prestige in the world. It is the world’s largest oil exporter in a region that is fraught with dangers and conflicts. Why would we want to abandon an ally in that situation, especially as they supply us with intelligence on al-Qaeda and ISIL and support us in our fight against terrorism more generally?

Stopping arms sales to Saudi Arabia will not end the conflict in Yemen. In fact, it could exacerbate it, because, obviously, it would no longer be listening to the sound advice of this country, its Government and its military. At the same time, it would also devastate many thousands of highly skilled people who are working in an industry in Lancashire that provides aircraft and systems that defend with great effect not just our borders, but the borders of our allies in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

If the reported human rights abuses are taking place, are they accidental, are they planned, or are they being carried out by rogue elements of the Saudi air force? I do not know, and I welcome the coalition’s interim report and look forward to its final report.

The Foreign Secretary referred to the fact that the interim report, which was published on 15 October, stated that Saudi Arabia is reviewing its rules of engagement and will take action against those responsible for the atrocities. He also said that the House should not be in any doubt that the British Government are meticulously monitoring the situation. Having served on the Committees on Arms Export Controls, I would expect them to do that, and I expect them to do so again in the future.

As I said in an intervention, the alternative to a royal family governing Saudi Arabia is not liberal democracy, but extremist Islamism. Undermining one of our allies in the region is not an alternative to guiding them to abide by international humanitarian law and the standards to which we all in this House aspire.

5.49 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The House should remember that the countries involved in the terrible war in Yemen do not have a history of intervention. Historically, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar have not intervened in other jurisdictions, despite their location in a very difficult and volatile region. They have certainly never come together, as they have done on this occasion, collectively to enter another country—in this case to take on the Houthis.

We ought to pause for a moment to think about the historic consequences and the unique situation that we find in all these disparate countries. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) listed the names of the countries that have come together because collectively they see the appalling consequences of what is happening in Yemen. My contacts in Saudi Arabia tell me that many Saudis are married to Yemenis and that there has historically been a huge amount of exchange between Yemen and Saudi, and the idea that they would deliberately target civilians is one that they find appalling and shocking.

Yemen is being destabilised by the Houthis. As we heard from the Foreign Secretary, they are firing Scud missiles into Saudi Arabia and carrying out the most appalling brutality throughout that country. We have heard from the SNP about the civilian casualties, but the Emirates have lost more pilots in this conflict than in the history of their nation, so they have suffered a great deal as well.

I am concerned that the coverage of the situation by our own media in this country, the BBC and Newsnight in particular, is superficial, poor, and I would even go so far as to say biased, leading to motions such as that emanating from the SNP.
We met the coalition forces at the Royal United Services Institute. RUSI kindly organised a meeting for us at which we engaged with the head of the Saudi air force, who told us, “Every single plane has cameras on it. We can pinpoint exactly where the planes are at any one time. If you have evidence that any of them have deliberately”—that is the critical word, and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) alluded to it—“targeted civilians, that must be raised directly with the Saudis.” They are doing everything possible to try to limit civilian casualties. There is a report in The Independent today that the Americans’ recent bombing in Syria has led to over 300 casualties. Of course, civilians are affected, regrettably, when there is a bombing campaign.

We take great pride in Shropshire in training many pilots from the Gulf states—Kuwaitis, Emiratis and Saudis—at RAF Cosford and RAF Shawbury. It is not just about selling the equipment to those Gulf states. We take great pride in training those pilots to the very highest standards. They are taught by their British counterparts not just about professionalism and about flying, but about the ethics of flying those planes and the importance of what they do. I am very proud of the contribution that we make and I regret that there are Members in this House who think that we would be party in some way to deliberately targeting civilians.

5.53 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is not in his place, for his initiative in securing the Adjournment debate last week on the humanitarian atrocities in Yemen. We all look forward to the UN peace talks that will take place in a few days and I hope they bear fruit. That debate was well attended and there are even more MPs here for this debate. Government Members should take note of the growing discontent and unease in this House and across the country about breaches of humanitarian law in Yemen. This issue has not emerged just in the past week. I remind the House that the debate today takes place more than a year after the first evidence emerged of deliberate human rights violations by the Saudi regime in Yemen. It will come as no surprise to anyone here today that I opposed the granting of arms export licences to Saudi Arabia then, and I oppose it now. Although I am pleased to see many more MPs gradually coming to that view in today’s debate, it astonishes me that there are still those who cannot see the contradiction in continuing to allow those arms sales while asserting that Britain is a force for good in the world.

With over 3 million internally displaced persons in Yemen and almost 15 million people experiencing food insecurity, the human cost of the conflict is all too clear. Last week the all-party parliamentary group on Yemen watched in silence as Krishnan Guru-Murthy introduced a Channel 4 exposé of the level of suffering we are releasing on the children of Yemen through our actions and inactions. We heard from Yemenis who told us that they welcomed the current ceasefire, as perhaps being a path to lasting peace, but that that peace could not be delivered while the civilian population was in danger of being bombed in school, at weddings, at funerals or at work in Yemen’s faltering economy. This is not grandstanding—but if it is grandstanding, I plead guilty.

We on the SNP Benches understand perfectly well that Saudi Arabia is an ally, that it is fighting on the side of the legitimately recognised Government of Yemen, and that atrocities have been committed on both sides, but the fact remains that the sale of £2.8 billion-worth of arms to the Saudi regime over the course of this conflict has undoubtedly contributed to humanitarian suffering. Surely those on the Government Front Bench cannot take a contrary view.

The most galling aspect, in my opinion, has been the blatant attempt to ensure that no independent investigation takes place that would put our Government in the inevitable position of having to request that arms sales be halted. In October last year, when the Netherlands sought to establish the first UN investigation into war crimes in Yemen, the UK Government supported a Saudi motion that would see it investigating its own crimes. I have met no one who seriously thinks that Saudi Arabia has the capacity to conduct a rigorous, independent and transparent investigation into itself. The Foreign Secretary knows that a Saudi-led investigation is worthless, I know that it is worthless, and this House knows that it is worthless.

Put simply, the UK Government must immediately support the establishment of a thorough, UN-led investigation into these crimes, and the continuing inability of anyone on the Government Benches to move that forward is to their immense discredit. As the Committees on Arms Export Controls found in their evidence, it opens Ministers—these Ministers—up to international criminal investigation, and that cannot be in our national interest.

The SNP’s position is that the Government must halt arms sales to Saudi Arabia immediately and ensure that a full investigation, under the auspices of the UN, now takes place.

5.57 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I think most of us in this House would recognise that Saudi Arabia is a country in transition. It has come a long way in a relatively short space of time in order to address some of the concerns that we in this House have articulated. To deny that it has made progress is to deny the facts. I think we all share the concerns about what we have seen taking place in Yemen. No one could defend the bombing of a wedding party and the deaths of civilians. However, when we stand back and look at the conflict in its totality, and the crimes that the Houthis are responsible for, such as the capture and the killing of Saudi personnel and intrusions across the Saudi border, we have to recognise that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, like any sovereign state, has the right to defend itself.

As someone who has visited Saudi Arabia, I have not been shy about criticising aspects of its Government’s direction of travel, but neither should we be blind to the fact that the kingdom has made some great strides forward in recent years to address the concerns of many Members of this House.

I think that we would be wrong to withdraw support in an attempt to influence the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A withdrawal of support, which is implied in Labour’s motion and made explicit in the SNP’s amendment, relates to the withdrawal of arms sales. I unashamedly
defend our right to sell defence equipment legitimately, with export controls, as we do, to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In my constituency, 6,500 men, women and apprentices are employed by BAE Systems at Warton, 4,000 over at Samlesbury and another 1,000 over at Brough, working on Hawk trainer aircraft, Typhoons and Tornado upgrades. Without the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and without those arms exports, 16,000 people would be out of work.

It is all very well for people to sit as though they were at an Islington dinner party and, over their latest glass of Uruguayan wine, say “Let’s stop arms sales,” but let us look at one key fact: every single one of those people is a human being, not a number; they have mortgages to pay, they have skills and they have jobs. Twice in my time as a Member of Parliament I have been at the gates of BAE Systems in Warton when redundancies have been made. My goodness, when you see proud working people at the risk of losing their jobs, it is a humbling moment. So when I see people in this House tabling motions calling for those people to lose their jobs—that is what is happening—I question their moral judgment. These are supply chains. If we seek to suspend the sale of this defence equipment, these people do not just go somewhere else; they do not just switch to manufacturing for someone else—they lose their jobs; that is what happens. When people feel really proud that they have said and done the right thing, there are also people who will lose their jobs—tens of thousands of them up and down this country.

I am not going to sit and take lessons from the Scottish National party about what we are doing morally. I know what we are doing morally: we are controlling arms sales, and I support the Government’s actions on this issue. We are controlling arms sales through the rigorous approach taken by the Government, and anyone who seeks to deny that is denying the truth.

6.1 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank the official Opposition for securing the debate. I also thank the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who is not in his place—he is by your Chair, Mr Speaker—for rightly putting the focus on the ceasefire, which is what we in the House would all like to see, although we will not be debating his amendment this evening, or indeed voting on it.

I shall focus briefly on the international investigation. Clearly, there are precedents for the UK Government pushing for international investigations—Sri Lanka, for instance, springs to mind. In the right circumstances, we would all support an investigation that covers both sides, because human rights abuses are potentially being committed on both sides. The Government’s position is that they are not opposing calls for an international, independent investigation, but I would like to press the Minister on the circumstances in which they would actually support such an investigation. He has referred to allowing the Saudis to conduct their own investigations, but at what point—using what test, what criteria and what timetable—do our Government say, “Actually, we think we’ve reached the point where we need an international, independent investigation”? I am sure the Minister is aware that the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that 93% of casualties from air-launched explosives are civilians. It is difficult to see, with such statistics, how civilians are not being targeted, certainly through the use of air-launched explosives.

An inquiry might also consider whether the use of cluster munitions is in breach of international humanitarian law. I know that the Minister’s view—or the legal advice that he has received—is that, provided those munitions are used in a way that does not contravene international law, and particularly international humanitarian law, their use per se is not necessarily unlawful. I hope that he will be able to set out on what legal judgments he bases that view that the use of cluster munitions in civilian areas is, on occasions, legal.

I certainly think that the Americans would be in favour of an international investigation. The Minister may be aware that US officials have looked at whether the United States might be a co-belligerent and could be pursued under international law for war crimes. I hope that our Government have investigated that.

I welcome the visit of the Saudi Foreign Minister. I agree that he was very open and frank, which is a good start in what is, perhaps, a developing relationship. He said that changes would be made to how the Saudis handle these issues as a result of the incident, or mistake, that they accept what happened in relation to the funeral bombing. We have heard that the Saudis will take action against those directly responsible, but what else does our Minister expect them to do? What additional measures does he expect them to put in place to ensure that such incidents do not happen again? Perhaps he will say something about double-tapping, which we have heard is a war crime in Russia, but does not appear to be so in relation to Yemen.

There is, I am afraid, overwhelming evidence that breaches of international humanitarian law are taking place in Yemen, and that is why I shall support the motion tonight.

6.5 pm

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): The situation faced by the Yemeni people is grave, and I am pleased that our Government are the fourth largest donor of humanitarian aid there. I am dismayed, however, that while the international community has pledged $100 million of aid, Germany is still to commit to pay, and the EU has paid less than it promised. A cessation of hostilities is in the best interests of not only Yemen but the wider region, but I do not believe that the suggestions in the Opposition’s motion would in any way achieve that aim.

We cannot overestimate the importance of UK-Saudi relations to the British national interest. Our strong alliance, which spans decades, encompasses trade, security and intelligence. It has, over many years, provided us with crucial intelligence that has saved the lives of our constituents. We must not forget that, nor the fact that it has taken decades to build up that relationship of trust. This understanding comes from the fact that tens of thousands of British nationals, including many of my constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and the hon. Member for Preston (Mr Hendrick), have lived and worked in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through their work in the defence aerospace industry. They realise that this fledging state—we must remember that it was founded only in...
1932—is not perfect, but that progress will be made only through experience, engagement and co-operation. Stability in Saudi Arabia is in the British national interest. Chaos has ensued in the past few years since the so-called Arab spring, with a spike in terror, meted out at home, and unprecedented migration to our own shores. The country does not have the perfect liberal democracy that we have here, but what it has is better than anarchy and terror. We must support Saudi Arabia in its drive towards reform in a peaceful fashion, because these are difficult times for that country. The falling oil price, and unemployment and underemployment, are creating a vacuum that could be filled with radicalisation, which, again, would have an impact in our constituencies.

It is unsurprising that Saudi Arabia will do all that it can to prevent the war in Yemen from spilling into its own territory. This is the country's first experience of extended military action, as its Foreign Minister made clear when he came to Parliament last week and spoke frankly about that fact. It is through British intervention and guidance that the Saudis will learn about accountability and transparency. How would they do so without allies like the UK? If the UK were to suspend its support for the Saudi-led coalition forces, as the motion suggests, that would not expedite the publication of reports. Rather, Saudi Arabia would continue its campaign but without our influence as regards better targeting, transparency, accountability, and our understanding of international humanitarian law.

Moving on to the SNP's position, I will not reiterate the arguments so ably set out by other hon. Members about our arms control policy and the importance of the aerospace industry to our country. This is not an either/or situation; the Government are not pursuing trade to the exclusion of human rights. We can have these conversations about human rights because we have strong trade and diplomatic relations. It is naive to think that if we suspended arms sales, Saudi Arabia would not buy from somebody else. The motion, and particularly the SNP's position, misunderstand the realities of the region and our role in it, and the British national interest.

6.9 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is almost five months since I successfully secured a Westminster Hall debate on human rights and arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Part of my speech focused on the situation in Yemen, and since then that situation has gotten progressively worse. There is a massive humanitarian crisis as the country heads into winter, and it is also careering towards a famine. Millions of people urgently need food assistance, but unfortunately they are not receiving it due to the lack of unhindered access.

I appreciate that the Government have been making efforts to ensure that aid starts to get through—that has certainly helped the situation—but the war-related damage to Yemen's infrastructure means that essential supplies are still not getting into the country. Onerous restrictions on humanitarian access have resulted in 1.3 million children under five suffering from malnutrition. Is it going to require images of dead children to make us do more? There will soon be no shortage of them—that fact is heartbreaking and infuriating.

The Department for International Development will no doubt argue that we are already doing our fair share, and of course it is only right that we do so. I am afraid, however, that handouts cannot make up for us arming the forces that are causing a lot of the damage to the country's infrastructure. Make no mistake: although we are not coalition partners, we are willing accomplices.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP) rose—

Margaret Ferrier: A lot of Members want to speak, so I am sorry but I am going to continue.

I have been calling for the suspension of the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia for more than a year, and I have heard many excuses for not doing so. First, the Government insisted that the Ministry of Defence had conducted assessments of the situation in Yemen and determined that there was no evidence of breaches of international humanitarian law. That was as recently as June, when the then Foreign Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), insisted, in response to me in a Westminster Hall debate, that that was the case.

There was then a climbdown when the Government admitted that the MOD had not, in fact, conducted any assessments. The new refrain is that the Saudis should be responsible for investigating themselves, and that is what has started to happen. Although the joint incidents assessment team has investigated relatively few incidents, it has been forced to admit that the Saudi-led coalition has indeed broken international humanitarian law. That still does not seem to be enough to shame the Government into action. Even the coalition airstrike in Sana'a on 8 October was not enough.

The UN panel of experts on Yemen has condemned the airstrike. It said that the coalition had “violated its obligations” under international law and that it “did not take effective precautionary measures to minimize harm to civilians, including the first responders” on the scene. When I tabled a written question to the Foreign Office in June to ask for an assessment of an extensive report published by the panel of experts in January, it responded:

“The UK has supported, and continues to support, the work of the panel of experts commissioned by the UN, but we do not always agree with their conclusions.”

What is totally shameful about that response is that not once have I seen any evidence whatsoever that the Foreign Office has ever disagreed with the conclusions of the Saudi authorities, let alone questioned them. Why is it that the Government seem content to take the word of a participant in the war at face value, yet disregard so readily the findings of the UN panel?

We need to stop arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and we need an independent investigation. It is time for the Government not only to come clean about their role in the conflict, but to start putting things right.

6.13 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for calling me to speak in this important debate. A number of issues have been touched on very ably by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House.

The first thing we have to consider is that Saudi Arabia—I have visited the kingdom twice in the past
three years—is itself on a journey. I first went there in 2013 as part of a delegation, when it was clear that one regime was coming to an end. I and a few colleagues went there earlier this year, and it was equally clear that the country had evolved. There were new programmes in place under the direction of Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who spoke candidly about the nature of Saudi involvement in Yemen, as has his Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, very ably in many instances.

The Saudi action in Yemen is not coming out of the blue. It is not something that the Saudis are doing for the sake of it. They are doing it in response to UN resolution 2216, which other Members have alluded to, so in this instance they have the force of international law behind them.

I do not dispute that there have been incidents. I do not dispute that the Saudis have, at times, been overbearing and acted ultra vires, as we used to say—beyond their authority—and that civilians have been killed. That is greatly to be regretted, and it is an appalling violation. When there have been violations, they need to be looked at, but I do not believe that suspending the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia would help this country or the interests of other Gulf countries, but countries such as Morocco—not just Gulf countries, but countries such as Morocco—are involved in the action. Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are all involved—[Interruption.] They may not be the shining democracies that you would like to see in Scotland, but they are functioning Governments that are a source of stability.

Mr Speaker: Order. I did not say anything about what I would like to see in Scotland.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I know that, Mr Speaker. I just had a rush of blood to the head when I saw the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) chuntering from a sedentary position.

It is quite clear that the countries I have just mentioned are sources of stability, and it makes absolutely no sense for us to turn our backs on them. On the contrary, we must work with them and make sure that where there are violations, the right people are held to account. It makes no sense for us to walk away. We have important strategic relationships with these kingdoms. To achieve stability in the region, we will need to be mature in our relations with them, and friendly and co-operative when we can be, but we can also be particularly critical if we feel that that is needed.

6.17 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): The hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) accused the SNP of grandstanding and of denying Saudi Arabia the right to self-defence. Our argument is rather that the Saudi intervention in Yemen is disproportionate; that is the key. Several legitimate and well-respected human rights organisations have used open source material to try to count the number of airstrikes in Yemen since March of last year, when the Saudi coalition began the bombing. There have been at least 8,600 airstrikes, and that is disproportionate. There are not enough targets for the Saudi coalition to go on bombing as they have done. One of the findings from that open source material is that at least one third of the airstrikes have resulted in civilian casualties. That is the issue.

Dr Cameron: Does my hon. Friend agree that funding what appears to be indiscriminate bombing is undermining the excellent work that the Department for International Development is doing in humanitarian aid?

George Kerevan: I would not only accept that, but go further and say that it is undermining the Saudi case for trying to create a stable Government and a stable political position in Yemen.

The hon. Member for Regigate (Crispin Blunt) introduced a new doctrine: the doctrine of intent. He said that we should look at the intent of the Saudis and, since they say they are doing good things and they want peace and security, we should consider that to be enough. Let us look at the intent of the Saudi Government. They have not signed up to the international convention on cluster weapons. If they do not want to use them, I would have expected them to sign up to it. In fact, as we all know, they have been using them—air-launched and ground-launched cluster weapons. I know that the Houthis on the other side are using them as well, but we are talking about a massive, western-funded, western-armed coalition versus a small group of rebels. That is disproportionate.

If we look at which cluster weapons have been found by human rights organisations across Yemen, we can see that they are not just the BL755 cluster weapons manufactured in Britain, but the CBU-105s, CBU-87s and CBU-58s manufactured in the United States. They have been found to have been used in at least five provinces in Yemen. Here is the thing: the American cluster weapons were sold to Saudi Arabia 20-odd years ago. I do not know how they got there or who used them, but it is surprising that all the types of cluster bomb weapons supplied to the Saudis about 20 years ago—in the 1980s and 1990s—have been found to have been used comprehensively and across the whole of Yemen. That deserves an investigation, which is what our amendment asks for.

The test of what Saudi Arabia is doing is not intent, but whether there is on balance a risk that humanitarian law has been broken. I put it to the House that there is ample evidence of that. How do we get the attention of the Saudi regime? That is at the core of the proposal in the SNP amendment, which has not been selected, to call for an immediate withdrawal of current sales of weapons to Saudi Arabia.

To respond to the hon. Members for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) and for Fylde (Mark Menzies), our proposal is not to stop all arms sales in perpetuity.
are trying to get the attention of the Saudi regime, which cannot put its own ground troops into Yemen. The real secret is that the regime cannot trust to using its own ground troops—it keeps them at home to protect the regime, which has no democratic legitimacy—so it uses its air force, which has very close links to the royal family, in a consistently indiscriminate way.

Hon. Members have repeatedly mentioned the bombing of the funeral. It was the funeral of a leading Houthi Minister and a lot of Houthi Ministers were expected to be at it, so one suspects that it was not quite the accident that it has been made out to be. There have been repeated cases of civilians being killed in missile and bomb attacks in places where Houthi leaders were expected. My point is that calling for an investigation and for a halt to arms sales in the short term is a way of getting the attention of the Saudi regime to ensure a ceasefire and a permanent solution to this crisis.

6.22 pm

Nusrat Ghanji (Walden) (Con): The situation in Yemen is dire. As the House has already heard, nearly 7,000 people have lost their lives as a result of the conflict, and more than 14.4 million people are food-insecure. The recent ceasefire provided a welcome few days of relief, allowing much-needed humanitarian aid through to areas that simply cannot be reached while clashes are going on, as was passionately noted by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz).

A true and lasting solution to the humanitarian crisis in Yemen must come from a longer, stable ceasefire during which efforts are made by both sides to agree a long-term, balanced peace deal that the people of Yemen have invested in themselves. I strongly support the Government’s work at the UN and, through our ambassador, Edmund Fitzton-Brown, in Yemen. We should be proud that we have contributed £100 million to the UN’s humanitarian response, making us the fourth largest donor. I am pleased that our ambassador was present at the Kuwait talks. Our support for the UN special envoy, both politically and financially, is also extremely welcome.

However, we must recognise that this is not about us and that we are just one player. It is very easy to moralise on foreign affairs, but the devil is always in the detail. History has taught us that it is not our role to dictate relations between neighbouring countries in a region in which, if we are honest, our record is not exactly perfect. I suggest that we show some humility in our role.

My reservations about how Saudi Arabia conducts some of its affairs, internally and externally, are known. To discuss those concerns would require a whole other debate in itself. But however critical we are and will continue to be about the involvement of Saudi Arabia in this conflict, that involvement is at the request of the legitimate Government of Yemen, to deter aggression by the illegitimate Houthi rebels.

The situation in Yemen and Saudi Arabia’s involvement are not isolated, but have to be seen in the context of the wider difficulties in the middle east and, once again, ongoing tensions between Sunni and Shi’a; in this case there is also the involvement of the Zaydi Shi’a, who are so extreme that even Iran at some points calls them out. As regional power struggles continue between Sunni and Shi’a, Saudi Arabia and Iran are once again the players in the situation. Iran has allegedly been increasing the frequency of its weapons shipments to the Houthis via the Omani border. Will the Minister outline what the coalition and the UN envoy are doing about that?

As I draw to a close, I once again have to mention terrorism and extremism. We know the danger posed by failed states. It is the fuel that Daesh feeds on, allowing it to export its ideology and terrorism. As we continue to defeat Daesh, we must also recognise the role being played by Saudi Arabia within the Islamic military alliance, which now has 39 members. The organisation’s joint command centre is in Riyadh, and the role of the alliance in the future defeat of Daesh has been recognised by us, the United States and others. We cannot risk weakening that alliance or the willingness of its leading members to lead the fight against Daesh by attempting to undermine its role in the Yemen conflict.

As my time is running out, I put one further request to the Minister. In the context of getting lasting peace in the region and strengthening co-operation, I suggest that he pushes for some sort of inclusion of Yemen in the Gulf Co-operation Council. That would send a strong message of solidarity and sustainable economic co-operation.

6.26 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. When we consider that the war in Yemen is reported as the forgotten war, it seems even more appropriate that it is raised in this place, the highest seat of democracy, to ensure that our international obligations are being satisfied.

I support the legitimate Government in Yemen. I also put on the record that I support the peace process as we try to move forward. It is important that we do so, and to put that on the record when we are looking at these issues in this House. Indiscriminate bombing and the murder of innocents in Yemen—the destruction of property and the loss of life—are issues we are very aware of. We must condemn such actions, wherever they come from, and I have done so in the past. Amnesty International has said that violations of international humanitarian law have been committed by both sides with impunity, so it has said that both sides have been guilty of—dare I say it?—war crimes, in many cases. That has to be condemned by everyone in the House.

The Saudi-led coalition has been responsible for scores of airstrikes that have indiscriminately targeted civilian objects, disproportionately harmed civilians and attacked infrastructure indispensable to the civilian population, including hospitals, schools and humanitarian installations. According to the UN report on Yemen of 2016, the coalition airstrikes have failed to uphold the cornerstone principles of proportionality and distinction in any armed attack, and have clearly failed to take all necessary precautions to avoid civilian casualties.

There is a definite need for intervention. That is the reason for my highlighting this issue back in June in a written question, asking what assessment the Foreign Office had made of the UN Secretary-General’s report, “Children and Armed Conflict”, and its annexes. Published in April 2016, in which the Saudi-led coalition is listed as committing grave violations against children in Yemen.
I ask the Minister again, what is being done to provide the response there should be to a war of this magnitude? What aid has been sent, what diplomatic pressure has been applied and how are we attempting to bring an end to this forgotten war?

As other hon. Members have said, Yemen is a tribal society. Islam is part of the identity of the Yemeni tribes, and tribal leaders are likely to enforce punishments for those who wish to leave Islam. That can mean honour killings, house arrest or, for women, forced marriage. Those are human rights abuses that we cannot legitimise or support. I put on the record my concerns about those abuses.

In the power vacuum resulting from the conflict, al-Qaeda and Islamic State are trying to gain power. That alone should mean we do all in our power—we must act to stop another Muslim country turning into an ISIS-held country. The world can little afford more strongholds for those who despise our very existence, and passionately wish to stop any of us in this place having another breath.

We have a duty to help children who are being slaughtered indiscriminately. We must send aid to the support networks to provide the assistance that is needed. We have a duty internationally to stand with our allies and ensure that those who seek to tear down and destroy understand that we will not stand by and passively allow or, even worse, encourage atrocities to take place.

Finally, we have a duty to our constituents to prevent terrorists from having an even greater hold upon this world. Evil triumphs when good men do nothing. I do not want that to be said of this House in this debate. At a sensitive time of delicate diplomacy, let us support the UN initiative as it elevates this critical problem in Yemen and support a solution and a peace process that can last. Let that be the message from this House tonight.

6.30 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a particular pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), given that we regularly see each other at a range of debates in this House.

It is welcome that we are here again discussing Yemen. Having attended the recent Adjournment debate secured by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), I share many of the comments he expressed earlier about the scale of the crisis gripping Yemen and the disaster that the conflict has proved to be for the Yemeni people. I think it was earlier this year when the UN highlighted that both sides were preventing the access of food aid. I know he shares my disappointment that the ceasefire has not held. Again, I share his hopes that the forthcoming UN discussions will bring what everyone here wants to see: a return to a system based on a constitutional structure for settling differences, not one based on armed conflict.

That said, we have to look at the choices and the alternatives, and at why the UN voted to support an intervention. It was interesting to hear the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) talk about a small rebel group. It is perhaps worth quoting the House of Commons Library on this “small rebel group”:

“The Houthis have managed to gather dozens of tanks and plenty of heavy weaponry from these defectors and deserters.”

It also states:

“...Yemen’s government and armed forces have long been weak and fragmented, and have had too many forces lined up against them to put up a strong resistance to the Houthis.”

This is not a small band of people who are incapable militarily; these Houthi rebels are former soldiers who are able to pose a direct threat of overthrowing the main Government. That is why the intervention is there. We then have to be clear about the alternative. If we did not have coalition involvement, the Houthis would overrun the whole country. We would have a failed state in Yemen, equivalent to the failed state we have had in Somalia for so long.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is not only a large group. It is well armed with arms from Iran. There is also evidence that there are Iranian revolutionary guards acting on the ground in Yemen.

Kevin Foster: Let us be blunt. It is not a small rebel group that fires effectively a ballistic missile at a neighbouring country or attacks a US warship in international waters. That does not fit my definition of a small group of lightly armed individuals. This is a serious and coherent threat to the recognised Government of Yemen, any constitutional process, and, ultimately, to the security of one of the key trade routes of the whole world through what we once saw as the Straits of Aden, with shipping heading up towards the Suez canal. Ultimately, if we allow a failed state in Yemen we will all pay the price for it in the cost of shipping, and disruption to energy supplies.

The alternative to the Saudi coalition—let us assume it is not the Saudis and their allies who intervene—is western intervention to enforce a UN motion. The same people very busily attacking this coalition are the same people who regularly oppose any western intervention in the middle east. For a UN resolution to have any meaning it needs to be implemented and it is questionable who it would want to take the action.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Foster: No, I do not think I will as we are running short of time.

The argument that the support should be removed is wrong.

On the motion itself, it was interesting to hear the shadow Foreign Secretary telling us about the two command centres. That is what leaps out from the motion. She talks about the northern command centre in Riyadh, where our advisers are and where the strikes were not authorised. She then talked about the southern command centre, where our advisers are not, and says that that is where the problems are in terms of targeting. Well, it does say something that we are going to pull away from the site where it is not happening, which would not make any difference.

Emily Thornberry: The southern command centre has been identified, but who is in it has not been identified. Neither has it been identified whether it included anybody from any particular company—whether it be a British company or not; or indeed what British personnel, if any, are involved.
Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. However, I still do not see how pulling out our supporters and advisers from the northern command centre in Riyadh, as the motion suggests, would make any difference to what is happening there. It is therefore a rather interesting point that the hon. Lady has raised. Certainly for me, the Government’s amendment is far stronger than the Opposition’s motion. I nevertheless pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East, who managed to come up with an amendment that showed a lot more understanding than his party’s Front-Bench motion. It might not agree with the view being presented on Russia Today, but it had a bit more understanding of the region and the area.

Let me move on to the potential or alleged use of cluster bombs. It must be clear—it might not have been clear from one of the SNP’s contributions—that the weaponry was last delivered in 1989. Whether or not that weaponry delivered in 1989 is being used will not change anything that we do today. That said, an issue on which I challenged the Saudi Foreign Minister directly was that the country’s signing up to and ratifying the international treaty is long overdue. Yes, I was told that Saudi Arabia was considering it, but I suspect that its consideration will be a lot longer than most of us would prefer. I would be interested to hear more from the Minister about the work we are doing to encourage the country as one of our key allies to ratify that treaty and send a powerful message that it no longer intends to produce, retain or—crucially—use that type of weaponry.

Finally, I accept that the decision to be taken is going to be difficult for anyone. It is a complex situation and none of the outcomes looks particularly ideal. I accept that we therefore have to be realistic about the outcome. As with so many other situations in the middle east, we need to be careful what we wish for, because we might sometimes find that what we wish for turns out to be a lot worse than the devil we know.

6.36 pm

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): As mentioned in the debate, the Committees on Arms Export Controls has in recent months conducted an inquiry into the conflict in Yemen and the use of UK-manufactured arms in it. In a joint report of the then Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the International Development Committee, following the inquiry that I chaired, the conclusion from the widespread evidence that we heard was that there have been violations of international humanitarian law, as reported by organisations such as the UN, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. As a result, the joint Committee report has called on the Government to push for a UN-led investigation into the conduct of the Saudi-led coalition, and for the suspension of arms sales to the country while this investigation takes place.

Since the report was published on 15 September, we have seen further civilian casualties—not least on 8 October, which saw the most severe attack of the conflict yet, as mentioned by a number of colleagues.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I would like to ask my hon. Friend the same question as I put to the shadow Foreign Secretary. When he talks about suspending arms sales, what does that mean? Does it mean that he and his Committee believe that the United Kingdom should withhold the supply of spare parts and withdraw our advisers to the Royal Saudi Air Force, or does it relate just to future sales down the truck?

Chris White rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. We are running very tight on time, and if Members want to hear the concluding speeches from the Front Benches at their fullest, I suggest having as few interventions as possible and making them very short.

Chris White: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I thought I should grant my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) the chance to ask that question. We have a very short amount of time for this debate, but we deserve the opportunity to have a proper discussion of what a pause in arms sales would be. I would ask a more open question in response to those who have spoken on the same side as my hon. Friend: were we looking for a UN-led independent investigation, so what is preventing that investigation?

Saudi Arabia has described the airstrikes on the funeral as a mistake, while the Government continue to depend on Saudi assurances in relation to the conflict. The number of civilian casualties prompts me to ask whether every act that results in such loss can be considered a mistake. As Philippe Sands QC told the Committees on Arms Export Controls, the question of whether or not a state “intends” to commit a violation does not detract from the fact that a violation is committed by that state.

The United Kingdom’s legal obligations stipulate that the Government must suspend arms sales if there is a clear risk that there might be a violation of international humanitarian law. I suggest that that criterion has been met, and that arms sales to Saudi Arabia should therefore be suspended. I repeat our report’s recommendation that while such doubt and uncertainty about compliance with international humanitarian law in Yemen exists, the default position of the UK Government should be not to continue to sell weapons, but to pause until they are satisfied that allegations have been investigated properly.

6.41 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I wish that there were more time for me to express my sadness at seeing a beautiful, seductive, complex country, which I have had the pleasure of visiting several times, laid low once again. When I last visited Sana’a, I was told about a speech made 100 years ago by Aubrey Herbert, who was then Member of Parliament for Yeovil, about the situation in the country. He said that it was “like the dream of some haunted painter.”

He said that women and men were “skin and bone”, with “begging eyes and clutching hands”.

That speech, made 100 years ago, could have been made today, and it fills me with great sadness to see the state of the country.

Let me turn briefly—for I have very little time—to the emotive question of arms sales, which has been the subject of our debate today. Let me make clear what those arms sales are about. They are about giving a nation that is under attack the arms that it needs to defend its territory. They are about giving an important ally the arms that it needs to re-establish, or try to
and values should be keeping faith with old and important
some modest influence over the conduct of the war. We
Houthi regime of chaos and destruction; and to retain
resist the descent of a proud, great nation that I have
defend its borders and territorial integrity; to try to
Arabia line. We must appreciate the context: the need to
We must be cautious about adopting a singular, anti-Saudi
country, we must have an influential voice in the region.
well. If we as a nation want to help this desperate
friends and allies, and it is a message to our enemies as
made by the shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member
for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry).
context is that a Houthi-controlled, Iranian-backed
We must also not forget that this debate is more
important than the sale of weapons, although jobs
is our strategic interest.

The context is that a Houthi-controlled, Iranian-backed
exploitation by Iran, by al-Qaeda and by Daesh. It
would pose a risk to freedom of navigation in a
gopolitically crucial part of the world, and would
courage terrorism there, across the Arabian peninsula,
in the horn of Africa. That is the context, and that
is our strategic interest.

We must also not forget that this debate is more
important than the sale of weapons, although jobs
understandably depend on them. It is a message to our
friends and allies, and it is a message to our enemies as
well. If we as a nation want to help this desperate
country, we must have an influential voice in the region.
We must beware of simple answers to complex questions.
We must be cautious about adopting a singular, anti-Saudi
Arabia line. We must appreciate the context: the need to
support a legitimate Government; to allow Saudi Arabia
defend its borders and territorial integrity; to try to
resist the descent of a proud, great nation that I have
had the pleasure of visiting into an Iranian-backed
Houthi regime of chaos and destruction; and to retain
some modest influence over the conduct of the war. We
would have no influence were we to suspend our arms
sales and walk away. Among our many security objectives
and values should be keeping faith with old and important
allies and being a reliable security partner, which we
should consider essential.

6.44 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard
an impassioned and informed debate on the conflict in
Yemen, to which there is no end in sight and which is
rapidly turning into the worst humanitarian crisis in the
world. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South
and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) spoke with his customary
passion and authority on this issue, and I believe he
spoke for Members in all parts of the House. Likewise,
my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East
(Keith Vaz), who has tirelessly pursued peace in Yemen,
one again made a powerful case for a proper investigation
of all these allegations. As an illustration of the cross-party
concern on these issues, we heard forceful and eloquent
contributions from the hon. Member for Twickenham
(Dr Mathias), who told us of the use of cluster bombs,
the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire
(Ms Ahmed-Sheikh), who spoke of the atrocities in
Yemen and the targeting of innocent children, and the
right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom
Brake), who spoke about the international investigation
that needs to cover both sides.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Toby
Perkins) supports the call for an independent inquiry
and spoke of other issues. We also heard from my hon.
Friend the Member for Preston (Mr Hendrick), the right
hon. Member for North East Bedforshire (Alistair
Burt), who has great insight and understanding of the
region, and the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick),
who spoke with passion about the conflict and its effect
on the civilian population and how we should scrutinise
the true threat in the region. We heard, too, from the
hon. Members for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi)
and for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman),
and the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan),
who spoke of the airstrikes, the hon. Member for Wealden
(Nusrat Ghani), who spoke about the desperate need
for humanitarian relief, and the hon. Member for Strangford
(Jim Shannon), who supports the peace process and has
a lot of experience. Many Members from all parties
spoke powerfully about the need for a full independent
investigation; I do not have enough time to mention
them all, but I know that they stand with me on the
comments they made.

I believe everyone who spoke today is united on one
thing: wherever we stand individually on the causes of
this conflict and how it must ultimately be resolved, and
wherever we stand individually on Britain’s long-term
relationship with Saudi Arabia as a military ally and
trading partner, we share the common view that what
matters above all else now is the need to tackle the
humanitarian crisis that is gripping Yemen and to stop
the thousands of civilian deaths turning into tens or
hundreds of thousands as the country tips into famine
and epidemic disease.

We have all been moved by the images of emaciated
children and teenagers so weak with malnutrition that
they are almost beyond help. The healthcare system in
many parts of the country has been destroyed and
humanitarian relief bodies are often physically unable
to access those in the greatest need. We have also
been saddened by the stories of young goat-herders in
rural areas picking up cluster bombs, thinking they are
 toys, with all too predictable and devastating results.
But the true horror in Yemen lies not in individual
images and stories, but in the sheer numbers affected,
especially of children, and in asking what on earth the
future holds for them.

Even before the war, 1.6 million children in Yemen
did not go to school. Since March 2015, thousands
more schools have been closed, and up to 600,000 more
children are receiving no education. Even before the
war, Yemen had one of the highest rates of malnutrition
in the world, but since March 2015 some 1.3 million
children have now moved into a state of acute malnutrition.
Their situation is getting worse. Muhammad Hadi of the
World Food Programme said only yesterday:

“Hunger is increasing every day and people have exhausted all
their survival strategies”.

The WFP director, Torben Due, explained the situation
on the ground, saying:

“We need to provide a full ration to every family in need, but
sadly we have had to…split assistance between impoverished
families to meet growing needs”.

His devastating conclusion is:

“An entire generation could be crippled by hunger”.

On top of that, Yemen is now facing a cholera epidemic,
with the number of cases growing and spreading every
day.

According to the UN, the majority of those who have
been killed have died as a result of coalition air strikes.
Time and again, we hear from the Saudis that they are
investigating. Indeed, what are the UK Government doing? We are told that the reports of civilian casualties from coalition air strikes are greatly exaggerated, and that those being hit are in fact Houthi rebels. Will the Government tell us how that squares with the fact that well over 1,000 of those casualties are children?

At the heart of this debate and today’s motion is a simple question, as set out by the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). This is not about whether or not anyone agrees with the justification for the conflict or the UN mandate that underpins it. Given the concerns about the way in which the coalition forces are conducting the conflict and about the potential violations of international humanitarian law, given the clear inadequacy of the Saudi-led investigations into those alleged violations, and given the terrible and worsening consequences for the civilian population of Yemen as long as the conflict continues, it surely makes sense for the UK to suspend its support for the coalition forces until there has been a proper, full investigation into how the war is being conducted and whether international law is being broken.

Let me boil this down to one example. On 11 September, in the rebel-held Sa’ada province, coalition air forces attacked and destroyed a drilling rig building a major new clean water well. When local civilians and healthcare workers rushed to the scene to aid the workers who had been injured, the coalition air forces returned and struck the scene again. In total, 30 civilians were killed and 17 were wounded. That is why the motion makes a simple case, which we hope will command the support of the whole House. Let the UN investigate this and all the thousands of other incidents. Let the UN determine whether there have been violations of international law. In the interim, let the Government suspend their support for the coalition forces; and let the message go out from this House that we care about the children in Yemen who are at risk.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this important debate, to dispel some of the myths that surround the conflict, to put the background to the conflict in context and to clarify the UK’s role as we seek to resolve the challenges facing Yemen today. As we have heard, Britain has a historical relationship with the region. We are a P5 member of the United Nations Security Council and we work with our international colleagues. We also support the UN envoy and recommend his road map, which has been shared with stakeholders.

It is worth stepping back briefly to set in context the challenges that Yemen currently faces. It is a young country. The north and south were united only in 1990. The failure by its then President Saleh to strengthen the nation’s bonds created space for extremism in the form of al-Qaeda. He was then forced to stand aside in the Arab spring. Vice-President Hadi was then legitimately appointed President, and work began on trying to unite the country through the national dialogue conference, which took place in 2013 and 2014. The peace and national partnership agreement in September 2014 was signed by the Houthis themselves, yet in that very same month they moved south from their strongholds into the capital, took over key buildings and placed Cabinet members under arrest. Those actions prompted President Hadi to request international support. That was legitimised through UN Security Council resolution 2216, which includes the words “by all necessary means” and led to the formation of the Saudi-led coalition.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) said, the UK has an important relationship with Saudi Arabia—a strategic and defence partner for decades. We need to use that relationship to advance Saudi Arabia’s accountability. It is itself a new country, gaining independence in 1932, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy). The concept of central government is relatively new. Its leadership is on the moderate side of a conservative population, a point made earlier. We want more accountability and transparency, and we need to get involved in pushing that forward. I welcome the Deputy Crown Prince’s “Vision 2030” which underlines where he would like to take the country. Is it in Saudi Arabia’s interests to test the resolve of the west and deliberately breach international humanitarian law?

The hon. Members for North Durham (Mr Jones) and for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) mentioned the visit by Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister. Where better to hold to account another Foreign Minister than in the mother of all Parliaments? He did a service to his country and to us by holding his hand up and talking about the challenges he faces and what role Britain could play in moving the situation forward.

Humanitarian issues were raised by several colleagues. DFID is at the forefront of that engagement. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development, who held a donors conference at the UN General Assembly that increased our aid package to £100 million and encouraged others to join us in providing support to tackle the humanitarian situation on the ground. We estimate that 80% of the population is in need of assistance.

Keith Vaz: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: There is not enough time.

I stress the importance of the port of Hudaydah, where ships are queuing up to get in. I am pleased that DFID is looking at the situation to see what we can do to repair the cranes.

The licensing issues have been taken seriously, with my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary focusing on them. The Ministry of Defence monitors the incidence of alleged violations of international humanitarian law using all the available information to form an overall view of Saudi Arabia’s approach and attitude to international humanitarian law.

The Saudi evaluation process has been slow. It has taken time and there have been mistakes. Modern warfare is complex and difficult, but we must ensure that we work with the Saudis so that they can put their hand up, which is exactly what happened when I went to Saudi Arabia to ask what happened when the funeral attack took place on 8 October. This was a shocking and tragic incident. The Foreign Secretary expressed deep regrets about it when speaking to the Saudi Foreign Minister, and I travelled to the capital to express our concerns and to ask about the details of the investigation. It transpires...
that standard operating procedures were not followed in this particular case. At least one senior officer did not follow the agreed rules of engagement, and I expect him and others to face a court martial.

To conclude, this Government’s position is clear: the conflict in Yemen must end; a political agreement between the Yemeni parties must be found; and the humanitarian suffering and the economic situation must be addressed. Britain continues to play an important role and supports the UN envoy’s road map, which was recently distributed to all stakeholders. We continue to monitor the situation closely and factor any incidents of concern into our consideration of our continued export of weapons to Saudi Arabia.

The Government are not opposed to the idea of independent UN-led investigations, as I have said in this Chamber before, but first we want Saudi Arabia to investigate allegations—that is international convention. Unlike Russia, which is defying international concern in Syria, Saudi Arabia—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.

Question put accordingly (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 193, Noes 283.

Division No. 72] [6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bardell, Hannah
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blenfield, Paul
Bowswell, Philip
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brook, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kerevan, George
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
MacNeil, rh Mr Angus
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCaa, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McGarry, Natalie
McInnes, Liz
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mearsns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicholson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Pugh, John
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharman, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Starmer, Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Owen
Thomson, Michelle
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
West, Catherine
White, Chris
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes: Judith Cummins and Chris Elmore

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afrifiye, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
The proposed words be there added.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No 31(2)),

That the proposed words be there added.

Question accordingly negatived.

Tellers for the Noes:

Christopher Pincher and
Chris Heaton-Harris

Rosindell, Andrew
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Speelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Street, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Toffur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Vara, rh Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whatley, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

26 OCTOBER 2016

Yemen

Yemen
Yemen

26 OCTOBER 2016

Birmingham Pub Bombings: Legal Aid

**Motion made, and Question proposed,** That this House do now adjourn.—(Mr Syms.)

7.16 pm

**Jess Phillips** (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I called this debate with the support and backing of all the Members of Parliament for Birmingham. Special credit goes to my right hon. Friend the Members for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), and my hon. Friends the Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for joining me here today. I want to say a massive thank you to all Members from across the midlands, especially the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), who have always supported the campaign. I also thank Northern Ireland Members who are here tonight to give their support. I wish to give a special mention to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), who recently gave voice to the issue in this place.

Today I will focus on two areas. I want to breathe life into a debate that has become about claim and counter-claim and a very famous miscarriage of justice. It is time that in this place and outside it the story of the 21 people who died became our focus. I will also cover some of the issues that the families of the 21 victims have faced in the fight to receive fair and equal access to our justice system.

I am sure that the Minister is poised to tell the House that yesterday the families were informed that they would be granted some form of legal aid funding. That was not the case when I called for the debate, so perhaps I will do a little less fist-waving—I do love to do that—than I might have. However, their treatment and the legal funding that has been granted still pose fundamental questions that must be answered.

For Brummies, this is a bit like knowing where you were when Kennedy died. Anyone from Birmingham has a story to tell about the night of the pub bombings. My parents were driving away from the city with my two brothers—then a baby and a toddler—in the back of the car when they heard the blast. My dad returned to work the following Monday to find that a young woman he taught had been killed. That young woman was 18-year-old Maxine Hambleton.

Twenty-one people died in the Birmingham pub bombings on 21 November 1974. Those 21 people have been largely forgotten in a story that for so many people became about six men. When I was a kid, the story of the Birmingham Six was everywhere. It is worth noting that it was not the justice system that acted to correct itself in these matters; it was the actions of a Member of this House at the time—namely, Chris Mullin—that led to their release. This House has had, and can have again, an important role to play in the story.

Along with similar miscarriages of justice at the time, the story of that fatal night became, for many, a story about the accused and the war in Northern Ireland. The lives and loves of the people who died got lost; today,

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**PETITION**

**Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts**

7.15 pm

**Mark Tami** (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): The petition relates to implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts and the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—Campaign. I want to place on record my thanks to Caron Fahy, Lynne Dorm, Rosemarie Phoenix, Janet Shefras, Julia Clay and Anne Tapp for collecting nearly 400 signatures in Alyn and Deeside.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Alyn and Deeside,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that this implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.  [P001966]
we must remember them. They were: Desmond Reilly, Eugene Reilly, Maxine Hambleton, Jane Davis, Michael Beasley, Lynn Bennett, Stanley Bodman, James Caddick, Thomas Chaytor, James Craig, Paul Davies, Charles Grey, Anne Hayes, John Jones, Neil Marsh, Marilyn Nash, Pamela Palmer, Maureen Roberts, John Rowlands, Trevor Thurpp and Stephen Whalley. Their names are not enough. The people who died had lives and responsibilities.

That night, six friends stood around a bar at the Mulberry Bush—like we all do after a long day’s work—sharing a pint and a joke. It was Stan Bodman’s turn to buy a round of drinks. A larger-than-life character, the life and soul of the group, his mates included John Rowlands, an electrician, a father and a husband; and John Jones, a postman, who that day had returned from two weeks’ leave. Stan’s request for drinks saved the life of the barmaid, but ended those of him and his friends. When they were found in the rubble, they were positioned exactly where they stood, in a circle—friends in death, as they had been in life.

At the same time that Stan was ordering his last round of drinks, Paul Davies was walking past the Mulberry Bush. When the bomb went off, he and his friends died outright. He was 20 years old, with a young child and one on the way. His partner never got over his death, and she died in tragic circumstances a few years later, leaving her child an orphan.

Maxine Hambleton had popped into the Tavern in the Town to hand out tickets for a house-warming party that she was planning to give. That night, Maxine and Jane Davis, who was the youngest victim, at 17, both died, their lives extinguished before they ever had time to begin. I met Julie Hambleton, the sister of Maxine, five years ago. Until recently, we did not realise the connection between our families. Julie, her family and the families of many others who died that night have been campaigning for years to find out what happened to their loved ones. I want to stress today that the victims of these killings are not confined to those who died; they include those who were injured and the hundreds of people affected through the loss, grief and fear that followed.

Last week, Julie wrote to me:

“Maxine was our sister. She had an aura of such maturity that even now when I remember her, those memories are of a young woman who had a purpose and direction in life. My memories of Maxine are very few and far between, which as I’m sure you can imagine is hard… I would love to have…memories of her… I sit here at work, writing this to you, crying, fighting to try and remember more about my beautiful, kind, generous and funny big sister. I remember how we watched Thunderbirds together when we were living in Yardley in the old cottage opposite the Church. We used to sit and watch it every week… watching these programmes helps me to feel her… presence. Our love for her will never ever die for as long as we live and we will fight until our dying breath, because we know without any doubt, that she would have died for any one of us… to get to the truth.”

The families want to know who killed their loved ones. They want to know what happened in the investigation— which is still so shrouded in secrecy and questions. After years of individual battles, the families came together to form the campaign group Justice For The 21. Julie Hambleton, who was just a kid at the time of the bombings, leads this campaign with the same tenacity and emotion as if they had happened yesterday. I admire her resilience; she has fought this for longer than I have been alive.

And so to the issue today. In June this year, the Birmingham and Solihull coroner ruled that, on the basis of submissions made by the legal teams of three of the victims’ families, there was sufficient reason to resume the inquest. It is important to state that the legal support that has been offered to date has been provided completely for free to the victims’ families. Without the fight from the families, and the generosity of their lawyers, the inquest would never, ever have resumed.

Today is 26 October, and the day after tomorrow—on 28 October—submissions are to be made on the scope and process of the resumed inquest.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her speech; she speaks for all of us. I hope that the Minister will address the months since the inquest was granted in which the families have had to wait to hear about their legal aid. That simply shows a lack of respect, and an apology for that extra delay would be useful today.

Jess Phillips: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I could not agree more. The families involved were told only yesterday that arrangements will be made for their legal teams to work with another firm and receive legal aid. Does the Minister think that three days’ notice on this matter is sufficient?

I stress how much I welcome the progress that has been made since I called for the debate. At that time, the families still had no idea whether they would be granted funding at all, even though they applied for exceptional case funding from the Legal Aid Agency in January this year, and the resumed inquest was granted in June. In the meantime, the families also applied to the Home Secretary to seek the use of the Hillsborough funding and administration scheme. The families have been given messages of support all along the way from the former Home Secretary, who is now the Prime Minister, the new Home Secretary and the Justice Secretary. However, those warm words proved to be little else. The legacy of what happened at Hillsborough marked for many a turning point in how the families of those bereaved or injured in large public disasters would be treated. Lord Wills, in speaking to his Public Advocate Bill in the other place, stated that when he met families of those that died in Hillsborough in 2009, one

“message that came through over and over again was that they wanted to find a way to prevent other similarly bereaved families suffering and having to endure in the way they had suffered and endured for 20 years.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 29 January 2016; Vol. 768, c. 1519-20.]

The Prime Minister should rightly feel proud of her role in how the Hillsborough families finally got justice, but I am afraid that the systemic problems that these brave families fought against still remain. The current Home Secretary said that funding the Birmingham pub bombings families through the Hillsborough scheme would not be appropriate, but I take real issue with that judgment. Both the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have cited the way in which the inquests on the 7/7 bombings were funded, even though the scheme that those families used is no longer available, as the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 removed it.
The bereaved Birmingham families feel that they were strung along by the Home Secretary on this matter, and ultimately let down. They tell me that she told them that she had written to the Justice Secretary to give her support for exceptional case funding from the Legal Aid Agency. When Julie Hambleton and I approached the Justice Secretary in Birmingham, she seemed to have no knowledge of the case. The families then received a letter from the Justice Secretary saying that neither she nor any politician could influence the outcome from the Legal Aid Agency, which seemed contrary to what they had been told by the Home Secretary.

With three days to go before the process is to begin, the families are informed of an arrangement that has strings attached. They feel they have been misled and fobbed off. I ask the Minister to bear in mind that these are families who lost their sisters, mothers, brothers, daughters and partners. They are just ordinary working-class people who are trying to fight for justice in the face of powerful actors whom they already do not trust. The appalling way in which the funding for their case has been handled pushes them—and, I have to say, me—into really doubting that those in power want to see justice done. As with Hillsborough before, this is a David and Goliath fight.

The former chief coroner, who will chair the resumed inquests, called for parity of funding in inquests where there is state involvement.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a valuable speech. On seeking parity, would it not be useful to know how much public money is being made available to fund the legal costs of the police and other Government agencies in this case, and how that compares with the help for the families?

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley): I agree with my hon. Friend. The former chief coroner, who will chair the resumed inquest, called in his annual report for exactly the same level of parity. Parity of funding means at the rates available to other parties to the resumed inquests. West Midlands police has apparently set aside £1 million so far. Former police officers will be represented through the Police Federation, and Government Departments will no doubt be represented by lawyers from the private sector.

Tonight I ask whether the legal aid for the relatives of the victims of the Birmingham pub bombings is appropriate or sufficient. I accept that it might be appropriate in many circumstances, but Hillsborough gives us a successful model, and there has been no explanation of why it cannot be replicated in this case or, in fact, in future cases of this kind. That is in the gift of the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady is speaking passionately from the heart. It is clear that the process lacks compassion for those who lost loved ones in the Birmingham bombing atrocity. Does she agree that the relatives should receive the same support that was given to the victims of Hillsborough so that they can find out the truth about what happened to their loved ones, who were murdered by IRA terrorists so horribly many years ago?

Jess Phillips: I think that this and other cases that will almost certainly be discussed in this place will require a specific mechanism for the future.

Will the Minister guarantee today that legal aid funding will provide the Birmingham families with parity? As a Birmingham tax and rate payer, and as a representative of Birmingham tax and rate payers, all I ask is that fairness is considered when our money is spent. Hundreds of my constituents and thousands of Brummies have signed petitions and written letters in support of the families. Without the certainty of parity, how can any of them—and, in fact, any citizen in this country—ever believe that if the worst were to happen to their relatives, those responsible would face justice? So many people in this country believe that powerful establishment figures act against them. The levels of disillusionment in the UK today should worry us all.

The Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that she would fight against burning injustice. She said:

“When we take the big calls, we’ll think not of the powerful, but you. When we pass new laws, we’ll listen not to the mighty but to you.”

I stand here today to ask on behalf of the ordinary families in Birmingham whether this Government will help them to be mighty and powerful, or are those words worthless?

7.32 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for allowing me to speak briefly. Her speech was not just powerful, but, frankly, superb.

I am keen to demonstrate, by standing here today, that this is not a party political issue. Finding justice for the victims of IRA terrorism is a cause that unites Members across the House and the west midlands. The false conviction of the Birmingham Six meant that vital inquiries into what really happened in 1974 closed down far too early. The fact that the new inquiry might have unearthed new evidence only makes the mistake more obvious and tragic.

Four decades is too long to wait for justice. This Government have already proven themselves willing to confront difficult issues from the past, such as Hillsborough. I know that legal aid is independently run, but January is far too long a wait and shows that the system is not meeting the test of compassion in our society.

We have come a long way since 1974. We are a more tolerant and less deferential society, thank goodness, but we should not rest until past injustices have been faced up to.

7.34 pm

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): May I join in the tributes to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) and pay tribute to those who have supported her? We have heard tonight from the hon. Members for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe), and from my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight).

I was a young student when the bombings happened. Like others of my generation, I remember the sense of deep shock and horror at this event in November 1974—it was shortly after the general election when Harold Wilson won by a narrow majority—when bombs exploded in two public houses in central Birmingham. Twenty-one people were killed, and 222 others were injured. At the
[Sir Oliver Heald]
time, it was the deadliest act of terrorism that had happened in Great Britain since the second world war. It caused great shock, not only in Birmingham, as the hon. Lady has said, but right across the country. People were horrified by what had happened. I remember the deep national mood of mourning at the time. The Government express their heartfelt sympathy to the friends and the families of all the innocent people who lost their lives in that shocking crime, and to those who were injured and had their lives changed by this awful event.

There are inquests where families need more help than they would get in an ordinary—if one can call it that—inquest, which is a matter of finding out fairly simply what the situation was, with the coroner asking the questions. The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, which has been mentioned, enables the provision of exceptional case funding for representation in such cases if certain tests are met. The Legal Aid Agency decides legal aid applications entirely independently, which is why Ministers have said—rightly so, I think the hon. Lady would agree—that it is not for politicians to interfere in its independent decision making.

Two applications have been received by the Legal Aid Agency. So far, one has been granted and, as the hon. Lady said, a way has been suggested of finding the other application to be within the rules. Those applications do not cover all the families who have been bereaved, so there may be further applications. I welcome, as she has, the fact that one of the applications has been accepted and that a way has been found to proceed with the other.

The Birmingham and Solihull coroner, Louise Hunt, has decided to reopen the inquests into these deaths, because she felt that there was sufficient reason to do so. That is partly because of the campaign that has been waged to resume the inquest and to look at the new evidence, which she feels should be investigated. I do not know whether the hon. Lady would agree, but I take the view that there is a role for campaigners to get behind an issue, to press and to push, and for Members of Parliament to help them. She mentioned Chris Mullin, and it is true that he took part in such a campaign, as she is doing in relation to this.

The exceptional case funding scheme is not intended to provide a general power to fund cases that fall outside legal aid. Legal aid is fundamental to our system. Resources are not limitless, as we all know, and it is always necessary to make sure that public confidence—

Jess Phillips: I wonder whether the fund that the other actors in the inquest will have is limitless.

Sir Oliver Heald: That is a point that the hon. Lady has made. I will come to it in a second, but I think there is an issue here that needs examination. The decision about whether to provide legal aid funding in an individual case should not be a political one. It is solely for the director of legal aid casework at the Legal Aid Agency to decide whether a particular case is within the regulations and the laws, which we in Parliament have set.

On the overall position mentioned by the hon. Lady, I want to make it clear that we acknowledge there is a wider issue. It turns on the perception that, as she mentioned, families in very difficult circumstances with complicated cases have gone unrepresented while public bodies and individuals have been represented by a legal aid lawyer in the public. The Ministry of Justice and the Home Office are rightly working collaboratively to consider that issue.

As the hon. Lady said, the families at the 7/7 inquest received legal aid exceptional case funding, which was under an earlier scheme. The issue related to the terms and conditions for receiving legal aid. In fact, it is obvious from what has happened in recent days that it is possible to receive legal aid under the current scheme.

Questions have been asked about other possible funding arrangements, and the arrangement used for the Hillsborough families—the Home Office made direct grants for representation at the hearing of inquest—does raise a question. The Hillsborough inquiry was expertly conducted by Lord Justice Goldring, who investigated the case in a very sensitive, effective and thorough way, but there are lessons to be learned about the tragic history of Hillsborough. As the hon. Lady may know, Bishop James Jones, who played a distinguished part in tackling the Hillsborough case, is preparing a report on how it was dealt with, and we want that report to inform how we take this work forward.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Minister is addressing the points raised well. If, as he says, he is looking at the lessons to be learned, will he tell the House tonight that he agrees with us that there should be parity of funding for the legal costs in this inquest? Does he agree with the parity principle—yes or no?

Sir Oliver Heald: What is important is that there should be an element of equality of arms in the sense that the work that needs to be done for the families should be done effectively and in accordance with the funding arrangements put in place by the Legal Aid Agency. Let us be clear that for cases that involve an inquest for which exceptional case funding has been agreed, I have never heard the scheme described as not providing enough funding for particular items of work for lawyers. The point is that there are rules about how people can enter the scheme and, as appears from the decision that has been mentioned, such a case has led to funding.

I want to make the point that the coroner for the Birmingham inquest will be His Honour Judge Peter Thornton, the previous Chief Coroner, and I am sure that he will have the confidence of the families. I am grateful to hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, and I think we will all want to pay tribute to the way in which the families have campaigned.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): May I briefly draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that, for 7/7, there was never any question of a problem with the investigation, but there was such a problem with Hillsborough and with Birmingham? Therefore, unless he now agrees to parity of funding, he will not be addressing the fundamental problem, which is that there was a difficulty with the police investigation. That is what the families object to.

Sir Oliver Heald: We may just be talking semantics. I certainly agree that it is important for families with legal aid representation to be able to do what their
lawyers think is necessary to conduct their affairs at the inquest properly. If the right hon. Lady is simply saying that the amount of money must be exactly the same for all, I do not think the system would ever work in that way. My own experience of appearing at inquests, as I have in the past, and of appearing in cases is that different rates of pay can be given to different lawyers, but the important thing is that the lawyers should be doing what is necessary, in a competent and effective way, to represent their clients. From what I know of the solicitors who have been granted a legal aid certificate—I am not in a position to say who they are—I do not think that is an issue.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): First, I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) for her outstanding speech—she spoke passionately about a grotesque injustice. As the shadow Minister for Policing at the time, I was involved in the discussions on the Policing and Crime Bill and the Hillsborough inquest. It was indicated then that there was sympathy for proper representation for the Birmingham families, based on the Hillsborough model. Why has it taken so long that, just three days before the process starts, there is at last movement? Why can the Minister not give the simple assurance that the Hillsborough principle will be replicated in the Birmingham case?

Sir Oliver Heald: As I have indicated, the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office are looking at the best way forward. We want to learn the lessons from Hillsborough and regard the report being prepared by Bishop Jones as an important part of that. The issue is not so much whether the funding is through the legal aid fund or through a Hillsborough-type approach as the fact that the families should be represented if the case requires. That is the system we are trying to create.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Sir Oliver Heald: I have about half a second, but I will, quickly.

Mike Wood: Does the Minister recognise that the basic test of fairness for the families is that they all need access to representation and that that representation needs to be at the same level as that of other parties in the inquest?

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes, and it is important—

7.46 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.9(7)).
The Attorney General was asked—

Cybercrime

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent steps the Crown Prosecution Service has taken to set out its approach to prosecuting cybercrime.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Crown Prosecution Service has this very month published guidelines on crimes involving social media, and it will publish a broader cybercrime strategy and guidance for prosecutors on crimes involving social media, and it will publish a broader cybercrime strategy and guidance for prosecutors this autumn. All CPS prosecutors already have access to training on how to deal with cybercrime.

Chi Onwurah: Last week’s internet of things bot attack, which brought down Twitter and Spotify, among other sites, was the result of tens of millions of household devices, such as baby monitors and televisions, being hijacked by cyber-criminals. This Government have been perilously slow to recognise the real harm that online scams and viruses do to our constituents. What is the Solicitor General doing to ensure that the CPS can respond to internet of things attacks?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have in place many measures to deal with prevention; she is quite right to talk about the internet of things. When it comes to prosecution, I am confident that the CPS understands the international nature of this crime, particularly the exploitation by organised crime groups of cybercrime across the world and the need for co-operation with other jurisdictions to deal with it. Our cybercrime strategy will address a lot of the concerns she has expressed.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Do we not rely too much on prosecution guidance when it comes to cybercrimes, such as online abuse, when there is no substitute for clear primary legislation? Will my hon. and learned Friend carefully consider the proposals of the Law Commission’s 13th programme of law reform, which looks at offensive online communications, and will he advise our right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor that this should be a top priority?

The Solicitor General: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work she has done and continues to do to tighten up the law on offences such as revenge pornography. I believe it is incumbent on the police and on prosecutors to use the existing law more thoroughly, but if there is a case for further reform, the Government will of course look at it very carefully.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Solicitor General seen that over 100 Members of Parliament have now signed a letter to President Obama on the case of Lauri Love, who is going to be extradited to the United States to face trial for hacking into government files? Does he realise that this young man is on the autism spectrum, has severe mental health challenges and may not survive such a journey?

The Solicitor General: I am very conscious of that case, as I have a strong interest in autism issues. I have to emphasise that it is of course a matter for the courts—there has been a court procedure relating to this issue—so I am loth to make direct comment on the case, but I am certainly following it very carefully.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): There is little doubt that there has been a huge increase in cybercrime of all sorts over the past few years. Does the Attorney General think we have the specialist knowledge we need within all our law enforcement agencies to tackle the problem?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. It is vital that the investigatory and prosecutorial authorities understand the global nature of cybercrime. I am confident that the new strategy, to be published very shortly, will address the very concerns that he has raised.

Vulnerable Witnesses

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that vulnerable victims and witnesses are enabled to give effective evidence.
Leaving the EU: Devolved Administrations and Prosecutions

3. **George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): What discussions he has had with devolved Administrations on the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the ability to prosecute criminals.

4. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the unduly lenient sentence scheme.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): The Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office regularly engage with Scotland’s prosecution service and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland. The Government recognise the importance of retaining good co-operation with European countries on prosecutions, and will continue to engage with the devolved Administrations to seek the best arrangements possible on leaving the EU.

George Kerevan: Post Brexit, will the Government seek to continue to use the European arrest warrant? If not, what will they put in its place?

The Attorney General: As the hon. Gentleman will anticipate, I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the negotiations and discussions we will have. It is of course right that the European arrest warrant and other measures like it are of huge benefit not just to this country but to our European partners as well. For that reason I am optimistic that we will be able to put in place measures that benefit both sides.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Once we are freed from the freedom of movement rules, will the Crown Prosecution Service seek to prosecute EU nationals who commit crimes in this country and to ban them from returning to this country, which we are not able to do at the moment?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend will know that at the moment the CPS does indeed prosecute European nationals who commit crimes in this country and to ban them from returning to this country, which we are not able to do at the moment.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I thank the Attorney General for outlining protection for vulnerable victims in the criminal courts. What progress has been made in providing special protection measures for vulnerable victims within family courts?

The Attorney General: We need to look carefully at how we might read across some of the things that are clearly working well in the criminal courts to other types of court. The hon. Lady is right to highlight that. There is huge scope for us to understand more about how people can give their best evidence. That, after all, is what court systems of all kinds should be looking for.
The Attorney General: My hon. Friend will know that as a party we have a manifesto commitment to extend the unduly lenient sentence scheme. A number of offences are surprisingly not included in the scheme at the moment. We need to look carefully at the whole range of criminal offences to decide what should be inside and what should be outside the scheme, but he certainly makes a good case for the types of offences we might consider including in the future.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Given that the need for an unduly lenient sentence scheme has been conceded, the public are very confused as to why some offences are covered and some are not. Would it not be simpler to have a scheme that covered all offences?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend makes a tempting proposition to give my office a good deal more work. There is no doubt that one of the advantages of the unduly lenient sentence scheme is that it is available to the public. It does not require the intervention of lawyers and it is, I hope, easy for the public to access. It should also be easy for the public to understand, and I am therefore in favour of drawing the line between cases within the scheme and those outside in a logical and easily understandable place. I would also say that it is important to bear it in mind that, even with an extended version of the scheme, we are talking about a very small minority of cases where judges err in this way. As I said, last year 102 cases were considered under the scheme to be unduly lenient. That is out of about 80,000 sentences passed in the Crown courts that year.

Leaving the EU: International Co-operation

5. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Whether he has made an assessment of the potential operational consequences of the UK leaving the EU on how his office interacts with its international counterparts.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): We are leaving the European Union, but co-operation with our European and global allies will remain important. My office will continue to engage internationally to promote the rule of law, a shared understanding of international law and global co-operation on criminal justice.

Alan Brown: I thank the Attorney General for that answer, but is not the stark reality that Europol’s director stated that the UK will be demoted to second-tier membership? Will that not undermine the UK Government’s plans to tackle and prosecute money laundering crimes?

The Attorney General: Again, I do not think we should pre-empt the outcome of any discussions that will follow, but, as I said earlier, I think there is an understanding, not just in the United Kingdom but in the rest of the European Union, that the sort of co-operation on crime and security that we have now benefits both sides and will need to continue in order to make sure that we are all safer and more secure, and that we can successfully capture and prosecute the sorts of offenders he describes.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not fallacious for the remoaners to always say that once we have left the European Union, we will not have access to European institutions? Is it not the case that Europol, the Erasmus programme and the Eurovision song contest all have members who are not members of the European Union?

The Attorney General: I do not think that by grouping them together my hon. Friend is describing Eurovision as a criminal enterprise—although there are those who may say so. It is important, as he says, to recognise that leaving the European Union is not the same as leaving Europe, and it is certainly not the same as being unprepared to co-operate. We will be co-operating with a whole range of partners, because, as I have said, it will be in our mutual interest.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Given the warnings from Rob Wainwright and given the Attorney General’s duty to the legal profession, will the Attorney General confirm that he will be making the case on Europol, the European arrest warrant—and, indeed, the Eurovision song contest—in the Brexit Tory Cabinet?

The Attorney General: I am unwilling to commit to making the case for the Eurovision song contest, but it is very important that all in this House understand that the Government are committed to continuing our internationalist perspective and to keeping this nation and its citizens safe. I do not think the hon. Gentleman will hear, from any member of the Government, the view that we can do so without co-operating internationally. We will seek to do that just as successfully and just as fully as we have done in the past, inside or outside the European Union.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): How is my right hon. and learned Friend interacting with the Government of Romania? He will know that the Heritage Foundation has recently issued a report saying that the courts in Romania are subject to chronic corruption and political influence.

The Attorney General: I am not going to comment on the status of other court systems. What I will say is that part of the engagement that this country has abroad on the rule of law, in a variety of different countries, is designed to ensure that the long experience that this country has in running effective, efficient and fair court systems is transmitted to others where they ask for our help, and I am sure we will continue in that enterprise.

Prosecution of Sexual Offences

6. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Director of Public Prosecutions on ensuring that prosecutors are able more effectively to prosecute cases of rape and other sexual offences.

The Attorney General (Jeremy Wright): I regularly meet the Director of Public Prosecutions to discuss this and other topics. The Crown Prosecution Service continues to prioritise rape and serious sexual offending and has taken steps to ensure that prosecutors are able to prosecute these cases effectively. Those steps include increasing
the number of specialist staff in its rape and serious sexual offences units, providing specialist training for prosecutors and developing closer working arrangements with the police.

Vicky Foxcroft: A constituent of mine is a victim of rape. A complete lack of communication and action from the police has left her unable to move on and recover from the horrific ordeal. After a year and a half, the case—which the superintendent deemed “a professional embarrassment”—has finally been brought to the CPS. However, this might not be the end of my constituent’s torment. Does the Attorney General agree that communication with victims is vital in effectively prosecuting offenders and that the Director of Public Prosecutions should ensure that every victim is kept updated, that their views are taken into account on key decisions and that a high level of communication is upheld?

The Attorney General: Yes I do agree, and what the hon. Lady describes clearly does not sound acceptable or in line with the standards we would all expect. There are two things that I think are important. The first is that the prosecutors should be involved as early as possible, so that advice can be given to the police about the development of an investigation with a view to prosecution. The second is to ensure that when a case comes to court, we continue the communication that we should have had up to that point with victims and witnesses and that people are given to understand what is going on around them. Courts can be very confusing places, and we only add to the distress if we do not take the trouble to explain the process to those who are, through no fault of their own, suddenly involved in it. That is one of the things we will look to do better.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I welcome the increased number of prosecutions for rape, but will the Attorney General outline what more can be done to improve the consistency across different areas and also the prosecution rate?

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is right that although we should welcome the increased volume of prosecutions that are taking place, there is still a divergence in the way in which this is done across the country. For that reason, the CPS has set up a national delivery board and is looking at ways in which we can understand why those differences exist and is attempting to resolve them. As my hon. Friend says, this is also a matter of making sure that prosecutors are properly trained, as they are, and have the resources they need to do the job well.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): As this is my first question in this role, I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and the fact that I am a non-practising door tenant at Civitas Law in Cardiff.

The Attorney General will be aware of the grave recent concern about the admissibility of a complainant’s previous sexual history in rape trials. Does he agree that single, high-profile cases can give rise to wider perceptions about the law, partly because of the level of coverage they receive, and will he undertake to tackle those wider perceptions?

The Attorney General: Yes, I will. He will know that I am a non-practising door tenant at Civitas Law in Cardiff.

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—Sex and Relationship Education

1. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Whether the Government plan to update its guidelines to schools on the provision of sex and relationship education to include (a) LGBT relationship issues and (b) sexual harassment in schools. [906852]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): We want to provide all young people with a curriculum that prepares them to succeed in modern Britain. That is why I want to make sure that sex and relationship education really is fit for the world that children live in today. I agree that we need to look again at how schools deliver high-quality and age-appropriate sex and relationship
education. We are carefully considering all the options, including updating our guidance, and I shall provide an update shortly.

Vicky Foxcroft: The Women and Equalities Committee has recommended that the Government amend the “Keeping children safe in education” guidance to include the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools. When do the Government plan to release the updated guidance, and will they consult the specialists working in the field of sexual harassment and violence against women and girls?

Justine Greening: I agree that we need look at ensuring how this guidance is brought up to date. From my perspective, the key is making sure that our young people have the right information and get the right advice, and that through this guidance and the quality of teaching in schools we produce the right attitudes for the young generation growing up in our country. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight the need to get that done effectively; that is precisely what I intend to do.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): The Select Committee report to which the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) referred uncovered a shocking truth—that most girls in secondary education have experienced physical or verbal sexual abuse. Four Select Committees are now calling for sex and relationship education to be made compulsory. What more evidence is the Minister looking for?

Justine Greening: I do not disagree with my right hon. Friend’s point. The Women and Equalities Committee report was an excellent one, to which we shall shortly respond. I have spoken about the nature of what we need to look at, and there are also questions such as what sex and relationship education comprises and how it can be taught at a high quality. As my right hon. Friend suggests, where it is taught and the breadth of schools in which we expect it to be taught are also relevant questions. About nine out of 10 secondary school teachers say that they have seen children bullied on sexual harassment grounds, which is totally unacceptable. We need to make sure that we take the next steps forward through a thoughtful and measured approach that responds to today’s world.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I would like to thank all the women, parliamentarians and campaigners who come before us to get equality and justice in this country. I am sure that we all want to take that forward.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): As do the men.

Sarah Champion: Good. The Minister for Women and Equalities has an admirable record of supporting sex and relationship education, and I welcome her comments today. Giving all children good-quality education in respect of themselves and others and encouraging healthy friendships is the cornerstone of preventing abuse, hate crime, intolerance and relationship violence. This approach is supported by five Select Committees and all the leading charities. When will the Minister introduce sex and relationship education for all children from key stage 1—regardless of where they are educated?

Justine Greening: I welcome the hon. Lady to her new role, particularly as she is the MP who represents my home town of Rotherham. The different ages at which children need to start understanding relationships means that what we teach in schools must be age-appropriate. Of course, SRE is mandatory in all secondary schools. Primary schools have more flexibility, but the hon. Lady is right to emphasise that if we want to get this right, we need to start at an early age so that children can understand relationships with one another.

International Men’s Day

2. Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): What plans she has to commemorate International Men’s Day. [90653]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): Some women might be forgiven for thinking that every day is International Men’s Day, but this year it falls on 19 November. The theme will be “Making a Difference for Men and Boys”, and there will be a focus on the very important issue of male suicide. As with International Women’s Day, it will be up to Back Benches to bid for parliamentary time for a debate on the subject, and I encourage them to do so. Of course, I welcome any initiatives that support gender equality and its meaning in people’s lives.

Philip Davies: So the answer is that the Minister has no plans. Perhaps her Department ought to take International Men’s Day as seriously as the Prime Minister has. She has said:

“I recognise the important issues that this event seeks to highlight, including men’s health, male suicide rates and the under-performance of boys in schools. These are serious issues that must be addressed in a considered way.”

Why is International Men’s Day not as important to this Minister as it is to the Prime Minister?

Caroline Dinenage: Let me gently say that I think that my hon. Friend is being a little unfair. The role of the Government Equalities Office is to tackle inequality wherever we find it. All parents of sons throughout the country, including me, will be conscious of and concerned about the issues that the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, the Prime Minister have mentioned. However, I am also aware that there are parts of the world where girls are routinely subjected to genital mutilation, forced marriage and sexual violence. For me, equality is not a zero sum game.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that International Men’s Day will give fathers of daughters an opportunity to ask, for instance, why those daughters may have to wait another 30 years for equal pay, and will give men a platform on which to ask why there continues to be a problem of violence against women and girls? Does she agree that it will give men an opportunity to express concern about those subjects?

Caroline Dinenage: International Men’s Day in the United Kingdom takes a very gender-inclusive approach, which is why issues affecting women and girls are also involved. The hon. Gentleman made an important point about the gender pay gap. We welcomed reports this week that it has been reduced again, and is now narrower than it has ever been. However, he was also right to
point out that, while focusing on the very important issues that International Men’s Day raises, we must never forget all the women around the world who are suffering every single day.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): No doubt, in seeking ways of celebrating International Women’s Day, the Minister has looked around the world to find out which countries do it best. Which countries best celebrate International Men’s Day, and will she note the example that they provide?

Caroline Dinenage: I know that 60 countries celebrate International Men’s Day in various ways, focusing on men’s health and wellbeing, discrimination against men and any inequalities that they face, improving gender relations, and promoting gender equality. That creates a safer world for everyone, and is always to be commended.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The aim of International Men’s Day is to promote gender equality and highlight positive male role models. In the United Kingdom, two women are killed by a partner or ex-partner every week. Action is urgently needed to tackle deeply ingrained and damaging inequality. Does the Minister agree that we should support campaigns to tackle misogyny and sexist attitudes, and that men have a crucial role to play in that?

Caroline Dinenage: I could not have put it better myself. The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the fact that last year 81 women were killed by violent partners or ex-partners in fact, 19 men were killed by violent partners or ex-partners as well. The Government are absolutely committed to tackling violence against women and girls—it is of the utmost importance, which is why we have put more money into it than ever before—and we will not rest until that happens.

Women’s State Pension Age

3. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): If the Government will take steps to provide further transitional support to women affected by the increase in the state pension age.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Government will make no further changes in the pension age or provide financial redress in lieu of pension. A total of £1.1 billion has already been committed to lessen the impact of the changes on those who will be most affected, so that no one will experience a change of more than 18 months.

Jeff Smith: It is clear that the members of the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign and their many supporters around the country think that the Government have not done enough. Will the Minister commit herself to publishing all assessments of the impact of the 2011 changes, and any analysis that has been undertaken of possible transitional arrangements at the time of the Pensions Act 2011 and in the period since then?

Caroline Nokes: The Government have made available £1.1 billion for transitional arrangements because of these changes. This is about undoing an historical unfairness by equalising the state pension age, which both men and women should welcome.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): The Scottish National party commissioned independent research by Landman Economics that found the inequalities facing many of the WASPI women can be rectified if the UK Government implement the report’s recommendations for the sum of £8 billion, rather than the previously cited £30 billion. Will the Minister urge her Treasury colleagues to prioritise this issue ahead of the autumn statement?

Caroline Nokes: A range of potential options have been proposed by a number of different campaigns, but nothing that is specifically aimed at those most disadvantaged by the state pension age increases, and none of them has proposed something significantly better or, indeed, affordable and at an acceptable cost to the taxpayer.

Caste Discrimination Consultation

4. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress have the Government made on the publication of its caste discrimination consultation?

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): We have said we will issue a public consultation on how best to provide legal protection against caste discrimination later this year. My hon. Friend takes this issue very seriously and represents his local communities views and concerns in respect of it.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. In excess of 85% of British Hindus consider having caste as a protected characteristic in equality legislation unnecessary, ill-considered and divisive. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in the forthcoming consultation she will look at all measures, including the abolition of caste as a protected characteristic in the legislation?

Justine Greening: This will be an open consultation. We know and understand how sensitive and emotive this subject is, and that there are very strong opinions on both sides of it. We need to look at the best and necessary level of legal protection against caste discrimination, and the findings of that consultation will help inform us on what to do to provide the appropriate legal protection.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the consultation process, will the Minister outline what steps have been taken by diplomats, ambassadors and embassies to combat caste discrimination, and is there an estimate of the success of these steps?

Justine Greening: My old Department, the Department for International Development, working hand in hand with the Foreign Office does huge work not only to advocate but to take action on the ground to help groups fighting for equality, including fighting against caste discrimination. We do that in the countries where it is most prevalent. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, these are generational issues that take time steadily to shift, but we believe we need to keep pushing on them to move things forward.
The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): Increasing the number of women in STEM industries is not only vital for our economic growth but part of how we can support our ambition to eliminate the gender pay gap. We are supporting girls to choose STEM subjects and careers by improving the quality of teaching in STEM subjects and increasing the proportion of girls’ A-level entries in maths and science. We are also raising awareness of just how exciting and valuable STEM careers can be for our young people through STEM ambassadors and through publishing online guidance called “Your Daughter’s Future”.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of BAME people on boards and at senior executive levels of FTSE companies. [906858]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): A diverse boardroom that reflects its customers and wider society is likely to perform better and make better decisions. The Government are very supportive of the private-led diversity initiative chaired by Sir John Parker, who is currently considering how to increase ethnic diversity in FTSE 100 companies, and we expect the group to report on its findings next month.

Rehman Chishti: I thank the Minister for that answer. I am chair of the all-party group on communities engagement, and fewer than 4% of directors in the 150 largest FTSE companies have ethnic minority backgrounds. Will the Government support a target of increasing the percentage of board members or directors with black and minority ethnic backgrounds to 10% by 2021?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend rightly points out this unsettling statistic, but, as with the fantastic work to get more women on boards, we support the principles of increasing the ethnic diversity of the boards of the FTSE largest companies through a business-led voluntary approach because we believe there is a strong business case for better board diversity. We need to tackle the root cause, which is why we have established the Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith review looking at the obstacles faced by businesses in developing BME talent across the board, from recruitment right through to executive level.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is a little disappointing that the Government have not put as much resource into developing issues around the Parker review as women on boards, and there has been a significant drop in diversity on boards since the Government established the review, which will report in November. Many organisations, including the Executive Leadership Council, have board-ready visible minorities ready to hit the road running. Will the Minister work with me to reverse the trend?

Caroline Dinenage: We are very happy to work with anybody who wants to see greater board diversity and, indeed, greater diversity in business all through the pipeline. The Government are clear that we want absolutely everybody to reach their full potential in life, regardless of their background, gender or race. Valuing diversity in the workplace is not just the right thing to do; our economy cannot afford to waste the talent of a single individual.

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STEM Industries

6. Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the number of women working in science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—industries. [906859]

Welfare Policies: Disabled People

7. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What assessment the Government have made of the effect on equality for disabled people of the Government’s policies on welfare. [906860]
Chris Law: But we still have not seen the publication of the long-awaited Green Paper to map out what employment support will be made available for those with disabilities. Can the Minister provide an explanation for the continued delay? Does she agree that this does not look like the action of a Government who want to provide “an economy that works for everyone”?

Caroline Nokes: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we will soon publish a Green Paper that will explore a whole range of options for long-term reform across different sectors. The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), is working incredibly hard to ensure that that happens soon. We are going to target the factors that contribute to the disability employment gap and engage with disabled people, their representative organisations and a wide range of other stakeholders. There will be an opportunity for hon. Members to feed into that consultation process, and I urge the hon. Gentleman to do so.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty as a result of their condition, and the situation has been made worse by this Government’s £28 billion social security cuts, which have affected 3.7 million disabled people since 2012. Sick and disabled people are also more likely to be hit by social security sanctions and forced to use food banks, as the film “I, Daniel Blake” so poignantly showed. Today’s report by Oxford University proves the link between the Government’s punitive sanctions and the rise in food bank use. What action are the Minister and her DWP colleagues taking to tackle these injustices, as the Prime Minister calls them?

Caroline Nokes: This Government are committed to providing support to the people who need it, which is reflected in the fact that spending to support disabled people and people with health conditions will be higher than in 2010 in real terms in every year until 2020.

The hon. Lady mentions “I, Daniel Blake”. I have seen the film. My first visit as a Department for Work and Pensions Minister was to a jobcentre in Newcastle, and I can tell her that the front-line DWP workers whom I met did not recognise their portrayal in the film. The film raises important issues, which we shall debate, but we must remember that it is a dramatic interpretation. I also recognise none of its portrayals of DWP staff.

Topical Questions

T1. [906835] Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Justine Greening): This Government have been clear that we want to build a country that works for everyone, which is why we are so determined to close the gender pay gap. I am therefore pleased that the Office for National Statistics recently released figures showing that the gap has narrowed significantly from 19.3% to 18.2%, reflecting the hard work of so many, not least the business community. That also reminds us that if we are to keep closing the gap, and close it completely, we must keep driving progress forward. That is why we extended the right to request flexible working and introduced a new system of flexible parental leave. We are also introducing mandatory gender pay gap reporting for large employers from April next year.

Philip Davies: Baroness Cox has long campaigned in the other place for the abolition of sharia councils, largely because of the unfair way in which they treat many women. Will the Government support Baroness Cox’s private Member’s Bill on the issue and ensure that Muslim women enjoy the same protections under the law as everyone else and do not feel pressured into having their cases determined by a sharia council rather than a British court?

Justine Greening: I assure my hon. Friend that that issue is of utmost importance. We know of concerns about sharia councils, including those raised in Baroness Cox’s Bill, and take them extremely seriously. The Government will respond to the Bill on Second Reading and will continue to consider the issue in the light of the findings of the independent sharia review, which was launched in May by the previous Home Secretary, now Prime Minister.

T5. [906839] Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Figures just out from NHS Digital show that 28% of women aged 16 to 24 have a mental health condition. Alarmingly, reports of self-harm among that age group trebled to 20% between 2007 and 2014. Despite that, a survey of 35 mental health trusts carried out by Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, showed that just one had a specific women-only mental health strategy. What action is the Minister taking to address that serious issue which is affecting women in our country?

Justine Greening: As constituency MPs, we all see such issues locally, and the House is holding a worthwhile Backbench Business debate later on the broader topic of young people and mental health. This country has a long way to go to deliver on our ambition to ensure that mental health provision is on a par with the rest of our healthcare provision. As the hon. Lady highlights, that should include understanding the different levels of mental health challenges faced by different parts of our community, of which women and girls make up 50%.

T2. [906836] Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Reports this week indicate that female entrepreneurs, such as Clover Lewis of Clover Lewis Swimwear, struggle to access start-up capital. Male entrepreneurs often receive up to 90% of all available start-up funding, but the return on investment with female entrepreneurs is on average much better than with men. What steps is the Minister taking to stimulate lending to address that anomaly?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities (Caroline Dinenage): I am so pleased that my hon. Friend mentions Clover Lewis Swimwear. I have met Clover Lewis, who does outstanding work creating swimwear for women who have undergone mastectomy surgery. We are absolutely committed to supporting women to start and grow their own businesses, and I am proud that Britain has been named as one of the best places in Europe for female entrepreneurs.
My hon. Friend will be as pleased as I am that 40% of the loans given out by the Government’s StartUp loans company since it was established have gone to women, providing funding to more than 15,500 women and totalling £87 million.

T6. [906840] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State welcome the Women into Tech initiative, which just goes to show how many women can get into business in tech? Will she help our campaign to improve the numeracy of girls and young women, as that is the key link between success in management later and everything else?

Justine Greening: We had a question earlier about STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—and the importance of ensuring that girls are taking those. It is important not just for those wishing to pursue a career in engineering, for example; these subjects, and maths in particular, open up all sorts of doors for our young girls. That is why it is so important that the kinds of initiatives the hon. Gentleman has just taking those. It is important not just for those wishing to pursue a career in engineering, for example; these subjects, and maths in particular, open up all sorts of doors for our young girls. That is why it is so important that the kinds of initiatives the hon. Gentleman has just talked about are in place to help deliver on those aspirations.

T3. [906837] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): A recurring theme for the Science and Technology Committee is the lack of progress being made in achieving gender balance across the scientific community, both in business and academia. What work are my right hon. Friend and her Department doing to remove barriers faced by women? What steps are being taken to ensure that work is integrated with ongoing efforts in the universities sector, particularly Athena SWAN?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is right to say that business needs to work hand in hand with the Government on this, and the Women’s Business Council has been enhanced by this Government to now include representatives of and membership from the science, engineering and construction industries. That is very much linked in with not only my Department, but the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. We have particularly welcomed initiatives such as Athena SWAN, which are doing so much to move this agenda steadily and progressively forward.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Gypsies and Travellers suffer particularly poor outcomes across a range of measures, but too many Government Departments and agencies are still not recognising them as distinct ethnic groups in accordance with the 2011 census categorisation. What can the Secretary of State do to encourage the use of that categorisation right across government—national and local?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is right to raise this important issue. The Select Committee on Women and Equalities has recently announced that it will be examining it, and I know it will do so with its customary rigour and intensity. We look forward very much to hearing what the Committee comes up with.

T4. [906838] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Online misogyny and other abusive online behaviour is damaging young people’s self-esteem and is even undermining their mental health. Does the Minister agree that social media platforms must face up to their responsibilities to keep young users safe online?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. This is something that all parents worry about, and social media platforms must take some responsibility for it. This year, we invested almost half a million pounds in the Safer Internet Centre to provide advice on how to keep children safe, and we are developing guidance on cyber-bullying for schools, which will be published shortly.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State may be aware of the closure of the only UK lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender charity, Broken Rainbow, in August. Sadly, this very much mirrored what happened to Kids Company, with the closure being reported by Patrick Strudwick of BuzzFeed. Will she work with me, him and others who are interested in this to put pressure on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Charity Commission to have a full review of this and make sure that LGBT people in this country have access to domestic abuse support?

Justine Greening: I am happy to talk to the hon. Lady further about the specific issue she has just raised, which is of concern. Only last night, I was at the PinkNews awards, which celebrates a huge amount of the work that is happening on the ground to push forward on LGBT rights. It is important that this work can continue.

T7. [906841] James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): The new head of John Lewis, the head of the National Crime Agency, the Prime Minister and, with any luck, the next President of the United States of America are all women at the top of their fields. Does the Minister agree that having strong women at the head of organisations is one of the best ways to encourage women into professions, and what is she doing to promote that?

Caroline Dinenage: I am delighted to agree with my hon. Friend, as we cannot overestimate the value of role models at every level and in every sector, inspiring girls and other women to follow them. We now have more women on boards than ever before. There are now no all-male boards in the FTSE 100. Women in key roles, such as the ones my hon. Friend mentioned, provide massive inspiration to girls and other women, as indeed does having a female Prime Minister.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I come back to the issue of STEM subjects. We do fantastic work in west Cumbria in encouraging women into the nuclear industry, and it would be great if the Minister could recognise that and look at how we can work it. However, often when I go to meetings at a senior level I find that I am the only woman in the room or, if I am not, that there are only one or two of us. What can we do to encourage women to come right the way up through to the senior level?

Justine Greening: It is about building the ladder at all levels. We have talked about the importance of STEM subjects, and there will be a national college that will focus on skills for the nuclear industry, which is the next stage. As the hon. Lady says, many of us have been to
meetings where we are the only woman at the table, and we need to play our part as role models to encourage the next generation to aim high.

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

The Leader of the House was asked—Standing Order No. 143

1. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with his ministerial colleagues on the scope of Standing Order No. 143(1)(ii) and 143(1)(vi).

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I have had no such discussions to date, but while we are a member of the European Union, our obligations remain in place, as does the scrutiny reserve provision while we are a member of the European Union, our Standing Orders: Reform

2. Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): What plans he has to bring forward proposals to reform the Standing Orders of the House.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): Standing Orders undergo frequent revision. The Procedure Committee, the Clerks and the Government monitor their use to ensure that our Standing Orders reflect how business in the House is conducted in practice.

Ian Blackford: Yesterday, the Leader of the House announced a review of last year’s change to Standing Orders, which implemented the absurd English votes for English laws process, which disfranchises non-English MPs. Will he restore equality for MPs by removing the over-convoluted and shamefully partisan EVEL procedure from Standing Orders, and make sure that all MPs in this House are equal?

Mr Lidington: I shall take that as a first contribution to the consultation that the Government have initiated. I am disappointed that Members from the Scottish National party seem unable to comprehend that it is a matter of justice that legislation affecting only England should command the support of a majority of Members of Parliament from England.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Do the Standing Orders not need to be changed to reflect what goes on today? Despite your valiant efforts, Mr Speaker, we have far too many subjects to cover today, which prevented me from railing against the madness that prevents gay men from donating blood unless they say they have been celibate for 12 months.

Mr Lidington: As I think my hon. Friend has demonstrated, an ingenious Member of Parliament is able to find numerous ways in which to place the points about which he is concerned on the record.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is absolutely right that EVEL has been a bureaucratic, cumbersome and misunderstood nightmare, which has divided this House on the basis of nationality and geography. Given that the Government have a majority in both England and the rest of the United Kingdom, what difference has this useless apparatus made to any legislative outcome that we have considered in the past year?

Mr Lidington: The changes are a demonstration of the Government’s commitment to ensuring justice is done to Members from all parts of the United Kingdom. The EVEL arrangements apply only in respect of legislation, amendments or statutory instruments that cover matters that are devolved in Scotland, over which this House has no say and no jurisdiction, but which are a matter for this House to determine in respect of England, and it is only right that English Members should exercise the veto that these arrangements provide.

IPSA: Members’ Budgets

3. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority on changes to MPs’ budgets; and if he will make a statement.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): Mr Speaker, I attended a meeting of your Committee for IPSA on 18 October, and the agenda included discussions on IPSAs current consultation exercise.
Sir Henry Bellingham: Has the Leader of the House had a chance to examine IPSA’s proposed changes to zone 3 accommodation funding limits? May I make it clear that they do not affect me, because I do not claim any London rent from IPSA? However, does he agree that they could have a damaging effect on MPs with young children? Does IPSA not understand that, apart from on Monday, when we sit late, on virtually every other evening many MPs are kept here until well after the House rises?

Mr Lidington: The points my hon. Friend makes about the pressures of parliamentary life on Members’ families are true, and I think they are true of Members right across the House. As we all know, IPSA is an independent body, and it will, I am sure, consider carefully the representations from hon. Members and others, and then come to a decision at the end of its consultation.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House, and all Members of the House, will remember so clearly the dreadful killing of Jo Cox only in June. Since that time, has he had any intelligent communication and conversation with IPSA about how Members are better protected here, in their constituencies and on their travels between them?

Mr Lidington: As I hope all Members of the House know, Members’ security was the subject of very urgent consideration following the shocking murder of our late colleague. Under the leadership of the Chairman of Ways and Means, a new package of security measures has been made available to all right hon. and hon. Members, with a fast track for delivering those security improvements, where they are needed.

Private Members’ Bills

4. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Whether he plans to provide an opportunity for the House to vote on the proposals from the Procedure Committee on reform of the private Members’ Bill system.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): As I confirmed to the House on Tuesday, and to the Procedure Committee last week, the Government are currently considering the Procedure Committee’s report, and will respond in detail within the normal two-month timeframe.

Patrick Grady: Before Christmas, there will be important private Members’ Bills on the minimum wage, disability equality, awards for valour, and violence against women. To save us all a repeat of last Friday’s farce, can the Government just tell us now which ones they plan to talk out?

Mr Lidington: If the promoters and sponsors of any of those Bills command widespread support across the House, they should ensure that their supporters turn up on the day and vote, whether on procedural motions or on the substance.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): While the Leader of the House is right on that point, there are reforms to private Members’ Bills that are important, and we need the House to look at them. We need the Government to bring forward a package of proposals, which we could then amend and vote on in the House. We need to have a debate and a vote on this. Could he please arrange that?

Mr Lidington: As my hon. Friend knows, the Procedure Committee has, indeed, proposed such a package. The Government will want to consider the Committee’s recommendations carefully, including its recommendation that the decision on this be placed before the House. We will, as I said earlier, respond to the Committee in detail in due course.

6. Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Sticking with the subject of the private Member’s Bill from last Friday, the Leader of the House said on Tuesday that there was no complaint during the debate. I was there, and I was complaining—I was one of dozens who were complaining—about the farce that was opening up in front of us. Does he stand by the actions of the Minister in this case, or does he agree with me and with people across the country that it was an absolute farce—a shameful, embarrassing disgrace?

Mr Lidington: No; as I said on Tuesday, there was no argument last Friday that any hon. Member on any side of the argument was engaged in filibustering. When 2.30 pm came, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), as the Minister responsible, had spoken for only one minute more than the Bill’s promoter and for a shorter time than one of the Bill’s main supporters. He sought to respond in detail to the many questions raised, and he gave way seven times to interventions. It seems to me that he behaved in a thoroughly reasonable manner.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): In order to guarantee the fairness that the Leader of the House spoke about earlier, is it not time that English votes for English laws was extended to private Members’ Bills?

Mr Lidington: That sounds to me like a further interesting submission to the Government’s consultation.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Laurence Robertson. Not here.
Business of the House

10.35 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 31 October—Second Reading of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords].

Tuesday 1 November—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Investigatory Powers Bill.

Wednesday 2 November—Opposition day (11th allotted day). There will be debates on Opposition motions, including one relating to community pharmacies.

Thursday 3 November—General debate on the effect of the UK leaving the European Union on financial and other professional services, followed by debate on a motion on living wage week and the implementation of the national living wage, these subjects having been determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 4 November—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the following week will include:

Monday 7 November—General debate on exiting the EU and workers’ rights.

Tuesday 8 November—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business.

I am sure that the Leader of the House, and you, Mr Speaker, will join me in paying tribute to Jimmy Perry, who sadly died last week. He is one of the great Britons who brought fun into our lives. He was the writer and creator of “Dad’s Army”, and he also won an award for the theme song. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that we are a similar sort of age; I grew up watching this writer and creator of “Dad’s Army”, and he also won the Writers’ Guild Award for the theme song of “Dad’s Army”. He was the writer and creator of “Dad’s Army”, and he also won an award for the theme song. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that we are a similar sort of age.

You will recall, Mr Speaker, that the programme had some memorable catchphrases, and it struck me that we could hear those catchphrases ringing around No. 10. We could hear the cry of, “Don’t panic, don’t panic!” or, as the Prime Minister slaps down her recalcitrant and wayward colleagues, we could hear her muttering, “Stupid boys.” When we ask the Government’s position on Brexit, we hear the infamous, “Don’t tell them, Pike.”

May we have a debate on the great repeal Bill? Will it have just one clause or a series of clauses? Will it enact the whole of EU law into UK law? Will there be no enactment of EU law, with each item brought in through secondary legislation? The Prime Minister says that she wants us to be a fully independent sovereign nation. I thought that we were, because we passed the bedroom tax, reorganised the national health service and gave taxpayers’ money to free schools—all that was done over here, not in Europe, in the past six years.

Labour Members respect the result of the referendum, but we want to do what is in the best interests of the British people, including keeping them safe, because organised crime and terrorism know no boundaries.

The Prime Minister said on Monday that she wants co-operation on our shared security interests with Europe. May we therefore have a debate in Government time—the European Scrutiny Committee has also asked for this—on whether we opt into or out of the new Europol regulations? The Government will need to make a decision shortly, so we need to debate this before they do so.

I want to raise a fairly parochial matter: the closure of the New Art Gallery and libraries in Walsall. I invite the Leader of the House to visit the gallery—and you, Mr Speaker; perhaps on one of your outreach visits you can see what an incredible space it is, with art and culture free for everybody, of all nationalities. I plead with the Leader of the House to make representations to the Chancellor, who has recently signalled a change in his austerity policies, on providing a proper settlement for local authorities so that Walsall and others can fulfil their statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. Sixteen thousand children in Walsall live in poverty, and many of them cannot afford books or the internet. We want to give them opportunities and aspiration.

Next week could see a strike at the Equality and Human Rights Commission, under a female Prime Minister and against the background of a report from the World Economic Forum that puts the UK in 20th position on the gender equality gap. Bizarrely, the commission has created 22 posts at deputy director level or above, and two additional executive directors have been appointed at a cost of £250,000 or more. Consultants who were brought in to implement the restructure cost the commission £240,000 last year alone, yet lower-paid staff face compulsory redundancies, and a 25% cut is planned to the commission’s budget. We need an urgent debate on why that body, which looks at discrimination and is so vital at this time, is cutting staff when, according to the World Economic Forum report, it will take 170 years to close the gender pay gap if we carry on at the current rate.

The Prime Minister says that she wants to remove the European Communities Act 1972 from the statute book, but I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could tell her that she cannot do that—all that she can do is repeal it. In any event, the Act is printed on vellum, so it will last 5,000 years. On that issue, will the Leader of the House meet me to discuss how a vote won in the House in 1999 and earlier this year can be overturned by a Committee of the House? This is not a Wallonian moment; it is about respecting the democracy and sovereignty of this House.

Mr Lidington: I will try to touch on the subjects that the hon. Lady has raised. As she knows, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has operated, under Governments of all parties, at arm’s length from direct control by Ministers, for good reasons. However, I will certainly ensure that her comments are drawn to the attention of the relevant Minister, and I am sure that they will have been noted by the chief executive and the directors of the commission.

I thought that in the hon. Lady’s comments about poverty and the gender pay gap, she might at least have acknowledged that it is this Conservative Government who are insisting that large employers publish details of the gender pay gap. We had 13 years of a Labour
Government in which that issue was not tackled at all. I was disappointed, too, that in her comments about poverty, whether in Walsall or elsewhere, she omitted to mention that yesterday's figures from the Office for National Statistics show that, last year, the pay increase for people on the lowest wages in our society was, thanks to the national living wage, significantly greater than that for any other group, and well over twice the rate of the pay increase for the wealthiest in society. I hope that Walsall Council can preserve its museum and arts centre, and I hope to have the pleasure of visiting one day. Local authorities, just like central Government Departments, have to take rigorous decisions about priorities when setting their budgets for any particular year.

I note what the hon. Lady says about the Europop regulation. As the Prime Minister has said repeatedly, and as she demonstrated throughout her six years as Home Secretary, she and the entire Government are committed to continuing very close working relationships between the United Kingdom and other members of the European Union—and, indeed, European countries outside the EU—on police and justice matters. It is in our common interest to maintain those relationships as we prepare to leave the European Union. The hon. Lady will have to wait until the Queen's Speech to see details of the EU exit Bill, and I doubt that she would have expected to hear anything different at this stage.

I am happy to talk to the hon. Lady about vellum, although it has come to a pretty pass when the chief subject chosen by the Opposition Front-Bench team for their attack on the Government is the use of calf or goatskin for the enrolment of the official copies of parliamentary statutes.

I am happy to join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the late Jimmy Perry. It was a wonderful gesture when, during the changing of the guard ceremony outside Buckingham Palace earlier this week, the military band played the theme tune to "Dad's Army" as a tribute to Mr Perry. When I look at the faces of Labour Members, especially during Prime Minister's questions, the phrase that comes to my mind is, "They don't like it up 'em!"

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Will the Leader of the House allow us time to talk about the value of allotments? Healthy fruit and veg are important, but in areas that are not protected by a town council, or by neighbourhood or local plans, people are building on allotments, and we do not want to see any more of that.

Mr Lidington: I think that the principle of support for, and recognition of the value of allotments is shared by many Members on both sides of the House. I endorse what my hon. Friend says. The commitment is such that the majority of Labour Members keep urging their party leader to spend many more hours on his allotment.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. May I also pay tribute to Jimmy Perry? I would hate to say, "We're all doomed!", but perhaps we are under this Government.

We are always looking for things to commemorate at business questions, and they do not come any bigger than congratulating Candice on winning "The Great British Bake Off". May I also congratulate the first hon. Member who will tabe an early-day motion on that subject?

Last week I suggested a couple of definitions of Brexit. I thought that the words "soggy" and "crispy" might be useful; of course, there has been no end of other suggestions. The shadow Chancellor has referred to a bankers' Brexit, but I like the idea of a flexible Brexit, as announced by the First Minister of Scotland—a flex-Brex, if you like—where the nations of the UK take their own distinct approach. We are starting to see some useful debates about Brexit, so how about a debate that allows the nations of the UK to determine what we require from leaving the European Union?

It has come to my attention that a petition is kicking around to ask the House to hold a debate on, and organise a process for, kicking Scotland out of the Union. What could possibly go wrong with such a petition? Imagine the prospect of it getting into the hands of somebody who wanted to make mischief. What would happen if it got 100,000 signatures and one of my hon. Friends managed to secure a debate on it? Will the Leader of the House join me in appealing to the good people of this nation, "Do not sign this petition!" to ensure that that disaster does not come to pass?

We have been waiting a long time for the Government to introduce a Green Paper or Bill on their work and health programme. That important proposal will plug the gap in disability, so is the Leader of the House in a position to tell us whether we will see it soon?

Mr Lidington: On the hon. Gentleman's last point, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions regards that Green Paper as a very high priority. It will bring together a number of approaches proposed by the Government which, I hope and believe, will command a lot of cross-party support. We certainly hope that it will be published in the near future.

On our departure from the European Union, as the plenary session of the Joint Ministerial Committee demonstrated earlier this week, the Prime Minister and the Government remain committed to the full involvement of the three devolved Administrations in the preparation of our negotiating position, and we want to maintain that engagement in the months ahead. There will be opportunities in the debate that I have announced today, and in subsequent general debates about various aspects of our EU membership, for Members from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to make all the points that they wish to make about the interests of the nations that they represent and particularly of their constituents.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): May we have a debate on making better use of natural resources? Is the Leader of the House aware that, in the next few days, we will go through the ridiculous ritual of putting our clocks back, thereby plunging the nation into darkness and misery by mid-afternoon? Can we look again at the benefits of using summer time in winter, which would reduce road accidents and boost tourism?

Mr Lidington: For many years, my right hon. Friend has been a strong advocate of changes to the arrangements for summer time. As he knows, there was no agreement between different parts of the UK on the way forward.
On such a subject, the unity of the UK, and respecting the interests of all parts of the UK, are important. The Government have no plans at the moment to bring forward changes in legislation.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Last week, I met primary headteachers and parents in my constituency who were very concerned about the fiasco over the content and administration of SATs last year. May we have a full debate on the whole issue to avoid such chaos and upset in future years?

Mr Lidington: Last year, some quite far-reaching changes to SATs were introduced. The Government’s belief is that the changes will drive an improvement in overall standards among our school children, which we very much need. However, in recognition of the disruption that was caused to the lives of teachers and headteachers, the Government have agreed that any further changes should be paused. That explains why, for example, we have decided not to proceed with the proposal that children should be retested at the end of their time at primary school.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance of protecting our green belt and on the requirement for local authorities to maintain an adequate brownfield register to prioritise development? In my region recently, the Greater Manchester spatial framework has called for the development of large swathes of the green belt, with my constituency of Cheadle set to lose much of its natural landscape.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is a formidable champion of the green belt and of the interests of her constituents in particular. I am sure that she will be ensuring that their voice is heard loudly at all stages of the consultation on and public examination of the proposals that she describes.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): As someone who resides in and represents a constituency 55° north of the equator, I can say that British summer time works for us, so I hope that there is no plan to change that.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. May I point out that we have an application on the stocks—he will have heard the exchanges during Women and Equalities questions—for a debate on Thursday 17 November on International Men’s Day? If that could be accommodated, the Backbench Business Committee would be grateful.

Could we have a debate in Government time—this issue affects many of my constituents—on the way in which the Department for Work and Pensions is administering universal credit and the claims from our constituents? There are catch 22-style hoops to jump through and almost Kafkaesque rules that are designed to disallow and to delay legitimate claims from constituents. May we have a debate in Government time about that? The number of people who are going many weeks without any means of supporting themselves is a scandal.

Mr Lidington: I will do my best to accommodate the hon. Gentleman’s Committee in respect of the business on 17 November, although he will appreciate that I cannot give a firm promise today.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about universal credit, it is being phased in precisely to try to identify any potential flaws and to minimise the risk of teething troubles. I will report his concern to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, but we have to remember that universal credit not only is a much simpler method of administering a complex and old system of welfare support for people in need, but has so far demonstrated that it is pretty effective in helping to get people who are able to work back to work, and in providing support for people who need it.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): May we have a debate on the use to which these premises are put, following reports that, outrageously, a Member of the House of Lords presided over an event at which Israel was compared to the Islamic State and the Jews were even blamed for their own genocide? May we discuss that and whether we should issue an apology for these outrageous comments to the Israeli Government and the Jewish people?

Mr Lidington: I read the newspaper reports of the event in question, and I confess that I was genuinely horrified by the speech that was reported. I do not want to treat every newspaper article as gospel, but I think we should all be very concerned about what happened. Since this event appears to have been organised by a leading member of the Liberal Democrats, I hope that the leader of the party launches an immediate and thorough investigation, so that we can get to the truth and any appropriate disciplinary action can be taken.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House recognise that the acute financial crisis in Walsall, which has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), cries out for ministerial action? This crisis has arisen because, for the past six years, the amount of central Government money going to the borough has been reduced by over 60%. Libraries, essential services and the New Art Gallery, which was opened by the Queen at the beginning of the century, are now all in danger of being closed or slashed to the bone. It is totally unacceptable. What are the Government going to do to save the situation, given that the crisis now occurring is entirely due to the way in which they have treated this borough during the past six years?

Mr Lidington: I will certainly draw the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about his borough to the attention of the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, but I must put it to him that very difficult decisions about spending have to be addressed by both central and local government as a consequence of the irresponsible borrowing policies pursued by the Government whom he supported for 13 wasted years.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Mr McGonagle from my constituency has contacted me about being issued with a parking ticket by UK Car Park Management, despite the fact that the car was not his. I have attempted to contact the company five times to resolve the matter, but I have not even received the courtesy of an acknowledgment. Will the Leader of the House allow us to debate the regulation of private parking companies?
Mr Lidington: I note what my hon. Friend has said. He has obviously put this case on the record today. He may want to apply to you, Mr Speaker, for an Adjournment debate on it.

Mr Speaker: Very wise.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May we have a debate entitled “Project Fear” so that the Leader of the House, and the former Chancellor in particular, can reflect on the wisdom of presenting the case against leaving the European Union as a short-term apocalyptic, emergency-budgeted disaster, as opposed to concentrating on the medium-term damage that will certainly be done to this country through withdrawal from the European single marketplace? Given that the Leader of the House was up to his neck in “Project Fear”, will he give the House an assurance that never again will there be such a blatant abuse of Treasury statistics and forecasts in any future referendum that may come along?

Mr Lidington: I must say to the right hon. Gentleman—this probably embarrasses him now—that he and I were on the same side in the referendum campaign. To be honest, there is little point in our conducting post mortems on the referendum campaign. Whatever the reasons that led people to vote the way they did, the turnout was at or above general election levels and the outcome, although the margin was narrow, was decisive and clear, and is respected not just by parties in this House, but by the other 27 Governments in the European Union. We now have to get on with the task of negotiating the best possible deal for British citizens and for British business in these new circumstances.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): At this time of year postal volume starts to increase. It is therefore high time we had a debate on the future of the sorting office in Bacup. If that were to close at Christmas, my constituents would have a 15-mile round trip to collect parcels, which is completely unacceptable.

Mr Lidington: I know that my hon. Friend. Friend will be vigilant in defending services available to his constituents. On Tuesday 8 November we have oral questions to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. He may be able to pursue the matter further then.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The crisis in adult social care continues to grow, as highlighted by the Care Quality Commission a couple of weeks ago. May I again ask the Leader of the House whether we can have an urgent debate or a statement from the Government, so that they can outline their plans to address that crisis, in particular with regard to local government funding?

Mr Lidington: It is certainly a priority of my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary to ensure that we plan a future in which health and social care are closely integrated, to ensure the best possible service to all our constituents. Average lengths of stay in hospital have fallen since this Government first came to office. Although there are difficulties and challenges—I do not pretend otherwise—that suggests that the local health and social services managers are responding to the challenges well. Since the hon. Gentleman mentioned the CQC, I note that it has said that more than 70% of adult social services should be rated as good or outstanding.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Will the Leader of the House provide me with some guidance as to the best way that my constituents can get value for money from their local council? It was reported this week that that council had spent £750 million on traffic consultants in four months; on top of that, it has wasted a lot of money on a very expensive bus lane that lasted for only 21 days, painted double yellow lines across the middle of a road and spelled “school” incorrectly on a sign. Will he let me know what I can do about this dysfunctional council?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is doing a service to her constituents in highlighting those examples of wasteful expenditure. They demonstrate the fact that this is a question not just of central Government grants to local authorities but of local authorities’ getting things right and not making mistakes or getting their priorities wrong in the way that she has described. In the medium term, the answer to her constituents is to secure change by voting for a Conservative-majority council.

Mr Speaker: Order. We have had an enjoyable Cook’s tour of South East Cornwall, but I am not quite sure it constituted a business question. Nevertheless, it is permanently on the record, and colleagues can study it in the long winter evenings that lie ahead.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Earlier this year, Greenwich clinical commissioning group awarded a contract for the provision of musculoskeletal services to CircleHealth without adequate public consultation and seemingly without an impact assessment by either the CCG or NHS England. May we have a debate about the adequacy of the procedures that Greenwich CCG followed in awarding that contract and about patient involvement in the commissioning process more generally?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman has evidence that the proper procedures were not followed in this case, and would like to send me that information, I will be happy to pass it on to the Health Ministers. My general point would be that although it is of course important that there is adequate public consultation and all proper process is followed, it is right that clinical commissioning groups should be free to decide whether they go to voluntary sector providers, charitable sector providers or, in some cases, private sector providers, on the basis of what will give the best quality free treatment to the patients they serve.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Two years ago, there was a tragic accident at a fireworks depot in Stafford in which people lost their lives. Surrounding businesses were greatly disturbed and had to close for some time. I understand, however, that even now it is not a requirement for anyone who is applying for a licence to hold fireworks to show that they have business insurance policies that protect against these sorts of occurrences. May we have a debate on that, and on what kind of support is given to both people and businesses affected by such tragic events?

Mr Lidington: In view of the fact that we are approaching 5 November, my hon. Friend might want to seek an Adjournment debate on this subject. I will draw his
concerns to the attention of the appropriate Ministers. I think we are all aware, from our constituency experience, of cases where people have suffered the most horrific injuries as a result of either abuse of fireworks by hooligans or a ghastly accident. All sensible safety precautions ought to be taken so that people can avoid such a risk.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you talked of the long winter evenings that lie ahead. Long winter days also lie ahead. May we have a debate on how we ensure protection for our security, police and doorkeeper staff as they stand, looking after us and protecting us, in the many draughty places in this building in the freezing cold? I am particularly concerned about the police officer who has to stand at the entrance to the underground station, the exit from the colonnade and the exit from Portcullis House. This is a particularly cold and draughty place, and standing stationary for a few hours is pretty cold. Can we look at that?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady’s question reminds us all of the debt we owe to all staff, including contracted staff, in the House of Commons, especially those responsible for our safety and security. I am sure you, as Chair of the House of Commons Commission, Mr Speaker, will take a look at the particular problem identified by the hon. Lady.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Yesterday, our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister emphasised the importance of building local consensus around local government reorganisation. May we have an early debate on this matter, so the Government can indicate how they will facilitate this process, for example by insisting that any consultation should be honest, open and transparent, which is certainly not what the consultation in Dorset has been so far?

Mr Lidington: I heard my hon. Friend’s question to the Prime Minister yesterday, and her answer. He spoke fiercely in support of his own local authorities and I am sure he will persist in that campaign. I think that an Adjournment debate, either in this Chamber or in Westminster Hall, might be the right way in which to pursue that particular course.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am not so sure about “Dad’s Army”, but one of the other shows was “Hi-de-Hi!”. I am not quite sure who to cast the Leader of the House as, whether Gladys Pugh or Peggy Ollerenshaw—or maybe just the camp host.

I want to ask the Leader of the House about the proceedings in the House of Lords last night. As he will know, the Government’s answer to everything at the moment, in relation to last Friday and to Leveson part 2, is to put it in the Bill in the House of Lords. The Minister in the House of Lords last night was unable to say whether we are going to have Leveson part 2, which has been guaranteed many times in this House. Will the Leader of the House make sure that this does now happen?

Mr Lidington: The key point about Leveson 2 is that the Government have been consistent in saying that we would not announce a decision on that until the completion of all criminal proceedings arising out of the phone tapping allegations. We have not yet come to the end of those proceedings, so it would not be right at the moment for the Government to come forward with the decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A further 25 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. I am keen to try to conclude proceedings on this statement by 11.30 am, so there is a premium on brevity from both Back Benchers and Front Benchers.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday we celebrated the accession of Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, to India. On the subject of light, over this weekend we celebrate Diwali. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Hindus, Sikhs and Jains everywhere a very happy Deepavali and a happy, peaceful and prosperous, but above all else healthy, new year?

Mr Lidington: I wholeheartedly endorse my hon. Friend’s call for Diwali greetings to go to all people in this country of Indian heritage who will be celebrating that great feast. As he mentioned Kashmir, I think there would perhaps be no better way to mark the festival of Diwali than to see progress towards the much yearned for settlement in Kashmir that would finally bring about peace and an end to the tension and conflict that has beset that beautiful part of the world for far too long.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): May we have a great debate on how this Government seem to enjoy spending lots of money in the south of England and to dislike spending any money in the north of England? This is holding back infrastructure projects that would boost the northern economy, such as the M65 link between east Lancashire and the north-east and Scotch Corner, which would transform parts of the northern economy. When are we going to have a serious debate about this?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman ought to go and talk to some of the Labour council leaders in the north of England who have worked closely with the Government to champion the northern powerhouse project, which includes many important infrastructure projects. I note, too, that leaders in the north of this country have broadly speaking welcomed warmly the Government’s announcement about airports this week.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Last Thursday I thoroughly enjoyed attending the Corby sports awards, an annual event when we all come together and celebrate sporting achievement in our town. May we have a debate next week on grassroots sport and the vital role that volunteering plays in it, not just in my constituency but across the country?

Mr Speaker: Especially the hon. Gentleman, who is grassroots sports parliamentarian of the year, which he is too modest to mention, although I can do so on his behalf.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is renowned for his modesty on these matters. I am happy to add my congratulations to yours, Mr Speaker, and I suspect
that most of us are somewhat in awe of the YouTube video of the Sports Minister demonstrating her footballing skills, which appeared online in the past 24 hours. There will be an opportunity on Thursday 3 November for questions to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. That will give the Minister with responsibility for parking to write to my hon. Friend. Friend the opportunity he seeks.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): May we have a debate on the Government’s policy on light rail schemes? We do not know what the policy is. In Leeds, we have a crazy situation whereby the Government made the brave decision to say that Leeds could keep £173.5 million and not waste it on the trolley bus scheme, but now seem to be allowing Leeds to fritter the money away in another way, when what we really need is light rail, so may we have a debate on this important issue?

Mr Lidington: I cannot offer the hon. Gentleman a debate in Government time in the near future. He may have other opportunities through the Adjournment debate procedure, but I will ask the relevant Minister to write to him about the Leeds scheme.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May we have a debate on school crossing patrols, and will the Leader of the House join me in praising the wonderful road safety role that lollipop ladies, and indeed lollipop men, play in our communities come rain or shine?

Mr Lidington: While I cannot offer a debate, I am happy to endorse my hon. Friend’s tribute to lollipop men and ladies. Many of us over the years have had children of our own who have benefited from the additional safety that they provide to children in going to school and crossing busy roads.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I join others in impressing on the Leader of the House that we should have a debate or statement in Government time on the cuts to the Equality and Human Rights Commission? Given that the industrial action involves the lowest-paid staff under threat of compulsory redundancy, surely it is time to have a debate.

Mr Lidington: I direct the hon. Gentleman to the shadow Leader of the House, the commission is rightly at arm’s length from Government decisions—we do not as Ministers interfere in its day-to-day operations—but I hope the commission will always have regard to the need to provide value for money for the taxpayer and to work to try to improve morale among its own staff.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May we have a debate on the ability of local authorities to introduce blanket traffic regulation orders to stop the problems that often occur in many residential and urban areas of parking on grass verges and other examples of inconsiderate parking?

Mr Lidington: I will draw that issue to the attention of Transport Ministers. Part of the problem is that, as suggested by our own constituency experience, different constituents who argue on opposite sides about any particular location, I shall ask the Minister with responsibility for parking to write to my hon. Friend.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): One disturbing aspect of the Panama papers revelations was that more than half of the companies for whom Mossack Fonseca acted were in British-linked tax havens. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has commenced negotiations on new treaties with Crown dependencies, but no provision has yet been made for this House to consider the outcome. In the interests of transparency, can we have a debate here to ensure that these tax treaties are properly scrutinised and thoroughly understood before they are ratified?

Mr Lidington: There are opportunities, particularly through the Select Committee system, to pursue those issues in much greater detail and to question Ministers about arrangements with all the relevant British overseas territories. I hope that the hon. Gentleman would, however, acknowledge that this Government have taken more determined and effective action than any of their predecessors to improve the standards of transparency and reporting on behalf of our overseas territories, and to pioneer international agreements to try to stamp out tax evasion and limit tax avoidance.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate—it may need to be a long one—on how out of touch the BBC is with the general public in the United Kingdom? A freedom of information request that I have just had returned confirms once again that over the last year the BBC bought more copies of The Guardian than any other national newspaper, despite it being only the eighth most popular daily with the British public. In fact, the BBC bought 75,000 copies of The Guardian last year—it seems to be single-handedly keeping that newspaper afloat. Does this not show how out of touch the BBC is with the general public across the country? Should we not expect the national state broadcaster in this country to be more in tune with, and to represent, the people it is supposed to represent?

Mr Lidington: There will be a chance at next Thursday’s Culture, Media and Sport questions to pursue concerns about the BBC. It is for the BBC itself to answer questions about its newspaper subscriptions. I do think, however, that evidence suggests that most people in this country value the programmes that the BBC produces on both television and radio, and that although we should certainly be on the lookout for any examples of wasteful spending or abuse of the sort my hon. Friend has described, we should not neglect the reality that the BBC is a formidable soft power asset for the influence of the United Kingdom globally.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I am amazed that the Government have not so far produced a statement on the British Steel pension scheme. It would be warmly welcomed if that could be rectified. This week, we saw the deficit written down from £700 million to £50 million. This scheme is an integral part of the British steel industry for the future. What are Ministers doing about arranging talks, and what support will they give to the BSPS in the future?
Mr Lidington: The future for the British Steel pension scheme is linked to decisions that Tata Steel needs to take about the future of its steel-making operations in the United Kingdom. Last May, the Government consulted on options to make changes to the pension scheme. We got more than 4,500 responses, and we continue not only to consider those, but to speak to all interested parties about the sale of the steel business, the implications for the pension scheme and the wider implications for the pension industry. These are delicate and sensitive talks. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the fate of many jobs hinges on them. We will respond in due course, but we think that it would be premature to make such a statement now. Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions are coming up, so the hon. Gentleman might be able to raise the point again then.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): In the light of the proposed restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, may we have a full debate on the need to optimise the commercial and operational benefits of a “decant”? I have some 20 years’ commercial experience in this sector. May I ask what we are doing to harness sector skills, including specialist apprenticeships—I see that the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills is present—given the scale of the project and given the availability?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend has made a very good point. We will certainly have a debate, and, if a Division is called, a vote, to decide whether we wish to approve the approach set out in the Joint Committee’s report. It will take place as soon as possible, but I am not in a position to announce a date today.

My hon. Friend also made a good point in drawing attention to the fact that the Committee’s report itself said that the project would, if approved, provide huge opportunities for British industry—both manufacturing and service industries—as well as an opportunity to develop specialist skills and involve apprentices in the way that she has described.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Royal Bank of Scotland allowed someone to withdraw £500 from the account of my constituent Calum Cheshire, at a branch which he had never visited and which was far from his home, because that person was able to reproduce his signature from a long-lost driving licence, and apparently their eyes looked similar. No bank card or PIN was required, and the bank will not give Calum his money back. May we have a debate on the duty of banks to refund customers’ money that they give away in error, and the lack of protection offered to customers by the financial ombudsman?

Mr Lidington: Obviously it is difficult for me to respond in detail without knowing the specifics of the case, but if the hon. Lady would care to write to me, I will pass the correspondence to the responsible Minister and ask for a reply to be sent directly to her.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a debate on the operation of the Child Maintenance Service? Notwithstanding the change of name, the problems that beset the Child Support Agency have been replaced with a new set of genuine complaints. For instance, fathers are being assessed on the basis of their gross earnings of two and three years ago, although they have provided the CMS with evidence that they are now on a lower wage.

Mr Lidington: I will flag my hon. Friend’s concerns to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. It is in all our interests for the Child Maintenance Service to work efficiently and fairly in ensuring that children receive the support to which they are entitled. Let us never forget that the children should be at the heart of child maintenance policy. However, I agree with my hon. Friend that it is also important for the CMS to get its calculations right so that people do not end up being saddled with bills that they are not actually supposed to be paying.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The chairman of Network Rail has said that there is a funding gap which could mean that the Swansea to London electrification project will not be completed. May we have a statement on the delivery of this important large-scale project? So far, we have had four years of probably expensive procrastination on the Swansea to Cardiff section. Wales deserves better, and the impasse needs to be resolved.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary is currently considering the priorities that he wants to set for transport infrastructure in the years to come. Meanwhile, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is preparing his autumn statement, which will address some infrastructure issues. I hope that we shall be able to provide greater clarity, not just for the hon. Gentleman but for the whole House, before very much longer.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Following the results of a BBC Radio 5 Live survey in which 8% of football fans said that they would stop following their teams if they signed a gay player, and the unfortunate comments of the chairman of the Football Association, who has advised people against coming out as gay at the moment, may we have a debate on homophobia in football and in male team sports more generally?

Mr Lidington: I think that if the hon. Gentleman has an opportunity to raise his concern during the forthcoming session of questions to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, he will find that Ministers wholeheartedly endorse his call for homophobia, and, in particular, the expression of some pretty vile homophobic sentiments and slogans, to be driven out of sport altogether. It has no place in sport.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In many parts of the country the number of women accepting invitations for cervical and breast-screening tests is at the lowest level for 18 years, and the all-party group on women’s health heard there are significant barriers to accessing these tests, particularly for black, Asian and minority ethnic women, women with mental health problems and learning difficulties and working women. May we have a debate in Government time to understand how Parliament can ensure women are given every opportunity to attend these life-saving tests?

Mr Lidington: I will certainly draw the Health Secretary’s attention to the hon. Lady’s concern. As her question suggests, for some of those hard-to-reach groups it is
not simply a matter of having screening services available; it is also about making sure the women know about, and feel confident enough to use them, and sometimes there are cultural or other reasons why people may feel unwilling to do so. So I agree we need to work through all the relevant agencies to give women that confidence to come forward.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): When we come back from a recess on a day that is not a Monday we sit on Monday hours, from 2.30 pm to 10.30 pm. Should a similar principle not apply when we rise for a recess, and may we on Tuesday 8 November sit on Thursday hours, from 9.30 am to 5.30 pm?

Mr Lidington: I will give some rapid thought to that question, but at the moment the plan is to continue with the hours we normally sit that day.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Did the Leader of the House hear a senior American military commentator this morning say President Putin is delighted about the British Brexit decision and likes to see Europe feeble and weak? If that is the case may we have an early debate on the growing aggression from Russia and the fact that Russia is clearly trying to intervene in American politics at present, and did the Russians intervene in the Brexit vote in June?

Mr Lidington: I agree completely with the hon. Gentleman about the aggressive approach taken by the Russian Government at present, which we have seen demonstrated both in the cyber-attacks he describes and on the ground in Ukraine and through the stationing of missiles in the Kaliningrad Oblast. I hope it will be some reassurance to the hon. Gentleman to know that yesterday NATO announced details of the rapid deployment forces to be stationed in the Baltic states and Poland, and that the UK will be the lead nation in Estonia and a supporting nation in the Polish contingent. That demonstrates this country’s continuing commitment to European defence and security, which will continue even as we prepare to leave the EU and afterwards.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): My constituent Kerrie Hamilton told me how she suffered a traumatic experience at the hands of her Atlantis Group landlord, with men barging into her Stockton home and bullying her, while Mrs Olwyn Murdoch, in her 70s, told me how Atlantis staff are hounding her for money even though she no longer lives in their property. Both have long tales of woe including welcome local council interventions and a recorded conversation in which the wife of the owner, John Sykes, tells Mrs Hamilton no one could prove bullying because he is so powerful and runs a charity. May we have a debate on rogue landlords and how we can better protect tenants from such behaviour?

Mr Lidington: There are various legal rules that landlords have to follow if they are seeking lawfully to evict a tenant, and in my experience the courts do test the arguments landlords put forward. In this case it may be that the tenant felt so intimidated that they were unable to avail themselves of those remedies. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me about his constituency case, I will draw it to the attention of the housing Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It was Mother Teresa who said: “I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.”

In northern Iraq, Yazidis are living in tents rather than in the trailer units that are provided for others. They are not receiving rations of basic food or support. There are many Yazidis and Christians living in extremely poor conditions outside the UNHCR camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Will the Leader of the House arrange a statement or a debate on this important issue?

Mr Lidington: The Government are giving assistance to people in need in northern Iraq through our international development and aid programme. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the reason that those people are in such dire circumstances is that they have fled the terrorist genocidal regime of Daesh in parts of the north of that country. The sooner the Iraqi and peshmerga forces are able to re-establish control over Iraqi territory, the sooner we will be able to bring hope and the restoration of normal life to those people.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): London has HS1, HS2, Crossrail 1, Crossrail 2 and a new runway at Heathrow, and of course the £30 million of Government money that is being wasted on a garden bridge. Meanwhile, the M56 is jammed every day and we have had no commitment on an HS2 hub at Chester. May I add my calls to those of my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) for a proper debate about why the Government’s priorities seem to be focused on the south-east while we in the north and the north-west lose out?

Mr Lidington: I do not blame the hon. Gentleman for wanting to get more spending for his own constituency. That is a perfectly proper thing for him to seek here. However, he needs to acknowledge the Government’s commitment to the northern powerhouse, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) initiated and which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has recently confirmed. I hope that, when the autumn statement is made, the hon. Gentleman will find ample demonstration in it of our continuing commitment to the prosperity and growth of our great northern cities.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Government are proposing to close down the Dungavel immigration and removal centre, not to improve immigration policy but as part of a flawed value-for-money exercise. Half the workforce live in my constituency, and they feel that they have been left high and dry. May we have a debate in Government time on how the Government have conducted this matter, on their wider estate rationalisation and on how they engage—or do not engage—with the workforce and the unions?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman might wish to seek an Adjournment debate on the constituency implications of that decision, but as I think he knows, the Government’s intention is that Dungavel will be replaced by a new centre located close to Glasgow airport, which will be much more convenient for ensuring that those people who are in this country illegally and
who have been properly served with deportation or removal notices can be removed to their country of origin.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I attended the launch of the Thin Red Line appeal on Monday. It is an initiative to raise funds for the refurbishment of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders regimental museum at Stirling Castle. What opportunities exist to debate and draw attention to this fine cause, which seeks to properly honour and commemorate that renowned Scottish regiment?

Mr Lidington: I should like to salute the proud record of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s tribute will receive unanimous support from Members representing all political parties in the House. He has seized this opportunity today, and there might be another opportunity to discuss the matter, either in a forthcoming Adjournment debate, at Culture, Media and Sport questions or perhaps in questions to the Secretary of State for Scotland.

Points of Order

11.33 am

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you give me any advice in my capacity as Chair of the Defence Committee? Both my Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee have been extremely worried about the forthcoming major cuts to BBC Monitoring and the potential closure of Caversham Park, the centre where BBC Monitoring and Open Source Enterprise, an American organisation, exist side by side to the great advantage of many Government Departments. The Foreign Affairs Committee’s inquiry had to conclude without getting a responsible Minister to give evidence. My Committee has been trying in our inquiry since 14 October to get a responsible Minister, whom we gather should be from the Foreign Office or possibly the Cabinet Office, to come to us. This is a serious matter that is worrying a great many people in the military and intelligence communities. We look to your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, as to what we can do to compel a Minister to do his job and come before us for scrutiny, which we must do in order to do our job.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for advance notice of his point of order. As he knows, the Chair is unable to compel Ministers to appear before Select Committees, but he has chosen the timing of his point of order well—the Leader of the House, who is very attentive, is here and will no doubt take those concerns to the Government.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At questions to the Leader of the House before business questions, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) the Leader of the House—in all sobriety and apparently without any hint of irony—presented the behaviour of the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), last week in talking out a private Member’s Bill as nothing more than answering questions from Members in the normal course of a debate. Every Member present knows that the reality—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. This is a continuation of a debate rather than a point of order. The hon. Gentleman will have to use other avenues to pursue his grievance.

BILL PRESENTED

Technical and Further Education Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Justine Greening, supported by Secretary Greg Clark, Secretary Damian Green, Ben Gummer, Damian Hinds, Robert Halfon, Mr Nick Gibb, Edward Timpson, Caroline Dinenage and Joseph Johnson, presented a Bill to make provision about technical and further education, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 82) with explanatory notes (Bill 82-EN).
Mr Lidington: I beg to move, on the Order Paper, that the Speaker has not selected the amendments Hacking”. The Committee found that Mr Colin Myler, in relation to select committees and contempts be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

Mr Lidington: I am going to deal with the question of penalties a little later in my speech. I said that the questions raised by parties to the inquiry about parliamentary powers and proper jurisdiction were troubling. In its report, the Committee of Privileges cites submissions from lawyers acting on behalf of the News of the World journalists. Those legal representatives claimed that the House does not have penal powers in respect of contempt of Parliament. It is regrettable that Parliament and its powers have been challenged in such a way. Although Parliament has chosen not to exercise penal powers for many years, there is no doctrine of desuetude in English law or, I believe, in the law of any part of the United Kingdom. It is for Parliament to make a judgment about the best course of action in addressing that challenge, and for that reason the motion refers “the matter of the exercise and enforcement of the powers of the House in relation to select committees” to the Committee of Privileges for further consideration.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House accept that as the two men concerned have made it absolutely clear since the Committee’s report was published that they have no respect for the decision of the Committee and for the processes of Parliament, merely admonishing them through a motion, rather than requiring them to appear before the House, will, to all intents and purposes, undermine respect for Parliament, not enhance it?

Mr Lidington: I take very seriously the points that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and he and I have discussed this matter outside the Chamber. I will come on in a little while to explain why I think that to move now towards trying to take the further action that he wishes to see would not be the right approach—certainly not at this time.

One reason why the House has had little need to exercise its penal powers is because refusing to attend Select Committees as a witness or otherwise committing a contempt of Parliament itself causes reputational
Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman, who is Chair of the Committee of Privileges, is absolutely right in what he says.

The former Clerk to this House, Lord Lisvane, made his view on this matter clear when he sent written evidence to the Liaison Committee. He said that the approach of summoning someone to the Bar of the House would, in his view, risk being a pantomime. The problem that I have in moving today to accept the arguments put forward by the hon. Member for Rhondda, my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley and others is that impact. Being designated as having committed a contempt of Parliament or having even been described as not a “fit and proper” person to hold a particular office or exercise a particular function can cause reputational damage to the individual and can also cause commercial damage to the organisations they represent. We should not lightly underestimate the incentive that that provides to witnesses to give evidence to Select Committees and to speak truthfully when they do so.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and other Members in this House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), would like to see us go further now: they would like the people found in contempt to be summoned to the Bar of the House. I agree with them that those who hold Parliament in contempt should not escape with their reputations unscathed, but I have concerns that moving in that direction immediately, without further careful consideration by the Committee of Privileges, would itself pose reputational risks to Parliament. The Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege was clear in its 2013 report that an admonishment can “take the form of a resolution of the House, without any requirement for the contemnor to appear in person.”

Of course the convention in this House has been that the Leader of the House and the Government will normally table and support resolutions brought forward by the Committee of Privileges in order to uphold the authority of that Committee. In this case, it is the Committee that, having examined the evidence in great detail, has chosen to call for the formal admonishment of the two journalists concerned. It has chosen not to recommend to the House that the two journalists be summoned to the Bar of the House to be admonished in person by Mr Speaker.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but some of what the Leader of the House has said is inaccurate. This is a matter for the House, not for the Government. Historically, the Committee of Privileges has brought forward a report. It has heard people at the Bar of the House, and then the House has made up its own mind. For instance, in 1947 we decided that the Committee report was right that Mr Heighway should be heard at the Bar of the House. He implicated Mr Allighan, a Member of the House, and both of them were then found guilty of contempt. Mr Allighan was removed from the House for six months. I just say to the Leader of the House that, as a House, we should be free to do what we want, and not be bound by the Committee of Privileges.

Mr Lidington: I do not differ from the hon. Gentleman on that point. The House is free to make whatever decision it wishes, but the fact that he has to cite a case dating back to 1947—I respect the argument that he is bringing forward—suggests that to summon someone to the Bar of the House is not a step that we should rush into today without some pretty careful consideration.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the last time this House admonished two people—they were Members of this House—they were not called to the Bar of the House, but admonished by a motion on the Floor of the House?
11.51 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement, and I agree with him. I also thank the Privileges Committee for its diligent work.

The Committee of Privileges adopted a procedure that met high standards of fairness, while being proportionate and properly parliamentary. The standard of proof applied by the Committee was whether the allegations were significantly more likely than not to be true.

It is always a serious issue when witnesses mislead a Committee, and it undermines the Committee process. It was right that the Culture Committee referred this matter to the Privileges Committee. Members should be able to question witnesses without fear or favour, affections or ill will. It is right that the exercise and enforcement of the powers of the House in relation to Select Committees and contempt be referred to the Committee of Privileges for a detailed, considered inquiry, as it may be necessary to take legal or other advice.

It is normal practice to agree with the Privileges Committee report. Therefore, the Opposition agree with the motion in the name of the Leader of the House.

11.52 am

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I wish to say a few words as a member of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee during the inquiry in the last Parliament into phone hacking at the News of the World.

First, the case against Tom Crone and Colin Myler is compelling. It is based not on one evidence session where there may have been a slip of the tongue or a piece of misleading information given; this was a systematic attempt to mislead Members of the House and members of the Committee over many years—over two parliamentary inquiries—and, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, for which Tom Crone and Colin Myler have shown absolutely no remorse or regret; actually, in many ways, they believe they have done nothing wrong.

Without going through all the incredibly complex work that was done by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee ahead of the Leveson inquiry in looking at the knowledge and extent of phone hacking at the News of the World, one simple thing is really clear, and it shines out in the Privileges Committee’s report as well: the evidence that condemned Colin Myler and Tom Crone—that condemned News International—always existed within the company itself and was always within reach of the executives of that company. In fact, the killer piece of evidence, which the Select Committee requested that News International’s lawyers, Farrer, produce and release, was a memo written by Tom Crone himself and attached to a legal opinion by Michael Silverleaf, QC, which lays out in black and white, extremely clearly, that phone hacking at the News of the World was not restricted to one journalist, but widespread throughout the organisation. There was a cultural problem, they all knew about it and they systematically lied about it over a number of inquiries, with repeated opportunities to give oral and written evidence.

The Leader of the House is right to say that incidents of contempt of Parliament and of people being requested to be brought to the House happen rarely, so we should reflect on this report and on the evidence the House has received. It is clear that this is a serious matter—it went on for a long time—and there should be some sanction.

On serious inquiries such as this—the inquiry on phone hacking, which was an issue that affected many people’s lives—it should be a presumption that witnesses, when they appear before the Committee, are telling the truth, and are compelled to tell the truth, and that if they seek to lie, and repeatedly lie, there is some very clear sanction against them.

I am pleased to hear what the Leader of the House has said. It really is time that there was a clear process that the House should follow whereby people face some sanction if they are found to be in contempt of Parliament and to have lied to Parliament. That might, as he suggested, follow the example of the United States Congress, where the matter is referred to the courts for them to decide what further action should be taken. There should be some clear sanction in law. Witnesses should have regard to the fact that when they give evidence to Parliament they are compelled to tell the truth.

11.55 am

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I rise briefly to support the Privileges Committee in the report that it has published for the House. The Leader of the House put forward a very compelling case for how we need to look at this to make sure that when issues of contempt of the House emerge, as they have in the course of this inquiry, they are taken seriously and we have a range of sanctions that could be deployed against those who treat this House with contempt and action is then required. I was disappointed that Mr Speaker did not select the amendments, because they would have given us a useful opportunity further to exercise this House’s views on controls and constraints of some sort, and on what has emerged in the course of this inquiry.

The Leader of the House outlined a sensible suggestion to compel the Privileges Committee to come forward with a report so that this House can consider all these issues properly. I support that intention. I hope that when such serious issues of contempt of Parliament arise in future, a range of options is available to this House that can be demonstrated and exercised by Members of Parliament who are doing their duties and carrying out their responsibilities on behalf of their constituents.

11.56 am

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am very conscious of the recommendation in the report that “it would be wise for those Members of the House who sat on the CMS Committee in 2012 to take no part in the debate on our Report.”

I therefore do not want to talk about the specific cases of Mr Crone and Mr Myler, other than to thank the Committee of Privileges and its Chairman, because they have already had to spend a great deal of time on this matter as a result of the decision of the Committee that I chaired at the time to refer this matter to his Committee.

The Leader of the House talked about the fit and proper person test. He will recall that there was great speculation when the Culture, Media and Sport Committee decided to dispatch the Serjeant at Arms to serve a
warrant on Mr Rupert Murdoch requiring him to appear before the Committee, with much excitement in the press about the consequences had he failed to respond. In actual fact, he did come. I do not know what processes he went through in deciding to do so, or his advisers in telling him that he should, but the fact that there is a fit and proper person test for those holding broadcast TV licences may have had some small part to play. The fit and proper person test is a relevant factor. It would be interesting to know whether it might apply beyond the broadcasting licensing requirements, perhaps extending into the general assessment of whether somebody is suitable to hold a position of company director, for instance. Perhaps being admonished by the House is not just the slap on the wrist that some fear it could be.

The other point, which the Leader of the House also mentioned, is the debate about whether this should become a criminal offence. I have reservations about that. If the two individuals who are accused had been prosecuted in a court of law, they would have been entitled to defence counsel, and I can envisage myself being cross-examined about whether it was right that I questioned as I did the people who appeared. That would clearly have profound implications for the powers of Select Committees.

These are very deep and difficult waters. I conclude by expressing my sympathy for the Chairman of the Privileges Committee, who, having already spent years on this matter, is now being compelled to go back to it and consider even more difficult questions. I look forward to hearing his conclusions.

11.59 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, am grateful to the Privileges Committee for the diligent work it has done, and I hope that we will hear from its Chair very soon. I am grateful not only to the Committee Chair and its Members, but to the acting Chair, who had to take much of this through over the last few months.

I will not make any comment about the individuals, Mr Myler and Mr Crone, but I think that the Committee did its absolute best to make sure that there was due and fair process, and that the two men were able to put their own case. The very fact that of the three names originally put forward by the Select Committee, two names are before us today—the Committee found that Mr Les Hinton had not misled the House, or certainly that there was not enough evidence to say that—shows that there has been due process.

The right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), whose most important role in the matter was as the former Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, is right to say that we should not underestimate admonishment. The Privileges Committee was right to say that that should be the only punishment. We should not be considering a fine or imprisonment, because I do not think that a political institution such as Parliament should be able to do that. That is one of our fundamental principles of habeas corpus. We should not underestimate admonishment, because it would be the House saying that these two men are liars; that they are not reliable witnesses; that they have deliberately misled Parliament; and that they are not reliable witnesses. Anybody who wanted to employ them would obviously want to bear that in mind.

If the same thing had happened in the United States of America, the Leader of the House is absolutely right to say that it would have gone to court rather than being dealt with by Congress. The penalties would have been considerably higher than some words in the Journal of the House of Commons. The last such instance in the United States of America led to somebody being fined $10,000 and imprisoned for six months.

I accept the points that have been made about not wanting to infringe the Bill of Rights, and not wanting the courts to be able to question or impeach proceedings in Parliament. At the same time, there is a real problem if people can, effectively, proceed with impunity. This is a much more serious case than any that we have had before the House for some considerable time, including the cases that have been referred to from 1947 and 1957. I do not think that either of those cases would come anywhere near the House today. Simply telling a journalist off for having published somebody’s telephone number and trying to get people to vote in a particular way—that was, to be honest, the House behaving a bit like a prima donna.

In the case that we are discussing, however, two men lied to Parliament. They chose to lie to Parliament. They made it impossible for the Select Committee to do its work properly, and other forms of justice were not available to those who were involved. I think it is much more serious than any other case since 1879, when two men said that they had bribed Members of Parliament to secure contracts for the building of bridges across the River Thames. Then, we did imprison; it was the last time that we imprisoned. The truth of the matter is that if the same thing happened today, the only thing that would be available to us, according to what we are deciding today, is admonishment. Frankly, I think that that is the kind of situation in which people should be going to prison.

The whole thing is made worse by the fact that the individuals concerned do not accept that they have done anything wrong. On the very day the report was published, they went on the record to say that they did not accept the Committee’s findings, they did not accept the way it had done its work and they did not accept Parliament’s remit. I tabled two amendments simply to say that we should not increase the penalty above that which was agreed by the Privileges Committee—it should still just be admonishment—but that it should be done at the Bar of the House.

I understand the argument that we should not do that. Lord Lisvane has his arguments, although he is too excitable on this matter for my liking, but I think the real problem was adumbrated by the Leader of the House. The reason we are not doing it is that we are frightened that we cannot summon someone to the Bar of the House because the Speaker’s warrant has no effect and the Serjeant at Arms has no power. The problem is that we cannot force somebody to appear as a witness before a Select Committee, which really means that we have become a paper tiger. We have become a lion with no teeth.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): We should insist that we have certain powers, but my concern with bringing someone to the Bar of the House
is that it is unduly theatrical and would make the House of Commons look foolish in the public arena, rather than making us look wise and providential.

**Chris Bryant:** If somebody were brought to the Bar of the House, I would hope that they showed contrition. John Junor certainly did so in 1957, which meant that the House decided immediately thereafter that it would not pursue the line of admonishment but let the matter lie. Perhaps if the two men in question had been brought to the Bar of the House, they would have shown contrition and that is exactly what we would have decided as well.

It is the counsel of despair to say that we cannot use the powers of the House. We need to address the situation urgently, because the number of witnesses who have tried to avoid appearing before Select Committees has grown exponentially in recent years. That was true of the Maxwell brothers, and then there was nobody for about 10 or 15 years. James and Rupert Murdoch tried to refuse to attend, and Rebekah Brooks refused to attend for some time. All sorts of excuses were provided, but they did eventually attend. It is extraordinary that the Murdochs, having been in control of such a large part of this country’s media empire, did not appear for 20 years. Mike Ashley and Philip Green tried not to appear, and we had to stamp our feet to secure their attendance. That eventually happened, but there may come a time when, if we keep saying that we do not have the power to force people to come, they will decide not to, and then we really will have lost. If we cannot summon witnesses and require them to attend, what price our ability to hold the powerful to account?

This is not about those of us who are in this Chamber today. We as individuals come and we will be gone. We pass through here but very briefly and the waters will very soon cover us over, but the role of Parliament endures, because Ministers do not have the sole prerogative rights on the abuse of power. We have to be able to summon witnesses, to force them to attend, to pursue the truth, to hold the lies and half-truths of the great and the good up to the light. I think that people in this country are sick and tired of the extremely powerful and the extremely wealthy being able to lie, scam and brag that they have been able to do so with impunity.

Finally, Rupert Murdoch has tweeted:

“Maybe most Muslims peaceful, but until they recognize and destroy their growing jihadist cancer they must be held responsible.”

That tweet in itself is an act of incitement and it is despicable, but if we were to apply his logic that all Muslims, including peaceful Muslims, are responsible for jihadism, we would conclude that it must surely be true that Rupert Murdoch is personally responsible for the lies that were told to this House by Mr Myler and Mr Crone.

**Kevin Barron** (Rother Valley) (Lab): The report represents the fulfilment by the Committee of Privileges of the task that it was asked to undertake by the House on 22 May 2012. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) for chairing a number of the hearings in my absence in recent months.

There is not much time for this debate, so I will concentrate on the process rather than the details of the evidence. It is important to be clear about the role of the Committee. It did not set out to find evidence of phone hacking or to make a judgment about the inquiry conducted by the former Culture, Media and Sport Committee or its findings. Our report is not about phone hacking or the alleged cover-up of such activities. It is this country’s legal process that has taken that into account in recent years.

As set out clearly in our Standing Order, the Committee of Privileges is concerned with specific matters relating to privileges. In this case, that meant investigating whether named witnesses and a company gave misleading evidence to the CMS Committee, as set out in chapter 8 of that Committee’s report.

We started our work by determining the process by which we intended to reach our conclusions. We believed that the process should be fair and should offer sufficient opportunities to the inquiry subjects to put their side of the story and to comment on our draft conclusions.

Although we do not accept that article 6 of the European convention on human rights applies to our inquiry, we set out nevertheless to shape a process that would meet its stipulations. We consulted the inquiry subjects in advance and published the process as a resolution so that all could see what would happen at each stage. That was before the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege started its own work in this area, but we were pleased to see that the Joint Committee subsequently described our process as “fair” and used our resolution as the pattern for its own draft standing orders on dealing with contempt.

Our resolution was published in 2012 and it is included as an appendix in our report, but there are two points from it that I would like to stress. The first point is the standard of proof. We adopted the standard used to assess more serious cases involving MPs—that the allegations had to be significantly more likely than not to be true. The second is the provision that we would suspend the inquiry if there were any danger that it might prejudice a criminal proceeding.

It was that provision which led to the inquiry being suspended at least twice and which meant work to complete the inquiry was delayed until December 2015, when the Crown Prosecution Service announced that it would not bring corporate charges against News International. That cleared the way for us to look at all the allegations made by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

To reach our conclusions, my Committee examined the evidence before the CMS Committee up to 2012 and documentary evidence that had emerged since which was relevant to the allegations. We took into account publicly available material such as that given to the Leveson inquiry, and requested further evidence from the inquiry subjects, the CPS, the police and others. Most of those we approached co-operated with us and we are grateful for that. The exception to that was where lawyers for the inquiry subjects seemed determined to raise procedural issues, rather than engage with matters of substance. We have published all the correspondence relating to the inquiry so that anyone with the time or interest can see for themselves how co-operative different parties have been.

At the end of that careful consideration and analysis, we concluded that there was sufficient evidence to support findings that Colin Myler and Tom Crone—the latter
on two counts—had misled the CMS Committee and were therefore in contempt of the House. We did not find sufficient evidence to uphold a third allegation against Mr Crone, or any of the allegations made by the CMS Committee against Mr Hinton. Nor did we find sufficient evidence of a breach of parliamentary privilege by News International, and there was some confusion in the CMS Committee report over pinpointing the corporate body that could be accused of misleading the Committee.

I would invite anyone who disagrees with our findings to re-examine the evidence before us and to bear in mind the standard of proof. I repeat that our concern was specific: did these named inquiry subjects give misleading evidence as set out in the allegations of chapter 8 of the CMS Committee report?

We have recommended that Mr Myler and Mr Crone be formally admonished by the House. We believe that that is a significant step. Although individuals may be criticised in motions in the House, as we saw only recently, that is very different from the House directly resolving to admonish witnesses for obstructing the work of a Committee. It shows how seriously the Committee regards these offences that it seeks to involve the House in that way.

I know that some people feel that we have not gone far enough; the amendments that have not been selected today suggest that. Those people are disappointed to be deprived of the theatre of the inquiry subjects being dragged to the Bar of the House, hence the amendments. However, as has rightly been said, that has not happened in modern times—it did not even happen with the two Members of the House in 1992 who were admonished by resolution; they were not brought to the Bar of the House. We should be conscious of how we treat one another, as opposed to how we treat people outside. In fact, 1957 was the last time the process was used against an individual, when it was described in the House as a “medieval pantomime.” That was objected to. The Speaker of the day, Speaker Morrison, accepted that it was wrong to describe the proceedings of the House as a medieval pantomime, but he accepted “medieval drama”.

The former Clerk of the House, Sir Malcolm Jack, in written evidence to the Joint Committee on Parliamentary Privilege in 2013, considered that “the possibility of hauling people to the bar of the House and admonishing them would provide a theatre of the absurd”.

I think that he was right. The more recent precedent, set in 1992, is, as I have said, for Members to be reprimanded by resolution only. My Committee considered which form of admonishment was appropriate and decided firmly against summoning Mr Myler and Mr Crone to the Bar. That would risk moving the focus from the proceedings of the House were not broadcast and there was no such thing as social media. We recognise now that everything we do is much more public. I am sure that Mr Crone and Mr Myler will not regard today’s events as a light matter, and nor should they, given the findings of the Committee and the evidence that is in its report for all to see.

I could say much more on the subject of the House’s powers and how they are enforced, but I will be able to return to that matter if the House agrees to the proposal from the Leader of the House that the Committee of Privileges should examine the “exercise and enforcement of the powers of the House in relation to select committees and contempt.”

As my Committee points out in our report, that matter has been left unresolved for too long and it is right that we should go away, look at it and come back with some workable recommendations. I believe that it is better that that be done away from any current privileges report or any current inquiry.

I hope that the Leader of the House can reassure us that, unlike in the past, time will be found for the House to debate and to come to an agreement on whatever recommendations we make in our report. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) that we have to get the power that this place has into the context of the 21st century, not the centuries before. That is important. If the proposal is agreed today, and agreed by the Privileges Committee, all Members, and I am sure others, will have the opportunity to give evidence to the Committee about the powers we have and how we should exercise them.

The inquiry took a long time and my Committee has done its best to reach a fair verdict following a fair process. I think that we have done that and I ask the House to support the motion before it today.

12.17 pm

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): My initial reaction on the day of the report’s publication was that I was pleased that the Privileges Committee had agreed with our 2012 report saying that Colin Myler and Tom Crone had misled us and were in contempt. I made those comments, which are on my website, following a statement by Les Hinton, the former executive chairman of News International that led to claims that he had been exonerated. Clearly, this Privileges Committee report provides no substance for that statement, and nor does it provide any substance for Mr Hinton’s claims that the CMS Committee reached false findings in 2012. In my comments, I also said that I found the second half of the report more disappointing and I want to explain why. I also have questions about an aspect of the Privileges Committee’s methodology.

I join the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) in expressing my sympathy for the Committee. During its long, interrupted inquiry, it clearly received only grudging, and certainly not full, co-operation from three of the subjects: Colin Myler, Les Hinton and News International, and their solicitors. That was an all-too-familiar experience through all our reports into phone hacking.

I turn to chapter 6 of the report and Les Hinton. Mr Hinton, often described as Rupert Murdoch’s right-hand man, was the executive chairman of News International until December 2007. He resigned as chief executive of Dow Jones, another News Corp subsidiary in New York, in July 2011, within a week of the closure of the News of the World—that fact should speak for
itself. We found that he was not full and frank in his evidence to our Committee about the payments made to the convicted royal reporter Clive Goodman; about their purpose, which was to buy silence; or about suspicions that were communicated to him about the extent of phone hacking beyond one rogue reporter and one hacker. One only has to look at the detailed memo from Harbottle & Lewis, the lawyers to the group, to see that he also misled us over claims that a full and rigorous investigation into phone hacking at the News of the World happened on his watch—it certainly did not.

On Mr Hinton, the Privileges Committee made three findings, each of no contempt. First, on payments to Clive Goodman, the report concludes that he failed to tell us, but would certainly have remembered, his role in authorising a £90,000 pay-off to a convicted criminal. The Committee says that it found its conclusion of no contempt “particularly difficult”. I, for one, find that a little confusing and surprising, because we certainly, and unanimously, did not find it difficult to reach our conclusion.

Secondly, on knowledge of the allegations about the extent of phone hacking at the News of the World, the report documents that Mr Hinton received a letter in 2007 from Clive Goodman appealing his dismissal, in which he implicated other senior members of staff. Mr Hinton subsequently told our Committee that he had never been provided with any suspicions of wider involvement, and he never sought to correct that comment. Paragraph 269 of the Privileges Committee report says:

“On that basis we agree that Les Hinton’s evidence was misleading because it did not reveal that Clive Goodman was the source of one of those allegations.”

Yet in paragraph 270—the following paragraph—the report goes on to conclude that the allegations that Mr Hinton misled us were not “significantly more likely than not to be true”, so it made no finding of contempt. I am not the only person to find that conclusion rather contradictory and confusing.

I will not delay the House in relation to the third finding in this chapter of the report, about the payment of Mr Goodman’s legal fees—the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) may want to ask questions about it—as I have said enough about Mr Hinton. I will say, however, that throughout our investigations we found a pattern of payments, settlements and confidentiality clauses that clearly had one aim in mind: to suppress the truth about phone hacking.

Chapter 7 of the report deals with News International, which has since been renamed News UK. It was the parent company of News Group Newspapers, which ran and published the News of the World and The Sun. I must say that, at the outset of the chapter, the Privileges Committee took a narrow approach to the question of whether News International itself was in contempt. It “looked to identify the individual who could be said to be a controlling mind such that their written or oral evidence could fairly be said to be on behalf of and bind the company.”

That is tantamount to saying that statements by the company, individual senior employees or its lawyers, with plenty of chance to correct the record, are not binding. The report concludes that, by that test, only the executive chairman or the chief executive giving direct evidence at the relevant time—Les Hinton, James Murdoch or Rebekah Brooks—fits the bill. That is rather contestable.

On corporate liability, the report says that it was unclear why our Committee chose to focus on the parent company, News International, rather than News Group Newspapers. That, too, is a rather narrow point. The Privileges Committee did not ask us about that before it issued its report, but I hope to shed some light on why we chose that route. The issue was not raised before we reached our findings, when the Clerk of Committees was acting as our Committee Clerk and the recently retired Speaker’s Counsel was giving us advice. The title of our 2012 report was, indeed, “News International and Phone-hacking”.

I should mention some of my uncertainties about the Privileges Committee’s methodology. It reviewed, inter alia, oral and written evidence formally given to us, but that was clearly not the sum of our knowledge. It says that it reviewed “other publicly available documents”, but it is unclear from the report whether those included, in particular, court evidence in the myriad civil phone hacking claims and press releases from News International. We certainly considered those documents, as well as the whole behaviour of the organisation over a long period, when reaching our findings. They were not allegations; they were findings.

Throughout, we sought the truth beyond the initial “one rogue reporter” defence. We were clearly not alone in doing so. Along with media investigations, notably by The Guardian and The New York Times, a raft of hacking victims sued in the civil courts. In each case, the pattern of behaviour in the whole organisation was always the same—denials, misleading statements and evasion, until being forced, grudgingly, to make admissions. That extended to out-of-court settlements with strict confidentiality clauses to avoid cross-examination in the witness box and, in the case of the investigator Glen Mulcaire, to indemnities and costs being paid as long as he played ball. We know that, as we knew it then, from all the court documents.

In July 2011, but only after closing the News of the World, News Corporation and News International changed tack, setting up the so-called management and standards committee to handle the scandal. Any notion that afterwards a so-called “zero tolerance”, as the report describes it, equated to openness and full co-operation in reality is completely wrong. We had to probe, dig and cajole, as did lawyers in the civil cases. During our inquiries, News International issued misleading and false corporate statements, including press releases on 10 July 2009 denying a key story in The Guardian and, on 24 February 2010, savagely attacking our earlier report. At the time of that report, News International’s chief executive was Rebekah Brooks, to whom I will turn in a moment. As far as Les Hinton is concerned, I have said enough.

I will not dwell too much on James Murdoch, save to note his “lack of curiosity”, as we termed it, about the key items and events about which he was made aware during his tenure, including the damning opinion from Michael Silverleaf, QC, in June 2008, and the settlement with Gordon Taylor of the Professional Footballers Association to which that related. In evidence, the Murdochs rested on a letter from their lawyers, Harbottle & Lewis, claiming that there had been a proper investigation. In a
key memo to us, the lawyers told us that the Murdochs were not entitled to do so. They said that the Murdochs were either mistaken or confused.

Those senior people were far from being the only News International executives from whom we took evidence. Tom Crone, for instance, who is found in the Privileges Committee’s report to be in contempt, was the legal manager for both News Group Newspapers and News International. In key ways, our 2012 report was unfinished business. Owing to the imminent criminal charges, we, on advice, made no findings about the former editor of the News of the World, Andy Coulson, or Rebekah Brooks. Whether the Committee will wish to do so now, raking back over old ground, is clearly a matter for the Chair and its members.

In June 2014, Andy Coulson was convicted of conspiracy over phone hacking, while Rebekah Brooks was acquitted. However, those charges were not related to the evidence given to us about whether she had misled our Committee. On page 112 of its report, the Privileges Committee mentions that her evidence in criminal cases and to the Leveson inquiry was “constrained”, as was her oral evidence to us on 19 July 2011. That was four days after she had resigned as chief executive, and the report says that “as such her answers cannot be said to be on behalf of News International.”

She was sitting alongside the Murdochs at the time. The report concludes:

“There are therefore no particular matters arising from her oral evidence in 2011.”

I am afraid to say that I am not the only one who would beg to differ with that narrow, premature conclusion. Ms Brooks is now, of course, the chief executive of News UK—so much for Rupert Murdoch’s penitence when he said:

“This is the most humble day of my life.”

Chris Bryant: Is it not a curious irony that, because of the Bill of Rights, neither Lord Justice Leveson nor the courts could, when interrogating Rebekah Brooks, ask her why, in an answer to a question from me on 11 March 2003 about whether she had ever paid a police officer for information, she said yes?

Paul Farrelly: I agree with my hon. Friend. That highlights the long record of Ms Brooks coming—or declining to come—to give evidence in this House. We have taken issue with such evidence.

In evidence to our Committee in July 2011, Ms Brooks repeated one central assertion:

“the fact is that since the Sienna Miller...documents came into our possession at the end of December 2010, that was the first time that we, the senior management of the company at the time, had actually seen some documentary evidence actually relating to a current employee.”

The Sienna Miller civil case was seminal in terms of disclosure. Ms Brooks went on to say:

“It was only when we saw the Sienna Miller documentation that we realised the severity of the situation.”

Yet we know that, by then, News International had plenty in its possession to suggest that hacking was widespread, including the Silverleaf opinion. We know that Rebekah Brooks personally negotiated the big out-of-court settlement with Max Clifford, which was all wrapped up in confidentiality, just days after our 2010 report. As the Privileges Committee’s report records, we know that she was present with other people from News International at the meeting of its lawyers Farrer and Co. on 20 January 2010 that was held to discuss Mr Clifford’s civil claim.

Damian Collins: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Tom Crone’s role as legal manager would surely be to act on behalf of the company to gather whatever advice he needed to advise whoever within the company—senior executives at all levels—of impending issues and problems, and that it is therefore right to assume that he would have made his opinion and that of Michael Silverleaf available to anyone he felt he had to make them available to?

Paul Farrelly: I thank the new Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. There are disputes within the company about who told what to whom at what time. If he will bear with me, in a moment I will come on to something about which there has been no dispute.

We know, too, that back in 2006, when Rebekah Brooks was editor of The Sun, the police informed her that her own phone had been hacked. Courtesy of evidence submitted to the Leveson inquiry in February 2012, we know that she had a long conversation with a police source that was relayed to Tom Crone and then by him in an email to Andy Coulson on 15 September 2006. That email referred to more than 100 victims across all walks of life, not just the royal family, who would have been of interest to royal reporter Clive Goodman.

On reviewing all the lengthy correspondence the Culture, Media and Sport Committee received at the time, it is clear that Rebekah Brooks led us a merry dance for nine months before our 2010 report, saying that she would give evidence in person and then declining. In her final written reply to the right hon. Member for Maldon, on 8 February 2010, she had this to say about what had been known at News International from the police about the extent of hacking:

“I understand that, at some stage between the arrests of Mr Mulcaire and Mr Goodman on 8 August 2006, and their first appearance in court on 29 November 2006, it became known, from information provided by the police, that Mr Mulcaire had accessed the voicemails of people other than Royal Household employees. It was not known how many.”

Compare that to the email from 15 September 2006 that was cited at Leveson. She does not say that it was she herself who received the information from a police source, and the final sentence appears to be a complete untruth. The email cites 100 to 110 victims—a very precise number. Did Mr Crone simply make that number up for Mr Coulson after talking to Ms Brooks? It all certainly contradicts the central assertion that the Sienna Miller case was Ms Brooks’s moment of epiphany about the severity of the situation, four years later. Along with the other replies that Ms Brooks gave us—not least over the cost indemnity arrangements with Mr Mulcaire after he was sacked—this also merits closer analysis than was evident, I am afraid to say, in the Privileges Committee’s report. On all those grounds, I believe that the Privileges Committee is wrong in
being “unable to draw” the conclusion that News International misled us, and is rather premature in not considering it “to have committed a contempt.”

As far as parliamentary privilege is concerned, what is important now is what happens in the future. In chapter 8 of its report, the Privileges Committee is quite right to note that the work of the 2013 Joint Committee has not been taken forward. When we on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee were finalising our 2012 report, as the right hon. Member for Maldon mentioned, we summoned the Murdochs to appear in front of us, as we knew they were in the country to apologise to the family of the murdered teenager Milly Dowler over phone hacking. The uncertainty over our step was what to do if they declined to come. While we were finalising our report, we asked time and again for advice on what sanctions might apply in this day and age for misleading a Select Committee. Too often, I am afraid we found that in the reality behind the rhetoric, the parliamentary emperor apparently had no clothes. That situation needs to be readdressed urgently.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House—

(i) approves the First Report from the Committee of Privileges (HC 662);

(ii) having regard to the conclusions of the Committee in respect of Mr Colin Myler, considers that Mr Myler misled the Culture, Media and Sport Committee by answering questions falsely about his knowledge of evidence that other News of the World employees had been involved in phone-hacking and other wrongdoing, and therefore formally admonishes him for his conduct; and

(iii) having regard to the conclusions of the Committee in respect of Mr Tom Crone, considers that Mr Crone misled the Culture, Media and Sport Committee by giving a counter-impression of the significance of confidentiality in the Gordon Taylor settlement and by answering questions falsely about his knowledge of evidence that other News of the World employees had been involved in phone-hacking and other wrongdoing, and therefore formally admonishes him for his conduct.

That the matter of the exercise and enforcement of the powers of the House in relation to select committees and contempts be referred to the Committee of Privileges.

Backbench Business

Young People’s Mental Health


12.34 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House notes the recommendations of the Youth Select Committee report of November 2015 on Young People’s Mental Health; endorses the findings of that report on the need for more support from the Government for mental health services for young people; acknowledges steps taken by the Government, since its response of January 2016 to that report, with regard to some of its recommendations, and calls on the Government to set out what further progress has been made since its response and what its plans are further to improve mental health services for young people.

The motion concerns the report of the Youth Select Committee on young people’s mental health and the Government’s response to that report. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for the debate, the application for which was supported by more than 50 members from across the House, and to the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) for co-sponsoring the debate.

I start by paying tribute to the many health professionals and voluntary sector organisations working in mental health services for young people, the teachers and teaching assistants who support young people with mental health difficulties in classrooms every day of the week and the youth workers seeking to support our young people in many different ways. This debate is not about the commitment of those who work tirelessly to support our young people but about the resources and the framework within which they are working, which affect our collective ability to deliver the outcomes we need.

The Youth Select Committee report on young people’s mental health was published in 2015, as a consequence of more than 90,000 young people voting for the subject of mental health in the 2014 Make Your Mark ballot. It is an exceptionally important piece of work because it is a report on mental health by young people, about young people. Since I was elected last year, I have been struck by how often young people’s mental health issues have been raised with me; whether by individual constituents struggling to access the support that they or their children need, doctors in my local accident and emergency department or teachers in our local schools. The issue is raised very frequently, and no one thinks the current situation is even close to being acceptable.

I pay tribute to the Youth Select Committee for its excellent, rigorous report and clear recommendations, which fall into three areas: funding and the state of services; a role for education; and awareness, stigma and digital culture. The report concludes that mental health services are significantly underfunded, and young people’s mental health services even more so, and that the challenge posed today by young people’s mental health is unprecedented. It highlights significant problems in accessing services, particularly in relation to first contact through GPs, and raises the urgent need for
every young person in the UK to leave school with a good understanding and awareness of mental health, empowered and equipped to look after their own mental health.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that some of the issues on access that are raised by this very good report could apply equally to adult services, so there is clearly a read-across between the two?

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that, although today we are debating young people’s mental health, many of the same issues apply to mental health services across the board for all members of our communities.

The Government published a response to the Youth Select Committee report in January 2016. That response was, on the whole, disappointing. It referred mainly to work that the Government were already doing rather than the additional work that they and other agencies clearly need to do. Most disappointing of all, the response rejected the key recommendation that statutory levels of attainment in mental health education should be introduced for all young people. I welcome the fact that the Government have subsequently announced some additional funding for young people’s mental health, but I remain very concerned about the current state of mental health services for our young people and the resourcing of those services.

I will focus, therefore, on the current state of services, and what I believe to be evidence of a crisis that is growing, not diminishing, and demands a response far bolder and more comprehensive than that which the Government are currently offering. I will also return to the conclusions of the Youth Select Committee report.

One in four of us will experience mental ill health in any given year. That means that mental health is something that affects every one of us. All of us have a friend or family member who has mental ill health, and many of us will experience mental ill health ourselves. I have known close friends and family members who have suffered from severe anxiety that impacted on their daily lives, clinical depression and eating disorders. There are few worse feelings than the worry for a loved one who seems unreachable in the pit of depression, except perhaps the worry when that loved one is a child. All any of us wants for our own children and the young people we represent is that they grow up happy, healthy and resilient to the stresses and strains of our world. Watching a precious child struggle with clinical depression, severe anxiety or an eating disorder is absolutely devastating.

According to NHS statistics, around one in 10 children and young people has a diagnosable mental health condition; that is around three students in a typical classroom. Many more young people do not have a diagnosable condition but experience a period of mental ill health or emotional distress during their childhood or adolescence. The Government’s own measures of children’s well-being found that almost one in four children showed some evidence of mental ill health. Half of mental health problems are established by the age of 14 and three quarters by the age of 24.

Shockingly, suicide is the most common cause of death for boys aged between five and 19, and the second-most common for girls of that age, after traffic accidents. A recent survey by Girlguiding found that 69% of girls aged seven to 21 feel that they are not good enough. It is thought that around one in eight young people self-harm between the ages of 11 and 16.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I know that my hon. Friend also has concerns, which a number of us share, about serious youth violence. Does she agree with me that mental ill health is now understood to be a key trigger in gang and serious youth violence, and that this deserves a serious and concentrated focus from within the health service and the Government? There is some very good practice out there. It is, sadly, nothing like widely available enough to help us deal with this problem.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful and important point. This is an issue that affects both our constituencies to a significant degree.

Only 0.7% of NHS funding is spent on young people’s mental health and only 16% of that funding is spent on early intervention. The Royal College of Psychiatrists also reports that additional funding the Government have committed to young people’s mental health is not getting to the frontline. Responses to a recent freedom of information request from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) revealed that although the Secretary of State made a commitment that the proportion of funding for mental health services should be increasing everywhere this year, and this is desperately needed, 57 of the country’s clinical commissioning groups are actually reducing the proportion of funding for mental health services.

The charity YoungMinds reports that three quarters of young people with mental health problems may not get access to the treatment they need. Child and adolescent mental health services, on average, turn away nearly a quarter of children referred to them for treatment by concerned parents, GPs, teachers and others. That finding is supported by evidence from the Association of Colleges, which reports that, of 127 colleges responding to a survey, many reported real difficulties referring students on to health services in times of crisis, with 61% of respondents reporting that their relationship as a college with local mental health services is only “fair” or “not very good/non-existent”. The thresholds for support are going up at precisely a time at which demand for services is increasing. This has the potential to create a ticking time bomb of mental ill health for the future.

The average waiting times for all CAMHS providers was six months for a first appointment and almost 10 months for the start of treatment; and an investigation by Pulse recently found that three in five referrals from GPs to CAMHS are being batted back to primary care without any access to specialist support. When early intervention is not available, it is very often schools and colleges that end up dealing with the consequences, and they are woefully under-resourced to do so. A recent survey by the National Association of Head Teachers found that only a third of primary schools have access to a school-based counsellor, and that of those who do have access, 59% have a counsellor on the school site for one day a week or less.
Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate on this very important subject, which often comes up in my constituency work. She makes a point about schools struggling to find support. That is certainly something I have experienced in my constituency, so I want to reiterate the point that primary and secondary schools know they have children who could really benefit from more specialist support and it is very hard for them to access it.

Helen Hayes: I agree with the hon. Lady completely. As we focus on prevention and early intervention, we need to think about early intervention in terms of age, as well as the stage of mental ill health.

As a consequence of the lack of early intervention support, the number of young people attending A&E because of a psychiatric condition has more than doubled since 2010. I have spoken to many doctors who tell me that when this happens and a seriously unwell young person presents at A&E needing a CAMHS in-patient bed, they frequently wait a very long time—sometimes days—for a bed to be identified. Often that bed is hundreds of miles away from home. One south London hospital has provided me with data that show a 37% year-on-year increase in the number of under-16s being seen in A&E with a mental health condition, and a 193% year-on-year increase in the number of those children being admitted to an in-patient bed.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree that while there is a shortage of beds, another issue, particularly in cities such as London, is poor quality housing? In cases where individuals could perhaps have been treated at home and in the community, that treatment cannot be delivered because of the lack of proper housing.

Helen Hayes: My hon. Friend is right. There are multiple causes and contributory factors to mental ill health, and multiple contributory factors that present obstacles to addressing that and providing the treatment people need, where they need it. Housing is certainly one of them.

In London, 69 young people from Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark and Croydon were unable to receive in-patient care in the South London and Maudsley Trust. Of those, 45 were sent out of London for their care. This issue, of seriously unwell young people being sent a long distance away from home to access in-patient care, needs to stop. It is distressing for families, it stops young people receiving the maximum possible support from family and friends to help them recover, and it makes them more vulnerable. When young people are admitted to a CAMHS in-patient unit, very often the service is not what it should be. The Care Quality Commission found that 62% of CAMHS in-patient wards and units were inadequate or required improvement.

The goal of parity of esteem for mental and physical health was introduced into the Health and Social Care Act 2012 via an amendment by Labour peers, and was a landmark in the way that mental health services are considered. However, we only need to think for a moment about what our response would be if some of the statistics on young people’s mental health related to a physical condition to realise just how far away we are from the stated objective of parity of esteem being realised. Just imagine if 75% of people with a bacterial infection struggled to get access to treatment; if almost a quarter of referrals for cataracts were turned away; if people with a chest infection were routinely forced to wait until they had pneumonia before any help was provided; or those with a broken leg were forced to wait for days in A&E only to be sent to a hospital hundreds of miles away to be treated. It would be a national scandal. The state of our mental health services, particularly those for young people, is a national scandal: it just is not being recognised as such. Words alone cannot achieve parity of esteem; the Government must start to act differently.

What action, then, is necessary to transform mental health services for our young people? I want to return now to the conclusions of the Youth Select Committee report. The Royal College of Psychiatrists highlights three recommendations in the report, which it believes are key. First, the Government must increase funding for young people’s mental health services and ensure that this funding is ring-fenced to guarantee that the money “reaches the ground” to CAMHS. There is particular concern at the moment about the introduction of sustainability and transformation plans across the NHS, and the resourcing implications of those plans. The Royal College of Psychiatrists recommends that the Government introduce ring-fenced funding for CAMHS and rejects any sustainability and transformation plans that do not clearly set out a plan to improve children’s mental health services in their area. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

Secondly, health services must pursue co-production, in which young people themselves are involved in the process of formulating policy to improve CAMHS. Research shows that where young people have a clear voice in service design, the end result much better reflects the real needs of the patients.

Thirdly, the Government must focus on improving mental health education in schools, with the aim of ensuring that young people leave school with not only an understanding of mental health, but an understanding of how to help their own mental wellbeing. This recommendation was made by the Youth Select Committee and it is supported by the Education Committee, the National Association of Head Teachers and other teaching unions, the United Nations and many others. The Government have introduced new lesson plans for the personal, social, health and economic curriculum, but there is a broad consensus across the health and education sectors that the role of mental health education in developing resilience, preventing mental ill health and safeguarding young people is so important that it should not be left to chance, and that along with sex and relationships education it should be a compulsory part of the curriculum. I hope the Government will reflect on the urgency of the situation and the consensus around the need for compulsory education, and will make a commitment to introduce it.

The Youth Select Committee report made many other practical recommendations, including the introduction of regional commissioning, the development of an app to provide mental health advice and support, and the introduction of plans to support students through periods of exam stress. I would welcome an update from the Minister on the progress that is being made to deliver these excellent ideas.
Finally, we know that one of the greatest barriers to delivering the mental health support and services that our young people need has always been the stigma that surrounds mental health. I want to pay tribute to a brilliant piece of work that was recently published by the YMCA in partnership with the NHS. Called “I Am Whole”, the research sought to identify the extent and impact of mental health stigma and included the finding that three quarters of the young people spoken to believe that people experiencing difficulties with their mental health are treated negatively as a result of stigma. The project also sought to address stigma directly by publishing a series of stories from young people about their experiences of mental health difficulties. These make for very challenging and moving reading.

Before I close, I want to read a quotation from the foreword to “I Am Whole”, from Connie, aged 22:

“Having mental health difficulties is like being trapped inside a thousand invisible prisons. There are a thousand reasons that as a young person you are driven deeper into that colossal void. Not only isolated by the struggles you’re facing mentally, but further enclosed in a thick, suffocating darkness. The darkness descends, comprised of a tangled web of myths, harmful language, misconceptions and misunderstandings. This is stigma. It is time for these myths to be dispelled, the web broken and the isolation to end. It is time for us to be free to talk about our mental health difficulties openly, so that we can access the services we need. Once the conversation begins, you promote understanding for others and break down misconceptions people hold...It is like being stood in the dark, untangling parts of that web until the sun's warmth breaks through...the light reaches your eyes, and you look around to see you are not alone.”

When we talk about young people’s mental health, we are talking about the wellbeing of our precious children, about their health and happiness, about the resilience of the next generation and about the ability of young people to fulfill their potential and be everything they can be. We are talking about the ways to stop more families living with the heartbreaking of a young person with mental ill health and about ways to stop more families suffering the devastation of a loss to suicide. There are few things more important than this and it is time the Government got it right.

12.52 pm

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this important debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. The report was brought to my attention by Lucy Broadman, my local member of the Youth Parliament, who has been in the Chamber for Youth Parliament debates. Lucy is in the Public Gallery to listen to the debate today and has even assisted me in formulating my remarks today—I will return to that later. As a result of the contact from Lucy, I made my own application for a Westminster Hall debate, but owing to an administrative error somewhere behind the Chair it was unable to be heard. I therefore congratulate and thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for bringing this debate to the Chamber today.

Before I address the subject directly, I would like to applaud not only the hon. Lady but the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, not just for the seriousness of the issue but for the legitimacy it confers on the Youth Parliament. As we all try to engage with young people more and more, it is imperative that the efforts of the Youth Parliament get acknowledged and debated in here. As Lucy, now a former member, tells me, when the Youth Parliament cuts out for subjects, mental health is very often in the top five or six that concern young people, so it is important that it is considered. The report is excellent, but it is also important that we debate it today.

The report is thorough and makes several conclusions and recommendations, as highlighted by the hon. Lady, but I wanted to get a better understanding of the issues facing young people in the modern age that can lead to the mental health issues laid out in the report. It is a long time since I was a young person—[HON. MEMBERS: “No!”]—thank you—so I thought the best way for me to understand the issue was to make use of the expertise of young people, as highlighted in recommendation 17 of the report. I decided to do that off my own bat, so I had a conversation not only with Lucy but with another 17-year-old young lady I know very well, Martha Banks Thompson. I asked them to tell me what their thoughts and experiences of life as a teenager were and about the pressures that they and their friends have to face in the modern-day world. Both girls are A-level politics students, but from different ends of the country. Lucy is from my constituency of High Peak and Martha lives in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). My remarks today are very much—although not completely—based on the conversations we have had.

Mental health issues in any person, of any age, are very often difficult to diagnose. As has been highlighted, they are not like a broken leg, which can be seen; they are not as tangible as that. Mental health issues can often be mistaken for a temporary emotional upheaval or distress, but in the young they can often be put down to other things: pure teenage angst, raging hormones or just plain old teenage moodiness—or, as some people say, the Kevin and Perry syndrome. Consequently, these issues go unspotted and unnoticed and therefore untreated. By the time it is realised that there is a problem, it has manifested itself to such a degree that it becomes even harder to treat.

Who would, should or could identify the problem? In all likelihood it would be an adult—a parent, a guardian or even a teacher. Because of that, there is a generational gap. I am sure anyone in the Chamber or listening today will have heard from a teenage the line, “You don’t understand”, and in this case I think that, as adults, we do not understand. So what should we look for and how does the problem manifest itself? There are various symptoms and they are all too easy to miss. As we have heard, there could be anxiety, depression, eating disorders, contemplation of suicide or maybe even self-harm. Self-harm can sometimes be seen as a cry for help or attention, but more often it is a symptom of a much deeper problem. When can it occur? In days gone by, the pinch points for stress among teenagers were usually exam times: January for their mock GCSEs—they were O-levels when I took them—or May for their final exams. However, in the modern world there are so many more pressures that can impact on young people and bring about problems.

How are things different from when we were young? What are the extra factors and circumstances that we did not have to contend with that the modern-day
young person or teenager does? There are many, but it would be a derogation of our duty to consider this question without looking at the impact of social media, whether it is Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp or Snapchat, or the many more that those of us in the Chamber have probably not heard of. Only a few years ago, they were a figment of the imagination—in my day they were science fiction—but now not only are they part of everyday life, but for the modern teenager they are often the preferred method of communicating with each other.

These technologies have much to commend them and have many advantages, not just for the teenager but for all of us in the Chamber. I am sure many of us tweet and have Facebook pages, and I am sure we all have websites. Indeed, I would venture to say that most of our communication as Members of Parliament with our constituents comes via email, making us more accessible than we have ever been. It is good that we are, and so is communication between young people. Again, I am going to betray my age now, but the days of sending notes to the object of our affections across the classroom with “SWALK” written on the back of the envelope—

Tim Loughton: SWALK?

Andrew Bingham: Exactly. I mentioned this to Martha and Lucy and they did not know what SWALK was. I can tell my hon. Friend that it stands for “Sealed with a loving kiss”. Those days are long gone. Now everything is done via social media. It is out in the open for everyone to see and it is there forever. The SWALK letter is read. If it is not reciprocated, it is thrown away; if it is reciprocated, it is replied to. On social media, it remains there forever.

That brings with it perils and pressures. Relationships, appearance, fashion, style—all are analysed in the public glare. Relationships, attitudes and opinions once shared privately between friends are now put out for the world to see, with every comment seemingly soliciting a further comment or response and the rhetoric growing from that. With, for example, chat groups on applications such as WhatsApp, it is very easy for what could be seen as a little verbal leg-pulling or teasing to take on a sinister complexion. We increasingly hear stories of cyber-bullying and the posting of revenge pictures. I am sure all of us in this House have at one time or another been on the receiving end of comments online that we would see as offensive or upsetting. However, for a teenager, maybe uncertain, vulnerable or lacking in confidence, such remarks can have a shattering effect on their self-confidence and in turn their mental state.

Let us look at the media in general. The modern media seem to present all young people in reality programmes such as “Made in Chelsea” as perfectly formed human beings, which puts pressure on so many young people to be absolutely perfect. The slightest imperfection, perceived or otherwise, can become a major issue. We hear a lot about body image, too, and young people’s attitude towards it. Again, the desire to be perfect crops up, so when a perceived imperfection is not only remarked on but ridiculed via social media, it can be amplified and re-tweeted, when “likes”, “unlikes” and “comments” can become very cruel, particularly to uncertain and vulnerable teenagers. This can severely damage the self-esteem and mental health of a young person.

Our consumer society is another issue. As we see with mobile phones, clothing and computers, everywhere we look there is a thirst for the latest, the best, the biggest, the fastest and the shiniest, while anything less than the optimum is seen as a problem. This is another issue that ratchets up the mental pressure on young people. I am not saying that a young person’s not having the latest iPhone will lead to mental health problems, but I am saying is that if someone is vulnerable and has low self-esteem, this sort of thing can work to enhance those insecurities and push someone into the territory that we are discussing today.

We need to remember, too, that all these pressures—I have mentioned only a few—are impacting on young people at a time when their minds, brains and characters are still growing and forming. As we get older, we form our minds and personalities, and we develop our own resilience to many of these outside pressures.

John Glen: My hon. Friend is putting forward a pertinent case and providing an accurate analysis of the pressures on our teenagers. Does he agree that it is important to recognise that we need an integrated solution, which requires education and NHS response, so that schools can get in very early and start tackling some of the behaviours that lead to poor mental health outcomes?

Andrew Bingham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and his point about the need for a whole school approach is acknowledged in the conclusion of the report. It states that when children leave school, they should be conversant with all the issues around mental health, which the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood also mentioned in her speech. As I was saying, as we get older, we develop our own resilience, but in young people that development is not complete. That is the issue that we need to be aware of, and it is where schools need to play a part in helping to develop that resilience.

As we know, a stigma is attached to mental health—and nowhere more so than with young people. No young person wishes to admit to it for fear of being labelled, and people often are labelled in this society. Parents are similarly affected, so this leads to a situation of potential denial—I am not sure that “denial” is exactly the right word—which further exacerbates the problem. There seems to be a lack of willingness to say, or a fear of saying, “Look, I have a problem, and I need some help.” There should be no stigma attached to any young person admitting that they are struggling with certain issues, and neither should there be any barrier to parents making a similar plea.

Young people should have somewhere to go to ask for help—the report mentions a counsellor—without fear of ridicule. They should not be judged or labelled either by their peers or by society. Parents can be the strongest help and support for any young person, and we should look to families and family support units as well. We need to enable parents to play as full a part as they can. A young person who is getting some help at 15 can find on turning 16 that they are suddenly deemed to be an adult and their parents can be almost excluded from playing a full part. An attentive parent who is
trying to help can face being told, “We can’t discuss this with you, because your girl or boy is now 16.” We should look to see whether there is a way around that problem.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Lucy Boardman and Martha Banks Thompson for their help. They have given me an insight into the world of the modern teenager and into how 21st-century pressures impact on their lives in a way that did not impact on my life as a teenager or that of many other Members here today. It was a very illuminating and educational experience for me, and I pay tribute to both of them for their candour and their honesty. As I have said, talking about these issues freely takes a lot. Many of my remarks today have come as a result of their contribution.

I say gently to the Minister that we must not in any way fall into the trap of dismissing mental health issues in the young as mere growing pains. This is a serious matter. I know she understands, but let us recognise that to provide the help needed, it needs to be not only readily and easily available, but available for as long as it is needed for each person according to their individual needs.

Lyn Brown: Absolutely. I totally agree with my hon. Friend, and as I go through my speech I am hoping to provide an example to show how intervention is particularly important for a very young child because of the impact on the rest of the family. Early intervention can do a lot to mitigate other events and difficulties occurring in the family that might include other family members, too.

Unfortunately, tragically and outrageously, young people’s mental health services often receive less attention than adult mental health services, so that young people’s mental health services have been called the “Cinderella services”. In November 2014, the Health Committee found that there were “serious and deeply ingrained problems with the commissioning and provision of services for young people’s mental health.”

Many providers reported increased waiting times and increased referral thresholds for specialist services, where patients would have to show severer symptoms to receive treatment than they would have done in the past. GPs reported feeling ill-equipped and lacking in confidence when dealing with young people’s mental health issues. The Select Committee found that early intervention programmes were “suffering from insecure or short term funding, or being cut altogether.”

There really is no excuse for this failing. Around half of people with lifetime mental health problems experience symptoms by the age of 14, and about 75% of them before the age of 18. Catching these problems early could well lessen the severity of adult problems, possibly saving the NHS money in the long term. More importantly, I would suggest, it would reduce unnecessary suffering and enable people to live better lives.

I want to be fair to the Government, who have recognised that there is a problem. In 2014 they set up a children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing taskforce, which made a number of recommendations in its 2015 “Future in mind” report. The taskforce identified a number of problems with young people’s mental health services. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who was then the responsible Minister, said that there needed to be a fundamental shift in culture, with a much greater focus on prevention and early intervention.

The taskforce rightly recognised that one of the challenges facing young people’s mental health services was—unsurprisingly—funding. I was pleased when the Government responded by announcing the provision of an additional £1.4 billion of transitional funding for youth mental health services, but that additional money needs to be considered in the context of the less encouraging overall picture of mental health services funding. NHS England’s planning guidance states that all clinical commissioning groups must increase their spending on mental health services by at least as much as their overall budget increases. However, there have been warnings from organisations including mental health trusts that mental health funding is not properly ring-fenced, and that NHS England’s target is being missed.

Let me again follow in the footsteps of my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood. We know from the responses to a series of freedom of
information requests from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) that more than 50% of CCGs intend to spend a smaller proportion of their budgets on mental health in 2016-17. That clearly demonstrates that what the Government tried to do has failed, and that that target is being missed as well.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some important points. She referred to the taskforce’s “Future in mind” report. According to one of its startling statistics, only between 25% and 35% of young people with diagnosable mental health conditions access support. Does that not underline the need for much better training and much more awareness among both teachers and GPs, in respect of early intervention as well as early intervention?

Lyn Brown: We need early identification and we need early intervention, but we also need the funds to ensure that there are services to which people can be referred. That is the rub of this whole debate. There does not seem to be the necessary funding at any point in the journey of young people who need help, whether in the form of awareness, intervention or services.

I have been looking into the good work done in my borough, the London borough of Newham. Even in these difficult times, it is increasing its mental health spending in both absolute and relative terms, and its children’s mental health services received an “outstanding” spending in both absolute and relative terms, and its children’s mental health services received an “outstanding” rating from the Care Quality Commission. I wanted to find out how we could improve young people’s mental health provision, and to learn about the challenges that an “outstanding” local provider continued to face in its form of awareness, intervention or services. Professionals in Newham recognise that a good young people’s mental health service does not just help those who have already developed severe and serious conditions, but provides early intervention and preventive programmes so that problems can be dealt with at source.

Seema Malhotra: Is it not important for young people’s mental health services to consider the needs of parents as well? I was struck by a recent case in which the parents did not understand where the issues had come from and could not identify what they were, and felt unable to understand how best to help their child.

Lyn Brown: My hon. Friend is right. The family is often key to the provision of the support that a young person needs, but a family may itself need intervention to gain the support that it needs to lead a mentally healthy life.

The national lottery funded a programme in Newham called HeadStart, which helps 10 to 16-year-olds, particularly in schools. It trains teachers in secondary schools to develop programmes that help to build resilience among their pupils. It also provides children directly with mentoring schemes so that they can learn from each other about how to manage mental health issues—it is peer-to-peer learning—and works directly with parents to show them how they can work through mental health issues with their children. Unfortunately, the scheme relies on lottery money rather than core funding, which means that its future as a core service cannot be guaranteed. It is often difficult to obtain the necessary proof that would persuade funders—including the Government—that core funding should continue, because the timescale is often not big enough to be persuasive.

Newham would love to run more services directly in the community, and more integrated services, because it knows that they make a real difference to people’s lives. M, aged two, and her baby brother T, just seven weeks old, were referred by a perinatal psychiatrist, who was helping their mother to deal with chronic mental ill health. M was still frequently breastfed, and showed a very insecure attachment to her mum. Her anxious, and therefore sometimes controlling, behaviour was making it difficult for her mum to wean her and to attend to the needs of the new baby, who was being bottle-fed. M’s speech was also delayed.

Following assessment, the family were offered parent-infant psychotherapy, which enabled them to reflect on the needs of both children, and gradually to help M to become more independent of her mum. At the same time, T was able to have more appropriate attention from his mum as the baby of the family. I am pleased to say that, following that intervention, M is more confident and her speech is developing. She sleeps in her own room, and has settled well into nursery. That is an example of our physical and mental health services working in tandem to improve real lives.

J was a 17-year-old who had been arrested and charged with possession of a weapon and affray. He had a history of violence and non-engagement with services. During the course of his referral to a youth offending team, the team became concerned about his mental health, and referred him directly to a child and adolescent mental health services specialist for an urgent examination.

During that assessment, J was having suicidal thoughts, was highly anxious, and showed quite severe symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder as well as softer symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The youth offending team nurse arranged for J to have urgent psychiatric treatment. He was put on medication for his anxiety, with an accompanying course of cognitive behavioural therapy for his obsessive-compulsive disorder.

He will also be assessed for ADHD in the longer term once his more acute symptoms abate. I am pleased to report that J has not offended since he has engaged with the mental health services offered through the youth offenders team. That shows that integrated services are better for individuals, and better for the whole community.

Those are just a few of the stories that I have been told, but I believe that there are enormous challenges to the provision of community-based and fully integrated services. I am told that Newham would love to run services directly from general practices, but they cannot currently do so because they do not have the necessary resources. With the current staffing levels it would not be efficient, because staff would spend as much time travelling to and from general practices as they would spend helping patients.

Health professionals acknowledge that early intervention work often increases rather than reduces workload in the short term. Professionals in Newham worry that they simply will not be able to deliver the clinical hours that are necessary to help more patients. Over 50% of patients in Newham already have to wait for more than five weeks to see a specialist, and that figure can only increase when further cases are uncovered without corresponding additional resources.
Some well integrated and community-based mental health services are delivered in Newham and, I am sure, throughout the country, but if we want to preserve and expand those programmes, we must be aware that they need stable and long-term funding. A good place to start would be ensuring that money designed for mental need stable and long-term funding. A good place to through the country, but if we want to preserve and improve services actually finds its way to the front line.

1.19 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I apologise for missing the opening couple of minutes of the speech made by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

I am delighted that we are having this debate, and to be participating in it, for two main reasons, which I am sure you will share, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I know your interest in this matter. First, this is an important subject. It is something that we are failing on, so it is right, proper and beneficial that hon. Members talk about it openly, especially because, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham), young people are much more prepared than ever to come forward with their own stories of their problems and issues, hopefully so that solutions can be found through them.

Secondly, I am delighted to participate in this debate because it is part of the UK Youth Parliament’s work. It is significant that we are giving up mainstream parliamentary time in the main Chamber of the House of Commons to discuss a report by the Youth Select Committee, an offshoot of the UK Youth Parliament. It is a shame that we have to do it in Backbench Business Committee time rather than Government time, but I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood for securing the debate and giving it such an excellent start—this will clearly be a high-quality debate. I take the view—I think that you share this view, Madam Deputy Speaker—that the Youth Select Committee has now taken on such status and stature, with its production of reports of such high quality involving such good research, that not only should the Government produce a formal response to the reports, as they have, but they should give up Government time in this Chamber on an annual basis—just once a year—so that we can formally debate the work of the Youth Select Committee. I have put that idea forward for some time, so I hope that the Whips and Government business managers are listening.

I am a big supporter of the UK Youth Parliament. It was founded during my time in Parliament, and I always try to attend its annual parliamentary sittings, which are a great spectacle. It is always exceedingly frustrating for Members when we return on the Monday and the Speaker inevitably says, “Why don’t you lot behave as well as the UK Youth Parliament members who were here on Friday; they are very smart, very concise, very well behaved, don’t heckle and set an example?” It is a shame that the media coverage of the Youth Parliament sitting is not more extensive because it is a great event for a great organisation, and it is great that we are discussing its work today.

When I was the Minister for children and young people, we produced the “Positive for Youth” document, which was all about promoting that sort of youth engagement. One of the things I most treasure having done is helping the transition of the UK Youth Parliament across to the British Youth Council to secure its future. I made some small contribution to its work over the past few years. It is a mainstream part of the youth voice in this country and in this Chamber.

I was the first witness ever to be called before the Youth Select Committee. It was an awesome and intimidating experience. I was called for its first inquiry back in 2012 along with the then Transport Minister, Norman Baker. We rather too nonchalantly rocked up before this group of young people in the Boothroyd Room. They were exceedingly well-rehearsed and well-researched, and were certainly not taking any BS from anybody. I have appeared in front of Select Committees—mostly the Education Committee—on many occasions, but I have to say that this was the most intimidating experience I ever had as a Minister in front of a Select Committee, and it was fantastic. That shows why the work of this Committee, and this, its fourth report, need to be taken seriously.

This Youth Select Committee report is difficult to distinguish, other than by its cover, from a House of Commons Select Committee report, and I congratulate Rhys Hart and his team on their work on it. They did all the things they should have done: they visited experts and sufferers of mental illness, and took no fewer than 148 submissions from expert witnesses and others—if only all the other Select Committees had as many well-informed and well-researched submissions as it did.

The Youth Parliament also has a substantial democratic endorsement. In 2014, when its priorities and the subject of the Youth Select Committee report were decided upon in the “Make Your Mark” ballot—which includes a debate in this House in the Youth Parliament’s annual sitting—no fewer than 875,000 young people from up and down the country bothered to turn out and vote. Of them, more than 90,000 voted specifically for the subject of mental health services, which is why we are debating this report in the Chamber today. That is a huge democratic mandate.

Every year I hold an event in the House of Commons to present democracy awards to schools in West Sussex, including my constituency, that have achieved a high turnout in the elections that are held every February. Each year the turnout gets higher, so more and more trophies have to be given out, and an ever bigger room has to be booked to accommodate everybody. Last year, one school had a 100% turnout—all its pupils turned out to vote for its UKYP members, which is absolutely fantastic.

This report is a chunky piece of evidence that needs to be appreciated, looked at and, importantly, acted upon. I am delighted that we are giving time to it today, and I am also pleased that the Government produced a formal response to it, whatever we may think about the shortcomings of what they said. That was produced jointly by the then Health Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), and the then Education Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah). Neither of them are still in those ministerial posts, but I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), to her new position. I am sure she has
learned the ropes quickly and that she will continue to do so. We need consistency in our approach to mental health, however, and a much more joined-up approach—and not just between education and health, because there are many other aspects as well.

This subject is clearly important to young people, as is this report, so it should be important to the House and the Government. There are many useful lessons that we can learn.

I am also very frustrated, however. I have been in the House for almost 20 years. I have been shadow Minister for mental health, and I was shadow Minister for children and young people for some nine years, as well as Minister for children and young people. I currently chair the all-party group on children and the 1001 group, which is all about perinatal mental health. I have seen mental health Bills come and go, too, and have been involved in them. I saw the 2011 mental health strategy “No health without mental health”, which was a very important statement about the parity of esteem we need to achieve, although we still have not. In 2014, I saw “Closing the gap: priorities for essential change in mental health”, with specific commitments to improve mental healthcare for children and young people. I saw the rolling out of talking therapies and the improving access to psychological therapies programme. In March 2015, as has been mentioned, we had the mental health taskforce, which produced “Future in mind”. I have seen lots of good work in the Department of Health, in particular, such as that done by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire, and in February this year the mental health taskforce produced the “Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”. There has been a lot of talk about the importance of mental health and the necessity of achieving parity of esteem but, as the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) rightly said, there is still a very big disparity. And here we are again: we are still here talking about this, and record numbers of children and young people still have mental health problems.

Mr Kevan Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can have reports, taskforces and recommendations, but the real problem is that mental health is seen as a Department of Health issue, whereas what we actually need is a completely cross-Government approach so that mental health and wellbeing can be part of every single piece of policy development?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman is right; he pre-empts a couple of my comments. From my experience as a former Minister—and, I am sure, from his—the term “joined-up government” is a complete illusion. Joined-up government does not happen in practice. On becoming a Minister, one is cocooned in a Department, and instead of having a dialogue with colleagues in the Division Lobby or wherever, a huge wall suddenly comes between you. Trying to get interdepartmental action becomes really frustrating.

I remember setting up something called the youth action group, which consisted of Ministers from nine or 10 Departments and representatives of six major children’s charities. Those of us who co-chaired the group were the Prince’s Trust and Barnardo’s. The charities came to us with problems—often complex ones—affecting young people. One example related to housing benefit and accommodation for children in care. I cannot remember what the specific problem was, but it involved housing, which was the remit of the Department for Communities and Local Government, and benefits, which were the remit of the Department for Work and Pensions, as well as children in care, who came under the remit of the Department for Education. Normally there was a vicious circle that involved people being pushed from pillar to post. Alas, that committee has not met for the past 15 months or so, but our meetings used to consist of at least six actual Ministers—not just civil servants—from the relevant Departments as well as their officials. We would get Ministers together and ask them to go away and solve the problem.

Mental illness falls into that category, in that it is not simply the remit of the Department of Health or the Department for Education. There are many other implications and knock-on effects that can relate to the underlying cause of somebody’s mental illness problems. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the structure of government needs to be much better. We need taskforces that genuinely cut across Government Departments, but in my experience they will flourish only if they have the buy-in and direct engagement of Ministers at the top. One welcome initiative from the hon. Gentleman’s party was the appointment of a Cabinet-level Minister for mental health. I think that that appointment has slightly gone by the wayside now, but the principle behind it was absolutely right, in that it tried to join up all the relevant Departments at the top table.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): May I remind the hon. Gentleman that I am the shadow Cabinet Minister for mental health? That post has not gone away on this side of the House.

Tim Loughton: I am delighted to hear that; I did not in any way mean to underestimate the hon. Lady’s contribution. However, when the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) held the position, she sat at the Cabinet table. I hope that that is still the case, and I would very much like to see my own party replicate that position in government, because this is such an important cross-cutting issue.

Mental health remains the Cinderella service of the NHS. Indeed, the report describes child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—as the Cinderella service of a Cinderella service. The whole question of parity of esteem and funding is important. We can have arguments about how much the NHS budget has increased and kept up with inflation, but in every year in which the funding for mental health remains static or, worse still, declines as a portion of the overall NHS budget, we are sending out a clear message that it is a secondary priority within the NHS, and therein lies part of the problem.

I do not want to be too negative, however. We are making progress, as are other countries. For example, when you go in through the main entrance of a hospital in Copenhagen, in Denmark, you turn left if you have diabetes and you turn right if you have a mental illness. And nobody cares whether you turn left or right; there is no stigma attached to mental illness. People are treated on exactly the same basis, and that is how we need to treat mental illness here. Despite the best intentions of many Ministers, that is just not happening in practice at the sharp end where our young constituents are
trying to access the mental health support that they desperately need. It is certainly not happening in a uniform way across the whole country. As a result, at least one in four people in this country is still suffering from a mental health problem.

I have a particular interest in perinatal mental health, and I declare an interest in that I chair the all-party parliamentary group for conception to age two—the first 1,001 days. I am also chairman of the trustees of the Parent and Infant Partnership Projects charity. We now have seven parent infant partnerships—PIPs—across the country providing direct support and specialist perinatal psychological help to mums and dads with newborn babies. About half of all cases of perinatal depression and anxiety go undetected, and many of those that are detected fail to receive evidence-based forms of treatment. Alarming, at the time of the publication of the all-party group’s report, “Building Great Britons”, in February last year, just 3% of clinical commissioning groups in England had a strategy for commissioning perinatal mental health services. The upshot of all that, as the Maternal Mental Health Alliance has calculated, is a cost to the NHS of £8.1 billion for each one-year cohort of births in the United Kingdom. That is the equivalent of almost £10,000 for every single birth in this country, and it is a cost that the NHS can ill afford.

Why is this relevant to young people? Nearly three quarters of that cost relates to the adverse impacts on the child rather than the mother. Followers of attachment theory, which the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) mentioned, will appreciate the strong link between achieving a strong attachment between the child and the primary carer and good nurturing from the earliest age—that is, from conception to the age of two, as our report puts it—when the synapses in the brain are developing at a rate of some 40,000 a second and the child’s brain, character and development are being formed. The earliest experiences shape a baby’s brain development and have a lifelong impact on that person’s mental and emotional health.

Research shows a direct link between what happens to a mum during the perinatal period and her child in later life. If a teenager aged 15 or 16 is suffering from some form of depression, there is something like a 90% chance that his or her mum suffered from perinatal depression. The link is that clear, so it is absolutely a false economy not to help mum out at that early stage. And let us not forget dad, who also plays a crucial role. Getting it right with parents and children early on is crucial to the good mental health of children and young people. This is not rocket science—technically it is neuroscience—and we should be doing it better, sooner.

Certain other factors have been flagged up in the report. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) spoke about many of them, including the peer group pressure that our children and young people experience. In fact, I have no children any more. My youngest is now over the age of 18, but we went through the teenage years together and I have seen these things at first hand. No one can go out in the morning without the latest iPhone, without checking Facebook and without tweeting what they are having for breakfast and Instagramming a photograph of it. And that all happens just after they have got up. The pressure to succeed in school and the hothouse of exams and testing are not conducive to the best mental health, and young people need support to help them through the challenges. We never had those challenges in my day, which I guess was even earlier than that of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak. Social media is a huge influence on young people, and it was just not around in my day. I would hazard a guess that it was not around in your day either, Madam Deputy Speaker.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tim Loughton: I will of course give way before I say something indiscreet.

David Rutley: I am sure that my hon. Friend would never saying anything indiscreet. He always makes important observations in such debates. He and I were at school together, and if bullying or similar was going on, children left their problems behind when they left school for the day. Does he agree that the challenge today is that such problems go home with the child beyond the school gates and during the holidays? Does he agree that digital service providers should take further steps to provide apps and protections that will help children in those difficult circumstances?

Tim Loughton: I do agree. Believe it or not, my hon. Friend is older than me and was in the year above me at school. He has aged rather better than me, but then he has not been in the House quite as long as I have. He is right about the dynamics of the stresses and strains in those days. How children communicate has also changed. For example, one of my daughters once put in her request for supper by text message from her bedroom to my wife and me in the kitchen—supper’s off! In an age when communicating has never been easier with email, social media, mobile device, tablet or whatever, the irony is that face-to-face communication between human beings has never been more rare or remote. Therein lies part of the problem. Communication between children and parents does not happen as regularly, and the fault lies with the parents as much as the children. Some people cannot talk frankly about the real pressures, strains and stresses on our children and about grooming, sex matters or drugs. In my hon. Friend’s day and my day, we perhaps talked more to our parents or other family members.

I will now pick out a few points from the report—I know that other hon. Members want to speak. We have reached a point at which one in 10 school-age children will have some form of mental disorder, and the age at which that happens is getting younger. Some 340,000 five to 10-year-olds have a form of mental disorder. If it is not detected early and acted on, it just festers and gets worse. Too often, the only immediate response if someone gets access to a clinician is the chemical cosh of drugs, which is in many cases inappropriate for younger children. Talking therapy, for example, might be more appropriate, but we increasingly find that when people have to wait weeks or months for them a call has to be made between waiting longer or giving some form of antidepressant.

The report flags up the big issue of the transition from childhood to adulthood. Nothing changes physically or mentally when someone receives an 18th birthday
card from their Member of Parliament. The last thing that an 18-year-old needs if they are going through the stresses of mental health is to have a completely new process and system to deal with because they have suddenly become an adult even though their condition has not changed. There is a particular issue around children in care, who too often used to leave at the age of 16. Fortunately, we now have a new scheme, which I was proud to have piloted at the Department for Education, based on staying put, allowing for a longer lead-in time. Every child is different and different children will be ready to go into the big wide world at different ages. The report contains some good examples of best transition practice. Southampton general hospital has a 0 to 25 age range for its “Ready Steady Go” scheme, under which every person is treated differently—people have different “go” ages.

Turning to the report’s recommendation about GP training, it is right, certainly for younger children, that GPs will be the first port of call for clinical services. Training for GPs to deal with younger people’s mental health problems is not good. Young people may need a lot of confidence to go along to see a GP with a parent or whomever, and there must be a clear understanding of how to tease the best out of children, so we need better guidance. As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood mentioned earlier, young people should absolutely be in on the genesis of that guidance.

Another recommendation that we have heard a lot about relates to what happens in schools. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood quoted the National Association of Head Teachers briefing, which states: “When children do not meet CAMHS thresholds, schools often become responsible for children’s mental health.”

In too many cases, they are ill-equipped to do so. We are dealing with potentially one in 10—three in a class of 30—children suffering from some diagnosable mental health disorder, and the chief medical officer says that three quarters of them will receive no treatment at all. That will obviously have an impact on the child, but there will be an impact on the class as well and it is very much in the school’s interest to do something about that.

We need better teacher training so that they are able to identify the signs that point towards a mental illness. They also need better awareness of where to signpost children to get the treatment that they require. They should also be able to talk about things more generally in class. We can argue whether PSHE should be compulsory—I have some sympathy with that—and whether mental health should be a formal part of it, but it must be done in an environment in which young people will feel engaged. It should not be just another lesson, but a place where they feel free to talk openly, to absorb and to learn.

Helen Hayes: The point about the proposal that mental health education should become compulsory is simply that its presence on the curriculum is too important to be left to chance. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that it should be undertaken in a way that is engaging and effective at educating young people, but does he agree that whether it happens at all should not be left to chance?

Tim Loughton: The hon. Lady and I have the same objective, but I am always sceptical about a solution that means making something another compulsory part of the curriculum. Sex and relationship education is an interesting case in point. Some of the best SRE that I have seen has been from outside youth workers and others who can empathise with young people and talk to them in a way that they will appreciate, respect and learn from. Making it another subject taught by Mrs Miggins the geography teacher, who happens to have a free period on a Thursday afternoon and so can be in charge that term, can cause problems. More schools should automatically want to have well-informed mental health education in whatever form is appropriate to engage their children. It is in their children’s best interests. I do not think that my objective differs from the hon. Lady’s, but we can have a debate about how we can most effectively achieve it.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about the importance of having appropriate, properly trained, empathetic people—specialists—delivering mental health education to young people. He suggests that youth services could provide such education. The problem is that local authorities are cutting those services because they are non-statutory. Many schools that have been providing support and bringing in specialist experts to help young people and teachers in this curriculum area are also facing cuts. Headteachers are having to pare back services as they deal with reduced budgets.

Tim Loughton: I hear what the hon. Lady is saying and that is a subject for another debate. It is an issue on which I have campaigned for many years, and indeed I chaired a commission looking into the role of youth workers in schools. Some really good examples of best practice are available, often in academies, which have appreciated the value of youth workers, because they can empathise with young people better, and brought them into schools. That is missing in so many other places. I have been advocating giving other roles to youth workers, who, sadly, are no longer being employed, particularly in local authorities, because this is not a statutory requirement and therefore has fallen by the wayside. So I have a deal of sympathy with that view, but it is for another day and debate.

I wish briefly to deal with a couple more points, the first of which relates to the last one: the importance of resilience and character education in the well being agenda in schools. Recent Education Secretaries have begun to take that on board, and a lot of this subject lies within that area. Another issue to consider is how this is monitored, and another good recommendation in the report is that Ofsted should have a role in that. Ofsted now has a role in assessing behaviour in schools, but that should extend to how it copes with mental health problems among pupils—that should be on the checklist. We are really bad in this country at disseminating good practice, but I have seen many examples of it. I recall visiting a school in Stafford and sitting in on some of the sessions held by their full-time counsellor. The teachers had confidence in her, would refer to her children about whom they had some doubts, and the children would speak frankly to her. Such people can prevent a lot of problems from occurring later on in the schools that have them, but not enough schools do—again, there is a debate to be had about why that is.
We also have to address the issue of cyber-bullying and the role of social media. The report gives examples about websites that promote self-harm, which are a huge scourge. We need to be much more aggressive in tackling these sites, particularly where they relate to anorexia and self-harm. People are going to them to seek advice and find a solution because they have feelings about self-harm or problems with anorexia, but these bizarre websites are promoting those things. As the report suggests, we need some form of verification scheme and, as has been mentioned, a much more responsible and bigger role for our social media companies. They are huge companies employing many thousands of people, yet the numbers in their scrutiny and enforcement departments are woefully low. As Members of Parliament with Twitter accounts, most of us have blue ticks to show we are who we say we are. Can there not be some form of verification scheme, described in the report as a “kitemarking scheme”, so that young people, particularly those who are vulnerable and impressionable, have confidence that the sites they are accessing are there to give them support, not to encourage them to do harmful things to themselves? This applies to so many different areas, including in respect of radicalisation sites.

Body image has been mentioned, and Girlguiding, which regularly revisits the issue of body image and young girls’ perceptions, has recently produced a report on the subject. It is always so alarming and petrifying to see the number of young girls as young as 13 whose aspiration is to have plastic surgery. Despite the fact that their bodies are not even fully formed and that they are still growing up mentally, they are being conditioned to think that this is the ideal to which they must aspire. That is wrong, and these influences on our young people are at the root of so many of the weaknesses and vulnerabilities leading to mental illness and, in the most tragic cases, to suicide. In the old days, a note passed across a classroom with the words “Sealed with a loving kiss” might, at worst, end up on a playground floor. At the worst extremes, in the case of a form of sexting, the equivalent these days goes viral and ends up on social media in perpetuity, where it is open for millions of people to see. That is the difference between the note in our playground days and the casual, ill-advised text on social media these days.

Finally, the report makes recommendations about young people wanting to relate to people of their own age, rather than old men in suits, which I guess takes in quite a few of the hon. Members here today. [Interruption.] Okay, I was talking about myself and my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) said, the unique thing about the report is that it gives those of us more advanced in years an insight into pressures on young people today that were not there when we were younger and into the challenges for parents and schools in dealing with them. The core of the report is very important, because it deals with a lot of issues that also affect adult mental health services.

I wish to concentrate on two aspects of the report: how young people get access to mental health services; and the vital issue of prevention and being able to address not just mental health, but mental health well-being. As has been said, how people access these services is important. The report talks about mental health services to young people being: “The Cinderella of Cinderella services”.

Is this about money? Yes, it is, in some cases. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) eloquently mentioned that we can have all the aspirations in the world, but if the funding is not there locally to provide services, the services will not be there and people will not access them. I agree with the report that this is therefore about more cash, but it is also about how we structure our mental health services in this country.

Page 5 of the report sums it up well. It contains a diagram of a pyramid showing a list of organisations that commission mental health services—schools, local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and NHS England—and calls for a lead commissioner. I totally agree with that, but I would go one step further. When we talk about commissioning services, we need to talk
about the treatment pathways and how people get into those systems. Adults trying to navigate the mental health system find that it is like a maze. Not only do they have to find their way through it, but when they get into it they on many occasions find that, as my hon. Friend said, they can wait weeks, months or years to get help—this help is available in some areas but it should be provided more quickly. Early intervention, especially for young people, can prevent problems further down the line.

I sympathise with parents today, because how do they know who to go to if their child has mental health problems? What do they need to ask for? We assume that, somehow, people are well versed not only in issues around mental health, but in how to access help—that is also true for families of adult sufferers. We do need that pathway.

The report quite rightly highlights the issue around GPs and GP training, but, as I have said many times, therein lies the problem. I am not criticising GPs, because there are some very good ones who do help, who are sympathetic and who can access services. I support the recommendation in the report for more training for GPs, but we need a more open system—a system of self-referral—which does not necessarily mean going through a GP.

That brings us to the issue around commissioning and how we provide mental health services in this country. Mental health services very much follow the medical model, but I am not sure whether that needs to be the case. What we need in this country is an open system, which involves the community and voluntary sector. I am suggesting this not because it is a cheap option, but because it is perhaps a better way of providing mental health services. However, those voluntary groups need to be funded, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham said. It is no good saying that we are going to pass this work over to some very good voluntary sector organisations and expect them to do it without the funding. Therein lies the problem. I give credit to the former Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who was a great champion of parity of esteem and of concentrating on how to make the system better. As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), it is no good just looking at mental health in terms of the Department of Health, because the cuts that have taken place in local government are having a direct impact on the provision of mental health services—I am talking about the closure of youth services and voluntary sector organisations that provide mental health services locally. This is a false economy. If we are putting more money into health and taking it out from elsewhere in the system, we will create an ongoing problem.

We also need a fundamental review of CAMHS, as it is a complete failure. I am not for one minute criticising the dedicated individuals who work in that service, because I have met them and know that they work very hard. Given their workload and the way that they get their referrals, they are doing a fantastic job, but the system is broken. We cannot have this situation in which young people are waiting possibly six months for an assessment, and in which families and the individual young person are somehow expected to cope.

Mr Jones: That is the case, yes. I can say from personal experience that the longer a person leaves the problem undiagnosed or untreated, the worse it gets.

I wish to touch on this idea that parents are, somehow, geniuses and know how to deal with children with mental illness. They do not. I work with Kinship Carers in Durham, which is run by Lyn Boyd, a friend of mine. It deals with grandparents, uncles, aunts and others who often find themselves, later on in life, looking after young people and children. Many of them have quite horrifying stories to tell. They often end up with the children, because of abuse, because the parents cannot cope, or because they want to save them from the care system. I had a case earlier this year in which a six-year-old was self-harming. When I looked at his background and talked to his grandparents who were looking after him, I could understand why, but the issue is how does he access CAMHS. They were told that he had to wait six months. There we have a couple, who are not the biological parents, looking after a six-year-old. All they can say is, “What do we do?” The child is also disruptive at school. That leads to pressure on the school, which then seeks to exclude him. What happens to the child then? We are talking about not just the trauma, torment and heartache of a six-year-old self-harming, but the knock-on effect on the family and the school.

We do need a new system. It may be a community-based provision. I would certainly like to see open access services—they could be run by well-funded voluntary sector organisations or by the local authorities and councils—where people can go for help or even on occasion just information. Those grandparents, for example, did not have a clue what to do. What does a person do in that situation? The system is certainly failing those individuals. It should not be up to me as a Member of Parliament to contact a mental health trust to enable those people to gain access to services. That is where we are failing.

The problem is not just about ensuring that we have joined-up local services—I have already said that local authority budget cuts are having a direct impact on the working of such services—but the changes in the national health service and GP commissioning, which has made things worse for many voluntary organisations. Contracts are being let for a whole host of services, many of which are too large and too complex. The idea that local community groups can bid for such services does not work because those services are just too big, which means that those groups are being excluded from the money that is available. I am not for one minute saying that anyone who works in the voluntary community sector providing mental health services wants a free ride. Those groups are quite happy to be evaluated. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham mentioned a project in her constituency that secured lottery funding. That project will certainly have had to ensure that the outcomes were there and that it was accountable. There is no way that many of those small organisations, which in many cases would provide a cheaper and better option for delivering the service, can manage those contracts that are currently being let by the NHS.
The way in which the Government should look at this matter—it is perhaps very difficult in this age of austerity—is that if they deal with it properly, they could save taxpayers’ money. It would save not just the heartache of the individuals who are going through the system, but, if done properly, money as well. On page 9 of the report, the chief medical officer said:

“Early intervention services that provide intensive support for young people experiencing a first psychotic episode can help avoid substantial health and social care costs over 10 years perhaps £15 in costs can be avoided for every £1 invested.”

If the Government really want value for money, this is a way to do it. However, there is a problem, which is that, in this country it is said that we know the cost of everything, but the value of nothing. The investment now in young people will possibly not pay for itself for another 10 or 20 years, but when it does, the payback to society will be quite large, and not just in terms of our having a healthier and happier society.

Another area I would like to touch on, which is covered in the report, is prevention—through the work done in schools and by making sure that we mainstream wellbeing. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned the difficulties of Whitehall Government and the silos people are in. We have enough reports on some of these areas now, and we do not need any more; what we need to do now is to hardwire mental wellbeing into all public policy across Whitehall. Can it be done? Yes, it can. I was involved when the last Labour Government mainstreamed veterans policy. Bob Ainsworth, who was the Minister at the time, commissioned a report on veterans. He made sure that the issue was taken forward and that each Department, when it was coming up with public policy, took veterans into account. We need a similar approach to mental health and mental wellbeing. The only way to do that is to have a Cabinet Sub-Committee so that this is dealt with at Cabinet level and the main Departments make sure, when they are coming up with a policy, that they take into account mental health and mental wellbeing.

As I said, early investment saves money, but it also makes for a better society. Another issue where I totally agree with the report is supporting school counsellors. Counsellors could be something of a pressure valve in the system. If they are properly trained, and there is a proper network of them across schools, they could intervene early on and prevent some of these issues. The hon. Gentleman said he was reluctant to make it mandatory for schools to carry out this work, but, as the report says, we have national standards and curricula for physical education, so we should have them for mental health as well.

Again, it is a patchy picture. There is some good work going on in schools across the country, with teachers taking the initiative. In my constituency, Simon Westrip, a lecturer at Northumbria University, has done some work around mindfulness with local community groups, and he is now taking that into secondary schools. If we look at some of the feedback on and evaluation of mindfulness in schools, it is clear that this is not just about the effect on individuals; it actually raises standards in many cases. However, the approach to these issues is patchy, and unless they have dedicated time in the curriculum, or they are something governing bodies need to take into account, people will not do that. Done properly, such work will not only address the pressures that a lot of our young people face now, so that they are happier going through school, but it will save lives and, in some cases, save money in the long term. Is this rocket science? I am not sure it is. We in this country have to change our attitude to mental wellbeing. If we get it right in children, as the report highlights, the payback for this country and its economy in the long term will be tremendous.

Let me finish where I started, by thanking the British Youth Council for its work. I also thank it for giving us another opportunity today to talk about mental health on the Floor of the House.

2.13 pm

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I would like to start by commending the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing such an important debate and raising so many important issues. The quality of the debate has been incredibly high so far, and I am grateful for the opportunity to be able to make a short contribution.

I will start, as others have, by paying tribute to the Youth Parliament. I want to give a shout-out to our young Members of the Youth Parliament in East Sussex: Joshua Moreton, Orla Phipps and Reuben Hayward-Brown. These MYPs do a fantastic job, and I hope that, one day, at least a couple of them will be sitting on these Benches as grown-up MPs—Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you, for one, will agree that we could do with far more grown-up MPs in the House of Commons. The mentor of those three MYPs—and my mentor—Councillor Sylvia Tidy, has done a great job in supporting them, and she is a huge credit to East Sussex County Council.

I also pay tribute to the work of the Youth Select Committee, which has produced this important report. It is still shocking how mental health is treated as a second-class health issue, compared with physical illnesses.

This October, we recognise Breast Cancer Awareness Month by wearing pink ribbons. This month is also when some celebrate Halloween parties up and down the country. It remains a common occurrence for people to dress up as someone with a mental health illness because it is seen as scary to portray mental hospital patients next to flesh-eating zombies. In our culture, sufferers of mental illnesses are often supposed to be feared or ridiculed, and that must change. We have to challenge the stigma and attitude that are so present today; we must challenge those prejudices.

We are all often guilty of making assumptions that are just wrong—I am also guilty of that. As a new MP I received an early piece of casework. I heard about a young teenager who was struggling with an eating disorder, and he was reluctant to make it mandatory for schools to carry out this work, but, as the report says, we have national standards and curricula for physical education, so we should have them for mental health as well.

Let me finish where I started, by thanking the British Youth Council for its work. I also thank it for giving us another opportunity today to talk about mental health on the Floor of the House.
leading cause of death for men aged 20 to 44, but we have a lot of work to do on prevention, early diagnosis and early treatment.

Mental illness also has consequences. It has particular consequences for young people who are already vulnerable to grooming and exploitation, who become more vulnerable when they suffer from a mental health issue. I recently chaired an inquiry for Barnardo’s into harmful sexual behaviour between children, where the victims and survivors are children, and where the perpetrators are children as well. A lack of self-esteem, an eating disorder or depression can sometimes be a factor in children committing, or being victims of, sexual abuse. That makes effective early diagnosis and therapy even more important.

There is an issue about these children sometimes being seen as troublesome, but not recognised as vulnerable or struggling with mental illness. Here, the Government can do more, by sharing best practice across schools, councils and police services. The integration of education and health is key—something my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) has already touched on.

The role of the digital world is also important in terms of its impact on young people’s mental health—something my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) has spoken about. The internet can be a dangerous vehicle for grooming vulnerable young people, so I especially welcome the Youth Select Committee’s recommendation that the Department of Health should develop a trusted app, with NHS branding, that young people can use to access mental health services—a positive use of the digital world that stands in stark contrast to the negative use of it. The Government have done great work on the youth mental health hub website, but the hub has not quite made it into app form, so I would be grateful for an update from the Minister.

Though we less youthful MPs have many disagreements across the Floor of the House, there is one thing on which we can all agree: we would be nowhere without the energy, enthusiasm and youthful brains of our hard-working teams. I was touched to hear the story of one young parliamentary assistant, who lost his brother to suicide. This is Jed’s story. Jed woke up on his day off to find his mum in despair at a Facebook message posted by his brother. The message read, “I’m sorry”, with the location, “At the Needles”—a beautiful but treacherous location on the Isle of Wight. Jed’s brother was hard-working, reliable, genuine and caring. He had suffered a marriage breakdown, but he was back to his former self, with a fantastic new girlfriend by his side. But Daniel Dwight took his own life. Writing afterwards, Jed said:

“It seems such a shame to think that he felt that he had nothing to live for...I for one can promise that I shall do everything I can to ensure that the world I grow old in will learn to be fairer, more caring, with a greater willingness to understand others whilst providing all important support.”

Jed’s experience, like that of others, shows what is at stake. We need to tackle stigma. We also need early diagnosis, early support and good-quality therapy that is offered within a sensible timeframe. Waiting months for therapy, whether for depression, anxiety, a personality disorder or an eating disorder, often just because someone has not quite reached a trigger level of concern, does not help them. It hinders their recovery because time allows their suffering to get worse, and they come to believe that their case cannot possibly be important, because if it was then surely the therapy would be provided sooner. This means that when the therapy finally is available, it is even less likely that it will be successful.

One of the key lines in the Youth Select Committee’s report is this:

“Until young people’s mental health services receive funding proportionate to that of physical health, we do not believe parity of esteem can be achieved.”

For me, that squares the circle. The amount of funding we put into mental health support and therapy is linked to our attitude towards it, and our attitude towards it is linked to the amount of funding we put into it. One must lead to the other. We in this place can lead on the funding, ensuring timely and good-quality therapy and support for mental health.

I welcome all the steps the Government have taken so far to improve support for mental health, and youth mental health in particular. The investment of an extra £1.4 billion in children and young people’s mental health services over the course of this Parliament is especially welcome, although there is always more that we could invest, and I urge the Minister to do exactly that. When funding parity is achieved, and timely and appropriate support is available to everyone who needs it, the taboo that surrounds mental health can be crushed.

Finally, I pay tribute to Jed for allowing me to share his touching account of the painful and still vivid memories of the day his brother committed suicide. We both hope that sharing his story might help to prevent others from taking that most desperate route, and remind any young person struggling with their mental health who is listening today that they are valuable and valued.

2.22 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the Youth Select Committee for an excellent and comprehensive report, compiled by our young parliamentarians with the backing of experienced evidence. It is extremely thorough, and a credit to them. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this debate and the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for leading it.

I must begin by declaring a professional interest, having worked for 20 years as a clinical psychologist in mental health. I continue to maintain my skills and engagement in line with the professional requirements of my registration. Just after the election, I had the great privilege of contributing to the evidence taken by the Youth Select Committee during its inquiry into child and adolescent mental health services.

Mental health is an extremely wide field, ranging from major mental illnesses such as psychosis to depression and anxiety, trauma, and eating and adjustment disorders. Childhood developmental disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autistic spectrum disorder are often also included in the sphere of mental health. I would welcome future debates on those important conditions too, because I feel that we shall not have time to do them justice today.

As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on autism, I have a particular interest in this field. I commend the recent report by Ambitious about Autism, which, worryingly for us all, highlights the fact that 80% of
children with autism experience anxiety on every single day they attend school. For this crucial group, we must target our resources and make sure that early diagnosis and support are provided for the young child and for the whole family. More than half of mental ill health starts before the age of 14, and 75% before the age of 18. Early and effective intervention in and prevention of mental ill health during childhood are absolutely key in reducing morbidity. The quicker we intervene, the more effectively we intervene, and it is also more cost-effective for the NHS.

In 2014, the health improvement efficiency targets were adopted in Scotland and across the UK, meaning that patients should be seen, from referral to assessment, in 18 weeks, including in CAMHS services. The figure that I have researched suggests that in Scotland 84% of children and adolescents are now treated within this time, and we have set a benchmark of 90%. We have therefore come a long way in this regard, but we still have further to travel. There are now significantly increased referral rates. Although that may mean increased numbers of sufferers, it may also mean that stigma is reducing and people feel more able to present, so it is a mixed picture. However, mental health services in Scotland, and across the UK, are not the finished article. We should continually strive towards improvement, and that should always be guided by patient need and by research underpinning the most effective clinical practice.

As we have heard, mental health problems in childhood are extremely serious. At worst, they can destroy educational potential, or at least impede it, and impede relations with peers and within the family. They can also lead to suicide and self-harm. Difficulties must be assessed and recognised at an early stage. In Scotland, widespread staff training has been undertaken to try to ensure that we can pick up on mental health issues within this age group. We have rolled out cognitive behavioural therapy, family therapy, interpersonal therapy and specialist interventions such as those for eating disorders, with a focus on seeing patients as close to home as possible. We must make continual progress on this.

There needs to be additional resourcing for tier 4 services for in-patients. For children and adolescents, in-patient treatment should be a last resort, because it takes children away from the family home and pathologises their difficulties. Best practice highlights intensive outreach approaches that enable children to be seen at home and treated in their natural environment, so maximising key family and peer supports. Children who need in-patient services may suffer psychosis, intractable eating disorders, severe obsessive compulsive disorders, and a variety of neurological conditions. There are currently 48 beds available in Scotland, and £8 million has been pledged to build a new unit in Dundee for children and adolescents with mental health problems. We must ensure that service provision meets needs. My clinical experience suggests a lack of available tier 4 beds in forensic and learning disability CAMHS, and that should also be addressed.

We need better communication channels between departments when children’s care is transferred between professionals, and importantly, as has been described, at key stages of development such as moving from adolescence to adult services. There requires to be a component of the training programme for general practitioners in primary care that identifies children’s mental health issues. I would include symptoms of autistic spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder within that training. We need to shorten the time from presentation to referral, and picking up symptoms timeously assists greatly with this. As with diet and exercise, good mental health and well-being has to be normalised. These are all fundamental coping skills that impact on everyday aspects of our functioning and deserve to be slanted more towards health and well-being than diagnosis.

Access to mental health specialists in schools is merited, as well as mental health awareness and training, particularly training for staff in schools so that if someone is experiencing a mental health problem the staff can pick it up at a very early stage and help them to access services. Specialist training for teachers would be a positive step forward. Education for children is also crucial so that they can identify when they are struggling, identify what makes for good mental wellbeing and seek help when needed, and so that they can identify whether a peer is struggling. Young people like to be, and should be, fully involved in their care.

We need to modernise our approach to mental health services for children and adolescents. We must embrace IT and social media methods of communicating with young people, because in the modern world, it is often how they communicate. In previous debates I have mentioned a project in Scotland called SafeSpot, which is an application, website and school intervention to promote positive coping skills, safety planning and access to information about mental health services for young people. That is a good step forward. I am aware that recommendations for online standardised and approved resources would be a key step.

As has been mentioned, we must address bullying, particularly online bullying, which appears to be on the increase and which badly affects children’s lives. In fact, we must address bullying everywhere. Only this summer, when I was discussing mental health, I was informed by an MP who was a fellow member of a delegation that MPs have a high suicide rate—something that I was unaware of. We must lead by example. We must ensure that mental health and wellbeing are addressed in all aspects of life, and we must provide our own model.

There remains a lack of empirical data regarding effective interventions for young people with co-morbidity issues, by which I mean mental health difficulties coupled with learning difficulties or substance use. That has to be built on through research and treatment programmes. I would also like to touch on services for looked-after and accommodated children—particularly those who have violence risk needs or self-harm needs—who are some of the most severely disadvantaged in terms of services and the magnitude of difficulties that they present with. Further service provision for specialist groups and underpinning research are crucial, and I am extremely pleased that the First Minister will be pledging to support those groups.

Given that the weight of evidence for child and adolescent mental health services is in favour of psychological rather than pharmacological interventions for the majority of presentations, clear structures must be in place to support the delivery of effective evidence-based psychological therapies for children and adolescents.
The number of child and adolescent mental health services psychology posts have doubled in Scotland, and I welcome that, but we need to continue and strengthen that progress. Uptake of such services has always tended to be poorer among people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and in such cases an assertive outreach approach may be required to ensure that some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families do not slip through the net.

To summarise, mental health services require parity of esteem and therefore considerable funding. I believe that this goes beyond party politics. It is crucial that we tackle it meaningfully in a cross-party manner, sharing best practice across the whole United Kingdom. We need real progress to reach children and adolescents and to help all our children achieve their full potential.

2.33 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I hope I have got that correct.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It is pronounced “Stray-ven and Lez-ma-hay-go”.

Huw Merriman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am suitably corrected and admonished at the same time. I am glad that you did not ask me to repeat that after you.

I particularly applaud the point that has been made about making this a cross-party matter on which we can all work together. As the young people have shown us in their fantastic report, working together will help to ensure that all voices are heard and recognised.

I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes)—her constituency is much easier for me to pronounce—for sponsoring the debate. I apologise for going back and forth from the Chamber, and perhaps I may explain to those who are watching why there are so few MPs on the Benches. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said that it would be good to hold such debates during Government time, when Members may not be in their constituencies. Of course, Thursday afternoon is also a time when Bill Committees sit, so Government and Opposition Members are required to attend those Committees. I hasten to add that I should also be in a Bill Committee, but I was so determined to speak on this matter that I have come to the Chamber. It is probably for that reason that I will always be asking Ministers for more from the Back Benches, rather than being on the Front Bench and able to deliver those things myself.

I commend the 2015 Youth Select Committee report, and I particularly applaud the 90,000 young people—many more took part in the vote—who voted that mental health services for young people should be the priority concern. They are absolutely right to focus on this subject, and I submit that they are in the best position to give their opinion on it.

I similarly decided that the subject would be a chief priority for me when I was elected as an MP in East Sussex 18 months ago. The severity of this issue, particularly among young people, became all too apparent to me. I found—I still do—the stories of carefree, confident and happy lives being shut down as young people enter a dark world of fear, anxiety and isolation to be incredibly upsetting.

As a result of my concern, I chose this issue as the topic of my question when my name was first pulled out of the hat for Prime Minister’s questions. I told the then Prime Minister that I had spent an afternoon in the small town of Battle in my constituency visiting three families, each of whom had a child who had not been given the early-stage intervention that they expected from the child and adolescent mental health services. I asked the Prime Minister for more focus on early-stage treatment so that young people’s conditions do not become more acute.

Providing such services is not only our civic duty, but an economic and social imperative. When my constituents ask me why the roads in East Sussex are in a state, I explain that I recently secured £250,000 from our county team to fund just one year of acute mental health treatment for one constituent. Fixing people has to come before fixing holes in the tarmac. The phenomenon may not have existed so openly when many of my constituents were younger, but it is now a huge financial concern to my county council colleagues.

I firmly believe that too much pressure is being loaded on to people too young. Social media and the internet, as pioneering as they are, are a curse on wellbeing, and internet service providers must be forced to do more. Every young person should have the right to have their web history expunged. Cyber-bullying is at last being recognised as a crime, but every school must ensure that its pupils are aware of good internet practice and the sanctions for abuse. We also need to be aware that young people and children are accessing graphic images and media on the internet that they cannot understand, process or cope with.

In the report’s consideration of education, I absolutely commend the recommendation “that the Government develop and introduce statutory levels of attainment for mental health education...Schools should have autonomy to deliver mental health education flexibly but must be able to demonstrate how pupils reach the attainment levels.”

May I suggest that in so doing the Government should ensure that the curriculum combines a consideration of social media and the internet with wellbeing training?

We also need training for our GPs. The situation is summed up perfectly by the experience of a young person that is detailed in paragraph 32 of the excellent report. It is essential that the GP does not diagnose a mental health condition, but merely refers the young person to a specialist. I know that mental health specialists find it frustrating if GPs diagnose a mental health condition when the specialist does not regard it as such. Once that badge is given to someone, it is difficult to remove it. Equally, brilliant local GPs, such as those in Battle who have helped my constituents in their surgeries, have championed young people and become their advocate. They are incredibly frustrated by the delay in early intervention in mental health services. I work closely with my local CAMHS team, and I have the highest regard for the many excellent specialists who do their best. However, I am worried that constituents face lengthy waiting times and that some have been passed from pillar to post when receiving treatment.
Building up trust is a key ingredient of successful diagnosis and treatment. I hear stories about young people finding the courage and trust to open up about their condition, only to find a new practitioner at the subsequent session. It disappoints me that the young person can then regress because of that change of personnel. I would like a commitment to giving treatment on a fixed one-to-one basis. If we can do that for maternity provision, surely we can do it for mental health treatment.

When I attended the launch of the mental health taskforce, I was buoyed by the commitment of the then Minister and the chief executive of NHS England to implement the excellent “Five Year Forward View”. I was cheered by the commitment to funds to ensure that our acute hospitals have adequate mental health expertise on A&E wards to deal with those who are hospitalised as a result of mental health issues, or who have such a condition in addition to a physical illness.

My concern was driven by the experience of a family in my constituency following a suicide attempt. The NHS staff did not have the ability to deal with the mental health condition, and my constituent, a young man in his teens, was forced to wait until CAMHS staff could make their way over from another town miles away. I understand the need for specialist treatment, but it strikes me that there is a need for a culture change across the entire NHS, and that all staff should be trained to understand mental health and provide a basic level of treatment. Specialisation in health is important, but if the NHS becomes over-specialised, it can lead to a lack of general involvement in such care for patients.

I welcome the news that the Government will fund 24/7 mental health provision in our hospitals, but I was alarmed at the suggestion by the chief executive of my local trust that the funding may not stretch far enough. I also want to ensure that that specific coverage will not mean that other NHS staff with the necessary technical understanding and empathy will feel that they are not empowered to assist those many hospital patients who need help with their mental healthcare, in addition to their physical wellbeing.

Ultimately, getting early-stage intervention right is a key part of achieving a proper diagnosis for people with a mental health condition. We should not misdiagnose young people who are suffering growing pains and need the coaching and guidance of family and friends to overcome the problems of adolescence. However, I have met too many young children who face a difficult future because their mental health condition was not treated at an early stage. Funding mental health treatment is a most important investment, not only for people’s welfare and wellbeing, but to enable these amazing young people to fulfil their hopes and dreams in their careers, and to make something of themselves and their country.

I applaud the amazing work of all of those in the British Youth Council, many of whom live in my county of East Sussex, who have done so much to produce this excellent report. Those young people are leading the charge to ensure that the nation supports all those who are affected by this terrible condition. We owe it to them, and to all young people, to deliver a better mental health service, and many of the report’s recommendations will do just that.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on securing this debate. My hon. Friend is having quite a week: she has pressed the Prime Minister about the serious issue of historical child sexual exploitation in her constituency; she is here today; and tomorrow she will help lead the charge on the Homelessness Reduction Bill. I am delighted that she has found time to lead this afternoon’s debate.

As one of the elected honorary presidents of the British Youth Council, I am particularly delighted that this debate arises from the Youth Select Committee’s report, “Young People’s Mental Health”. I hope that the fact that Members of Parliament have taken the initiative to make sure that we are debating it in the House of Commons reassures the UK Youth Parliament, youth councils and young people generally that their voice is being heard. Our challenge now is to make sure that their voice is listened to by Government.

It is also worth saying that much of the profile that the UK Youth Parliament enjoys in the Houses of Parliament, particularly the annual sitting, which will next take place in this Chamber on 11 November, arises from the personal support of Mr Speaker. I know that I speak on behalf of so many people involved in BYC and the UK Youth Parliament in thanking him for his consistent championing of young people’s voice in democracy.

My interest in young people’s mental health and the reason I am here partly stems from my time as deputy leader and cabinet member for health and wellbeing in the London Borough of Redbridge. However, the main reason I have chosen to be here instead of in my constituency on a Thursday afternoon is my experience, both as a councillor and as a Member of Parliament, of listening directly to young people talk about their concerns and issues, and those of their friends and peers, with mental ill health. Redbridge has a fantastic youth council, which, like the national UK Youth Parliament, has prioritised work on mental health. I will come on to talk about that.

While sitting in Redbridge Council chamber listening to young people from across our borough, I was struck by the way in which they talked in such an open, candid and courageous way about their own struggles with mental ill health and what they have seen in their classrooms and communities. Although much of what they described was harrowing and of concern from a public policy point of view, it is hugely encouraging that this generation of young people seem to be far more at ease with discussing mental health and have normalised discussing it in such a way that it is similar to how they discuss physical ailments. That gives us hope for the future when it comes to changing the culture surrounding mental health, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) has mentioned.

Recently I chaired a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs about mental health, and it was hugely encouraging to see young people from across the country pack one of the largest Committee Rooms of the House of Commons. The key...
message that came across was the failure of public services and health services to address concerns that many of those young people had experienced personally. We know from so much of the research, particularly the excellent briefings we have had from charities such as YoungMinds ahead of this debate, that there are significant and well-known problems nationally with regard to mental ill health affecting children and young people. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said at the start of the debate, one in 10 children and young people has a diagnosable mental health condition. That is the equivalent of three children in every classroom. We also know that a great many more suffer periods of anxiety, emotional distress and ill health because of the growing pressures of childhood. That should give us all pause for thought and cause for concern.

Three quarters of young people with mental ill health may not get access to the treatment that they need. I am particularly concerned about the statistic that my hon. Friend shared showing that CAMHS is turning away nearly a quarter of children referred for treatment by parents, teachers and GPs. Those children have been referred by people who, to be frank, have expertise, and to turn such a high proportion of them away is wholly unacceptable.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful contribution, as have many others. This summer, Healthwatch Nottingham published the results of its survey of young people about their experience of seeking help and treatment. It found that 26% of young people had not sought any help or treatment at all, despite feeling that they suffered from a mental health problem. That was twice as likely among black and minority ethnic young people. Does he agree that we need to do more to raise awareness of the help that is available, which needs to take account of the needs of all young people?

Wes Streeting: I agree strongly. That leads me neatly on to a point I wanted to raise about the provision for young people. It is not just young people generally who are having trouble accessing mental health services. The Government and the health services need to look carefully at the profile of the young people affected. During my time as head of education at Stonewall, we published “The School Report”, a piece of research undertaken at the profile of the young people affected. During my time as head of education at Stonewall, we published “The School Report”, a piece of research undertaken by the all-party group—is that it is not just GPs and headteachers who recognise that young people are being failed and turned away; young people themselves recognise that. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be a young person who is suffering from anxiety, depression or another form of mental ill health, who knows they have a problem, seeks help and is left to feel ignored, dismissed and unsupported. I have mentioned the proportion of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people who are affected, and it is even higher for trans young people.

I represent a constituency that is highly diverse ethnically and religiously. It worries me that Asian communities seem to be far less likely to seek access to mental health services. There is a job to do there to tackle stigma and to make the services more accessible. People from African-Caribbean communities face inequality. The failures of public policy on African-Caribbean people should shame our country. It is a further indictment that the majority of African-Caribbean people who come into contact with the mental health system seem to do so through the criminal justice system. That is a terrible state of affairs. Therefore, the issue of access and support is crucial if we are to deal with the problem.

This is partly about funding. We have had a good-natured debate this afternoon, so I do not say this to be objectionable or churlish, but on Wednesday, three or four Members on both sides of the House raised the issue of mental health with the Prime Minister, and her response was, to put it politely, inadequate. Beyond general statements about parity of esteem, she seemed unable to point to any meaningful actions her Government were taking on the issue of mental health.

I am sure that the Minister has come better briefed this afternoon, but the Prime Minister also needs to make this a priority. Much of this is about joined-up government—this will be a theme of mine this afternoon—and that requires leadership from the centre. It is not good enough for the Prime Minister to be sure-footed, although wrong-headed, when it comes to home affairs, but completely blinkered on issues such as mental ill health.

It really does. One of the things that concerns me most about young people’s poor experience of mental health services—this was reflected at the discussion by the all-party group—is that it is not just GPs and headteachers who recognise that young people are being failed and turned away; young people themselves recognise that. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be a young person who is suffering from anxiety, depression or another form of mental ill health, who knows they have a problem, seeks help and is left to feel ignored, dismissed and unsupported. I have mentioned the proportion of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people who are affected, and it is even higher for trans young people.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend will be interested to know that the same report says that young people who identified as homosexual or bisexual were most likely to have experienced a mental health issue in the past or currently, and that their experiences when seeking the treatment and support were more likely to be negative. Does that not give more credence to what he is saying about the need to deal with their specific needs?
as an elected member of the council—that local government cuts are biting. The picture is compounded by the state of our local health economy. Both our NHS trusts are in special measures, although I hope one of them will be leaving special measures sooner rather than later. I hope that they will both leave, but I suspect one is nearer to the end of that journey than the other. Primary care is creaking, it is fair to say that our clinical commissioning group is struggling, and our community health trust has a rating that requires improvement. The challenge for Redbridge is not simply the funding reductions that affect my borough, but the fact that the funding formula does not lead to a settlement for Redbridge—for the local authority and for the wider health economy—that genuinely reflects the needs of our population. I urge the Minister to look carefully at how Redbridge has been disadvantaged through the funding formula, particularly in public health funding, and at what can be done.

**Huw Merriman:** I do not wish to get into a skirmish on funding, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as in my area of East Sussex, the way to find the efficiency savings that the NHS is required to make, in addition to the £10 billion that this Government have put in, is to have a “better together” organisation so that hospitals and all the other healthcare providers—at county level and so on—can talk together? That would not only save money, but mean that everyone is joined up, which is the way forward on such issues, as he has rightly said.

**Wes Streeting:** I very much welcome the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. He has anticipated some of my closing remarks about looking to the future. I will have some positive words to say about the direction of Government policy in that respect.

This issue is not simply about funding, but about leadership and accountability. I must say that the damning CQC report on the Brookside unit in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) has more than raised eyebrows. Some of its judgments about this facility for children’s mental health provision were:

“The ward environments were not safe, clean or suited to the care of children and young people... The wards were not adequately staffed... There was a high usage of restraint and rapid tranquillisation at the unit... The ethos of the unit was containment rather than therapy... Care plans reviewed were not recovery orientated and more behaviour orientated... During the inspection we saw staff refuse to facilitate the requests of young people... Young people stated the food was of poor quality and cultural and religious foods were not available”—

and those who know the London Borough of Redbridge will know how totally inappropriate that is. My question for the North East London NHS Foundation Trust is very simple: why did it take a damning inspection by the Care Quality Commission for sufficient action to be taken? From what I can see and from my conversations with colleagues in the local authority, there is clearly a road to improvement. It should not take inspectors coming in to highlight the fact that we have failed some of our most vulnerable young people in such a gross and unforgivable way.

Among my worst experiences as a constituency MP—these are universally my worst experiences—are in my surgeries on Friday afternoons when I see absolutely awful cases of people who have been very badly failed by public services. One case I will never forget was that of Simon Harris, a young man—he was 30 years old—who was failed by Goodmayes hospital because he was insufficiently cared for. While under the care of the NHS, he was allowed to take his own life, although he was in the very place that his family thought would keep him safe. I never again want to have a conversation with a constituent like the one I had with his incredibly stoic and courageous grandmother, Brenda. That is the consequence of mental health failure: it is simply the difference between life and death. I do not think that young people like Simon should ever be failed in such a way by the services that are there to keep them safe and well.

This subject is not just about public service provision, but about celebrating the work done by the voluntary sector. In the past year, I have visited a number of programmes in my constituency. I have visited Audacious Veg, a social enterprise that involves helping people suffering from mental ill health to set up their own social enterprise, growing and selling vegetables. This wonderful project runs in conjunction with the Forest Farm Peace Garden, another environmental and sustainability project, which gets people with mental ill health outside, interacting with others and active.

I cannot commend strongly enough to the Minister the importance of social prescribing. Here, public policy has a role to play. When Redbridge Youth Council, for example, commissioned the Redbridge Drama Centre to design and deliver a play on mental health to reach young people, 5,000 young people and counting across the London Borough of Redbridge were reached by that fantastic way of engaging young people in conversations about mental health.

Music can play a powerful role in therapy, as can sport. One of the most impressive projects I have visited in the past 12 months was Coping With Football, sponsored by the London Playing Fields Foundation and run in conjunction with the North East London Foundation Trust. Again, that project got young people outside, interacting and developing their skills and, most importantly, their self-esteem.

That brings me on to looking to the future, and I will press the Minister to take policy in a few directions. I have asked her to look at Redbridge’s funding formula, on public health in particular, and I hope she will undertake to do so. I also ask her to work with her colleagues in Government to think about funding nationally. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle talked about the value of joining up services locally, in particular local government and the NHS. I commend the approach being taken by the Government through the introduction of the accountable care organisations. In the pilot with Redbridge, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and the London Borough of Havering, that approach is bringing the local authority together with stakeholders from across the local health economy to join up public service provision. That will bear fruit.

We also need joined-up Government nationally, however. Other Members have made a compelling case for the Minister to fight her corner in public health, because investment in public health and early intervention is a money saver—and not just across Government; within her
own Department we can reduce A&E admissions and the pressure on urgent and primary care if we get public health funding right.

The Minister also needs to make the case, along with the Secretary of State, across Government. For example, it is no good the Treasury making cuts to local government if that leads to cuts in public health funding and undermines the work of the Department of Health. It is no use cutting mental health provision if that leads to a spike in crime, an increase in the prison population and greater demand on the criminal justice system.

In education, it is no good asking Ofsted to inspect schools on mental health provision if school referrals to CAMHS are going unheard. We need to make sure the services are there to support schools. We also cannot continue with the postcode lottery on sex and relationships education and personal, social and health education. I hope we can revisit the issue of compulsory SRE and PSHE.

Finally, and most importantly—it is the reason we are here this afternoon—I urge the Minister and her colleagues in Government to listen to young people. That she is here this afternoon shows the importance the Government place on this report and the views of young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) talked about the importance of co-production and involving young people in the design of public services, and that is absolutely critical. But the Youth Select Committee has made a whole series of other recommendations that deserve not just the serious attention of this House but the response of Government. If that happens, we will get better public policy, and, I hope, we will have a generation of young people whose voices have not just been heard but, most importantly, listened to.

3.3 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate and the Backbench Business Committee on allowing it.

I have a new member of staff in Westminster, who started with me only last week, Matthew van Rooyen. He is 18 going on 28. He is cool, calm and collected; I he lost his hair gel. By an amazing coincidence he is from the village in south Wales where I was born, Kenfig Hill; more amazing still, I used to do judo with his mother when I was a child. As I have said before, Wales is one big family, and that has its advantages and its disadvantages, so in many ways this is Matthew’s maiden speech.

Matthew is a Member of the Youth Parliament and has been elected by fellow Welsh youth parliamentarians to represent Wales at the sitting of the Youth Parliament in this Chamber on 11 November. The calibre of the debate is always exceptionally high; at times, higher than some of our debates—Matthew is obviously driving the point home here—and I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to attend to show their support for the UK Youth Parliament.

By way of background, each year the UK Youth Parliament holds a UK-wide ballot called “Make Your Mark” that allows for young people to vote “on an issue that is most important to them. The five campaigns with the most votes are then debated by members of the Youth Parliament at their annual sitting in this Chamber. Matthew has asked that I thank the House for allowing this opportunity year after year. In 2014, more than 90,000 votes were cast specifically to campaign for the improvement of mental health services. Following the debate, the Youth Parliament voted on mental health services as its priority campaign. The Youth Select Committee subsequently launched an inquiry into mental health provision, publishing its report in November 2015. Today, this report comes before the House for debate.

What the report indicates, quite simply, is that there is a lack of full and proper support for young people with mental health issues. Nearly 850,000 people aged between five and 16 suffer from a mental health issue. There is clearly a real need for good quality, mental health provision. The fact that over 90,000 young people voted for this as their priority campaign is indicative that the standard of service provided falls far short of the standard of service that can be expected.

It is not even the case that the service provided is good, but young people expect excellent and they deserve excellent. It is the case that the service is simply substandard. In written evidence to members of the Youth Select Committee, one young person explained their frustration:

“After a lot of deliberation, I decided to take myself to my GP in search of support...What you must remember is the amount of courage it takes to open up about your mental health issues. It is extremely difficult for someone...who's totally confused about what's going on in their life, to openly talk about having suicidal feelings in a five-minute appointment to someone who feels like a complete stranger. This landed me in a vicious cycle. I ended up returning to different GPs, in a desperate cry for help, but time and time again I was refused any help. It took seven visits before I eventually got the support I needed. Seven times I had to retell that same story. Seven times I was faced with not being ‘sick enough’ and seven times I had to walk out of that same GP surgery feeling absolutely crushed and demoralised.”

That young person is only 14 years of age.

The stories from young people, up and down the country, of substandard interactions with their GPs and medical practitioners are many. With countless witness testimonies, the report highlights the many areas where improvements need to be made with regard to the medical profession and health services. I would welcome an update from the Minister.

There is not one single area that needs improvement. We need to improve the overall state of services for those suffering from mental health issues. We must also look at the education system and what role this has to play in improving young people’s mental health. The report, very thoroughly, covers the education curriculum. It suggests improvements to personal, social, health and economic education, which would provide the most effective environment for mental health education. I broadly endorse those.

A key issue that has been raised time and again by the Youth Parliament is the need for a curriculum for life—to meet the needs of young people by having a national curriculum that sets them up to succeed and not fail. This issue is so fundamental to young people that it received the most votes in the “Make Your Mark” ballot this year. In the local authority area of Neath Port Talbot, in which my constituency of Neath lies, around 2,300 young people took part in this year’s...
ballot. I look forward to working with the Neath Port Talbot Member of the Youth Parliament further over the coming year.

To return to the report, the findings of the Youth Select Committee make clear the need for an all-encompassing approach to improving mental health and wellbeing. Although the Department for Education has introduced character-building and resilience programmes, the report notes that this is not the best method of improving the wellbeing of young people and instead proposes further training for teachers and academic staff. The report specifically mentions that teachers said in evidence that they feel they “need more regular training on how we promote positive mental health.”

The Youth Select Committee recommends that, as part of the core content of initial teacher training, there should be mandatory training for teachers on young people’s mental health, with the training focused on how to respond to a young person who asks about mental health, how to spot problems and where to refer young people. The committee goes on to recommend the inclusion of a trained counsellor in all schools and agrees that schools should make counselling services available to all secondary school pupils. These are recommendations that I am sure every Member of the House will agree with.

Today’s debate has highlighted the vital work done by the UK Youth Parliament, the British Youth Council and the Youth Select Committee, all of whom I commend in assisting young people to have their voices heard. In recent times, there have been multiple reports and initiatives to improve mental health services for young people, aiming to reach parity of esteem, but until equal funding is achieved for physical health and mental health provision for young people, with funding for young people’s care at least equal to funding for adult’s care, the campaign will go on. Young people are our future. It is our duty to ensure their success and wellbeing. My thanks to Matthew—great speech, Matthew, and it is a pleasure to work with you.

3.12 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I apologise to the House for missing the start of the debate—it started a little earlier than I anticipated and I was sitting on a bus in Millbank—and thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and I congratulate her on leading this debate and the Backbench Business Committee on delivering it.

I am speaking towards the end of the debate, so I will try not to repeat the many excellent contributions that hon. Members have already made. Like so many other Members, I have had parents contacting me in great distress at the lack of adequate acute services when their children are in crisis. I had one parent who was worried about her daughter having to spend yet another weekend—this was not the first period of crisis she had had—in the children’s ward of the local hospital, as no specialist beds were available. The children’s ward is not a safe place for a young person in a mental health crisis, nor is it fair on the staff or children in the ward to have to support her either. She needed to be in a specialist bed, but in London there are too few tier 4 beds for young people.

I had another distressing experience, where a young man needed to go to hospital urgently, but because of a disconnect between the police, the ambulance services and the other services, it took two attempts on the same day to draw him from his house and get him to the safe place he needed to be in, leading to added trauma and distress and worsening his already critical health situation. To be fair, we are seeing some improvements locally, and we are promised additional tier 4 beds and better joined-up thinking between services, but I have to say that this is a small increase from a very low bar.

An additional problem is the break in consistent service when a child in crisis suffers further as they hit their 18th birthday. They lose one set of services and the adult services may or may not pick up at the same place, which does not make it easy for the child, the family and those trying to support her.

I pay credit to those working in the public and voluntary sector who support and heal these young people, but whose job is being made difficult because of the funding situation and lack of adequate joined-up thinking. In common with all Members here today, I want to thank the Youth Select Committee, the British Youth Council and the many Members of the Youth Parliament across the country for their work.

Earlier this year, I met Hounslow’s MYP, Tafumi Omisore, who told me about the history of this debate and how young people across the country had voted mental health as the top agenda issue for discussion among MYPs and the top issue that they wanted to bring to our attention. Tafumi told me:

“The future of tomorrow cannot possibly get to a stage where young people can rise to their full potential when they are being failed by this current generation”,

by which I think she means us. She continued by saying that they “lack the support they need for Mental Health. Every time we say we need more support, Mental Health services simply get cut.”

National campaigns for the Youth Parliament come along only once a year, so we have to treat young people’s demands seriously. Tafumi will be holding sessions in her school to promote more education on this subject—and all credit to her.

Earlier in July this year, I met a group of primary and secondary school heads, and I expected them to raise with me the issues of funding, recruitment and retention and testing, which they did. What I had not expected was that they raised their concerns about children’s mental health and the state of the services available to them as being equally important. They were concerned about the increasing incidence of mental health problems, self-harming, disruptive behaviour and so forth. These headteachers had feelings of inadequacy when it came to supporting those children. They felt that they could not get them through a good-quality education and make them ready for the world of work or higher education unless they could give those young people better mental health support.

These headteachers said that the capacity of CAMHS was overstretched and that there were long waiting lists. They had real concerns about inadequate early intervention.
They pointed out that more children were vulnerable for many and varied reasons, including mistreatment and abuse at home, and that more families were living in chaotic circumstances. They noted that more families were living in uncertain, insecure and poor-quality housing, which was exacerbated by austerity, particularly in respect of benefits and tax credits. Most parents and families were working, but they had suffered as a result of the changes to the benefit and tax credit system. Increasing numbers of families could not find enough money to pay the rent and put food on the table. This stress impacts on children—it could not fail to impact on them. The head of Kingsley Academy, who has been at the school only a year, told me that during her tenure, three of her children have been sectioned. Some of her children were self-harming and not enough support was available. The social work team could not cope either.

Some solutions were identified. Most of our schools either commission the Hounslow youth counselling service to deliver counselling or employ in-house counsellors. Strand on the Green runs a programme called “theraplay”, which combines therapy and art for children. It is very successful, but there is no funding left to allow it to continue indefinitely. The school heads concluded that not enough support was being provided.

An excellent youth counselling service serves the borough of Hounslow, and has done so for many years. Its counsellors strongly believe that Government cuts have led to the increased need for counselling. Less money means higher criteria for early entry to tier 1 services, and—as other Members have pointed out today—when tier 1 services pull out, young people enter the system when they are in crisis and need tier 3 and 4 services, which are extremely expensive. The Hounslow youth counselling service, like many others, is a tier 1 service, and is there to provide initial counselling and support. It is not a therapeutic service; it cannot be, and it is not funded to be. It does not have the necessary professional advisers. However, it is often the only option for young people, because higher-level services such as CAMHS will not see them for many weeks, and often for many months.

The Hounslow counselling service says that skilled and experienced staff are being replaced by others who are less skilled and experienced, which has made it difficult to maintain important standards in certain departments. It also says that there is no sign that the increase in the number of young people requiring counselling is slowing down, and that further cuts could worsen the situation. It is a voluntary service organisation, funded mainly by local government and the NHS, which are cutting support for the voluntary sector as their own funding is cut. It says that it is likely to see at least 3,000 young people per year and that the number is growing, but it is highly unlikely that it will be able to grow as well in order to meet that pressure. Its waiting lists will lengthen, and young people who are referred by schools or parents, or who refer themselves, will have to wait even longer for counselling.

Our experience in our borough reflects the experiences that other Members have described today. Children and young people are under ever greater pressures from social, family poverty, housing crises and identity questions. Services are already stretched, and some face an uncertain future: as school and voluntary sector cuts are made, many are closing or have already closed. There is a lack of early intervention. Different services have different priorities, and there are reports of the decommissioning of early intervention services as a result of reductions in spending on social services.

We could do things differently. It is not just a question of funding, although we cannot fail to discuss that issue. My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made an excellent suggestion, based on experience of the armed forces covenant. The establishment of the covenant under the Labour Government was led at Cabinet level, but it filtered through a range of services into local government. I was a councillor in Hounslow at the time, and we adopted the covenant, which filtered into several of our services and priorities. Could we not do the same for children’s mental health?

As many Members have said, we need to do more as a country, and the Government must lead. We must do better. We must listen to young people. We must deliver joined-up services, and we must deliver them early. By doing that, we will save money, but, more important, we will save our young people’s future.

3.23 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a privilege to take part in the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting it, and extend my praise to the Youth Select Committee for its excellent report on young people’s mental health. It is a genuinely superb summary of the current situation, backed up by sensible recommendations, and it makes a welcome contribution to the wider debate.

The details of the debate have already been clearly outlined by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I agree wholeheartedly that it is a debate about resources and the framework for their extend my praise to the Youth Select Committee for its excellent report on young people’s mental health. It is a privilege to take part in the debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting it, and extend my praise to the Youth Select Committee for its excellent report on young people’s mental health. It is a genuinely superb summary of the current situation, backed up by sensible recommendations, and it makes a welcome contribution to the wider debate.

The details of the debate have already been clearly outlined by the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I agree wholeheartedly that it is a debate about resources and the framework for their use. I also agree that the current situation is not acceptable, and that the demand for services is indeed increasing. I thank the hon. Lady for her clear explanation of the position, and for giving some powerful statistics.

The importance of this issue to the young people of the UK nations is illustrated by the fact that it has been repeatedly chosen as a priority campaign by the UK Youth Parliament, and voted for in the British Youth Council poll. The issue has also been the subject of research by the Scottish Youth Parliament, with the report “Our generation’s epidemic”. So we need not wonder what issues are of concern to young people; they have clearly, intelligently and repeatedly told us and it is incumbent upon us as elected politicians to address the concerns highlighted. The fact mentioned already today by several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), that more than half of all mental ill-health starts before the age of 14 serves to illustrate the seriousness of this issue.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) for illustrating the risk of the issue going unnoticed and undiagnosed and for highlighting the generation gap technology has developed and the issue of cyber-bullying. I am sure I am not alone in this Chamber in being glad that my youthful teenage years are not preserved for posterity on the internet and in social media.

As well as highlighting an important issue, the Youth Select Committee report shows the importance of young people being engaged in our democratic debate. In Scotland
Mental health is a priority for the Scottish Government, as demonstrated by the fact that Scotland has the first dedicated Minister for Mental Health in the UK, and while across England funding for young people's mental health services has been reduced since 2011 the SNP-led Scottish Government have doubled the number of child and adolescent mental health service psychologists, as part of an additional £150 million to improve mental health services.

The Scottish Government have welcomed the Scottish Youth Parliament's recent research “Our generation’s epidemic”, which I mentioned earlier. That research was undertaken as part of the Scottish Youth Parliament’s Speak Your Mind campaign on mental health. Maureen Watt, the Minister for Mental Health, met representatives of the Scottish Youth Parliament in September and took note of their recommendations that relate specifically to the Scottish Government. They will be considered as part of the public engagement on the new 10-year mental health strategy for Scotland. The SNP will continue to review the legislation in Scotland to ensure that the interests of children and their need to form and maintain relationships with key adults in their lives are at the heart of any new statutory measures.

The Youth Select Committee report highlights the importance of ending stigma around mental health, and the SNP is committed to playing its part in ending that stigma. Education Scotland is developing a national resource to support the development and practice of nurturing approaches for primary schools. A whole-school nurturing approach can promote school connectedness, resilience and the development of social and emotional competences, all of which are key aspects of promoting mental wellbeing.

It is completely wrong that people with mental health issues should suffer discrimination and stigma, but sadly too many still do. The Scottish Government, in collaboration with Comic Relief, fund the See Me initiative to help address this, and they do invaluable work, but the truth is that each and every one of us has it within our power to do our bit to end this stigma and to be more understanding of people who have mental health problems.

It has been a pleasure to take part in this well-informed and largely consensual and good-natured debate.

3.31 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate on the Youth Select Committee’s report, “Young People’s Mental Health”. I too want to thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for the debate, but I agree with the Conservative Members who suggested that this matter should have been debated in Government time. We must underline the importance of this report.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) on securing the debate. My hon. Friend talked about the focus on the early intervention, as did many other Members. She also talked about the need for beds, saying that sending seriously ill your primary school or whole class has to stop. I think we all support that view. She made it clear that, in her view, the state of the service was a national scandal, and she raised a number of points...
that we hope the Minister will respond to. They included the recommendations for ring-fenced funding for CAMHS and for co-production involving young people in the design of CAMHS, and the need to improve mental health education in schools. I will talk about those issues as well. My hon. Friend also referred to the notion in the YMCA report on stigma, “I am Whole”, of young people feeling as though they are “trapped inside a thousand invisible prisons”.

We should keep that in mind.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham) acknowledged the legitimacy of the Youth Parliament. He also talked about the pressures on young people and related that back to his own experience when he was young. That has been a bit of theme in this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) stressed the need for early intervention. That subject that has come up many times today, and quite rightly, because early intervention can decrease the severity of mental ill health. She made a powerful case for the Government’s funding pledges to be fulfilled.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about the importance of the status of the report and rightly said that it should have been debated in Government time. I am glad to have his support for the fact that Labour has a shadow Cabinet Minister for mental health, which is me. It is interesting that the Scottish National party Government also have a dedicated Minister for mental health. I think we are moving towards a position in which that is seen as something to be supported. The hon. Gentleman also talked about the effect of the pressures of social media on the mental health of young people. It is interesting to note that we shall debate the impact of social media on the mental health of young people in Westminster Hall next Wednesday.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) talked about the real problems that parents and grandparents face in navigating mental health services. He talked about commissioning and made some important points about the difficulty of working through GPs in our medical model. He also talked about local government cuts and said that they were a false economy. I shall talk about that as well. He also talked about the need for open-access services, given the difficulty in navigating the system.

The hon. Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) talked about a teenager with an eating disorder, the suicide rate and the problems faced by young men. Although there is a focus on the impact on women of mental health issues, young men are also badly affected.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about access to mental health specialists in schools and training for staff, which has been a theme this afternoon. She also mentioned the need to modernise approaches. We keep hearing about the importance of IT and social media, and she referred to the SafeSpot app. Like several hon. Members, she also talked about online bullying.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) is back in the Chamber. He came out of a Bill Committee to speak today and regards this topic as very important. His clear commitment to mental health was shown by it being the subject of his first question at PMQs. He also talked about social media and the need for early intervention.

I did not know that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) was elected an honorary president of the British Youth Council. He quite rightly thanked the Speaker for his support for the British Youth Council and the Youth Parliament. It is important, as he has done, to listen to young people’s concerns about mental ill health because that can lead to open, candid and courageous discussions. It is good that groups of young people can become more at ease with discussing mental health—there is hope for the future. He also talked about the exceptionally high incidences of mental health issues among LGBT young people, including high rates of self-harm and suicide. He referred to the poor standards of care at Brookside adolescent unit. It took a damning report from the CQC to highlight its problems, the consequence of which was the death of the young man Simon.

My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) gave us the first speech of Matthew, a member of the Youth Parliament who works in her team, and talked about the lack of full and proper support for young people’s mental health. She also mentioned the difficult experience of a young person who had to visit the GP seven times before getting help and felt crushed by the lack of support. Like other Members, she referred to training for teachers and having a trained counsellor in every school.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about hospital wards not being safe for young people with mental health problems. A headteacher in her constituency reported having three children sectioned from school, which is a sobering thought indeed.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), the SNP spokesperson, talked about many local groups. It is a sign of the difficulties facing support within the NHS that there is a need for all the groups he mentioned.

Before I move on, I want to pay tribute to the work of my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). She has campaigned tirelessly for improvements to the mental health system. Her work helped to raise the profile of many issues that had not previously been given the attention they deserve. I join other Members in congratulating the Youth Select Committee on its excellent report.

The Secretary of State for Health recently admitted to failings in mental health services for children and young people. He said:

“I think we are letting down too many families and not intervening early enough when there is a curable mental health condition, which we can do something about when a child is eight or nine, but if you leave it until they are 15 or 16, it’s too late”.

People working in mental health services know all too well the truth of what the Secretary of State says. We know that on average one in four people experience a mental health problem, that 50% of adult mental health problems start before the age of 15, and that 75% start before the age of 18. Yet just 8% of our mental health budget is spent on children, with CAMHS, which have been referred to extensively, representing just 1% of the NHS budget. Members have quite rightly referred to that as the Cinderella of the Cinderella service. Do the Minister agree that 8% is far too small a proportion of the budget to spend on youth mental health, and does she agree that more needs to be done to intervene
earlier when mental health issues are involved? Demand is clearly outstripping supply. Demand for child and adolescent mental health services is growing, but Government action is not meeting that demand. Funding for overstretched mental health services is not reaching the frontline, where it is so badly needed.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said, essential support services are being lost as a direct consequence of Government cuts to local authority budgets. Ofsted has reported that between 2010 and 2015 there was a 38% cut—£538 million—in funding for children’s centres, and a 53% cut, which is £623 million, in funding for youth services. Very many children and young people are not receiving the help that they need until they reach crisis point, and those cuts in local authority services are part of the problem. By failing to address these critical issues, Ministers are letting down vulnerable children and young people.

Sarah Brennan, the chief executive of Young Minds, has said that children’s mental health services have been “woefully” underfunded for years and that:

“While the government’s extra investment is welcome, it’s unclear whether it’s making a difference to frontline services. Even if the new money is spent where it’s intended, the Chief of NHS England has admitted that it will only be enough to reach a third of the children who need help.”

She goes on to say:

“Because of long waiting lists the threshold for accessing specialist services has got higher. Without treatment, problems are very likely to escalate and children are more likely to self-harm or become suicidal, to be violent and aggressive, or to drop out of school, which can ruin their prospects for the future. Delays can also have a disastrous effect on families, with parents forced to leave their jobs to look after their children.”

A report for the British Medical Association underlines that by telling us that the number of young people aged under 18 attending accident and emergency because of a psychiatric condition more than doubled between 2010 and 2015. The number of children and young people self-harming has also risen dramatically in the past 10 years, with the upward trend more pronounced among girls and young women. We have heard examples of that in the debate.

The number of referrals to child and adolescent mental health services increased by 64% between 2012-13 and 2014-15, but 28% of children and young people referred to CAMHS were not allocated a service. Members have referred to that fact in this debate. A report by the Children’s Commissioner found that 79% of CAMHS imposed restrictions and thresholds for children and young people accessing their service—I could go on. We have a tale in this debate of an increasing number of referrals to CAMHS, high thresholds for care and long waiting times. What all those things mean is that many children and young people are not receiving help.

Let me come back to the Secretary of State, because in reference to the quality of care that CAMHS teams provide, he said:

“I think this is possibly the biggest single area of weakness in NHS provision at the moment.”

Does the Minister recognise that the statistics we have heard in this debate show that demand for mental health services has clearly outstripped supply? Can she tell us what actions Ministers plan to take to address those issues?

I want to talk about regional variation, because it is an important aspect of the issues we are seeing. The Children’s Commissioner’s report also highlighted regional variations in treatment, suggesting that access to CAMHS is, in effect, a postcode lottery. The data gathered suggest that in England the average waiting time between referral and receipt of services from CAMHS ranged from 14 days in the north-west to 200 days in the west midlands. Does the Minister agree that that level of variation is totally unacceptable? Can she highlight what Ministers are doing to achieve swift access to care across the country at the same levels? A recent report on the state of mental health by the Public Accounts Committee warned:

“Good access to mental health services matters. Many people can make a full recovery if they receive appropriate, timely treatment. However, a high proportion of people with mental health conditions do not have access to the care they need.”

I wish to dwell for a moment on the state of CAMHS services, because that has been an important aspect of this debate. There is a lack of crisis services, a lack of accountability for transformation plans, and a lack of co-production with parents, carers and service users. One person asked, “Who cares for the carers because it certainly isn’t the mental health service?” That view of CAHMS is borne out by nurses who work in CAHMS. In a survey of 631 CAMHS nurses, 70% said that the services were “inadequate” or “highly inadequate”—I put it to the Minister that it is very worrying that the very people who work in CAMHS refer to the services in such a way—73% said that the main problem was too few nurses, 48% said that there were too few doctors, and 62% said that there were too few beds for patients.

Last December, the Secretary of State made this pledge:

“CCGs are committed to increasing the proportion of their funding that goes into mental health.”

However, as we have heard in this debate, increased front-line funding is not being delivered, and that is clear in the provision of services.

Let me refer to a matter that was raised by a number of my hon. Friends. In the responses to the freedom of information requests made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree, 73 out of 128 CCGs—more than half those that responded—admitted that they plan to cut the amount they will spend on mental health, which underlines the fact that the funding issue is just getting worse.

Does the Minister agree that the Secretary of State has clearly broken his promise and that many CCGs are not increasing funding for mental health? As we have heard in this debate, the pledge to achieve parity of esteem is repeatedly being broken. Despite Ministers’ promises about achieving parity of esteem between mental and physical health, there is still a great difference in the treatment of families of children with physical rather than mental health needs—a number of Members referred to that disparity. Indeed, many physical health hospitals now have family rooms or flats in which parents can stay to support a child, and parents can, in some cases, get help with transport costs. By contrast, the families of children in mental health units feel isolated. There is no provision for families to stay, and no support with transport costs, which can become prohibitive. Often a child can be sent home with no transition plan. It is clear from this debate that the Government are failing to achieve parity of esteem.
We had four questions on mental health at Prime Minister’s questions yesterday, which is an indication of the level of concern among hon. Members. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle made mental health the subject of his first such question. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North said, there was real disappointment about the responses from the Prime Minister, so I hope that we get better answers from the Minister today.

Much has been said about education and the role of schools. A report by the Education Committee on the mental health and wellbeing of looked-after children made the clear recommendation that schools should have a role in teaching about mental health and wellbeing. That report said:

“The interface between schools and health services needs to be strengthened to ensure that teachers and schools are better equipped to identify, assess and support children and young people with mental health difficulties.”

It has been quite clear in this debate that Members feel that schools and colleges should play a key role in promoting the good mental health of children and young people. More young people are experiencing serious psychological distress because they are under unprecedented social pressures. It is a credit to Members that those pressures are recognised.

Although we will not have time to cover this subject today, I have to say that easy access to the internet poses new challenges for young people. Cyber-bullying is increasing with more than one in 10 children now saying that they have experienced it. Young people cannot get away from bullying even when they have closed the door of their homes.

A number of Members have stressed the role of schools in ensuring that these problems are spotted as early as possible and addressed. Counselling services are vital. As a Salford MP, I am pleased that Salford has launched a register of approved providers of counselling in schools, and that one provider has already been appointed to deliver a two-year pilot to train and support a cluster of schools in counselling. My hon. Friend the Member for North Durham talked about the importance of counselling, but we recognise that there are funding problems. Many schools will not be able to afford to pay a trained counsellor.

Clear guidance is needed for schools on how to commission high-quality mental health support programmes and how to tackle mental health discrimination and stigmatisation. Will the Minister outline the Government’s plans to ensure that education, health and social services work together to provide an extra layer of support to spot and treat mental health problems? The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham talked about how cross-departmental working can help.

Clearly, the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place. It is critical that people can access the right information and that better support is provided in childhood and adolescence. That can help to reduce the incidence of young people developing mental health problems.

Overall, it is clear from the debate that actions speak louder than words. If Ministers are serious about tackling these issues, they must follow through with their funding pledges. Government cuts to local authority budgets, which I and others have referred to, have meant that many of the local services providing early intervention have had to scale back services or close their doors. I have talked about cuts to children’s centres, social workers, educational psychologists and mental health services in schools. There has been a reduction in care and support for under-18s, so we need urgent action. The Minister has been urged by Government Members, as well as Opposition Members, to relieve that pressure on overstretched CAMHS, but we also need to develop prevention and early intervention strategies. Crucially, the right help and support must be available for vulnerable children and young people when they need it, not 200 days later. I look forward to the Minister answering my questions and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood, and telling us what action will be taken to improve provision in this vital area.

3.50 pm  The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I thank the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) for initiating this debate on the Youth Parliament Select Committee report on young people’s mental health. I want to add my voice to those from both sides of the House in paying tribute to the Youth Select Committee for its powerful report—it is an important and timely intervention. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, Rhys Hart was, by all accounts, a remarkably effective Chair, and the 10 members were dedicated and focused. They won the admiration of the House of Commons staff who were involved, and they made particular mention of that to me before this debate.

The hon. Member for Ilford North ( Wes Streeting) demonstrated quite clearly that he is an elected president of the BYC, with his particularly eloquent speech. He is right that we should thank those young people who have had the courage to speak up on their mental health experiences and opinions, and who have allowed us to refer to them today, because the value of those first-hand stories in this Chamber cannot be overestimated.

I would like to make a particular point of thanking the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham), Lucy Boardman and Martha Banks Thompson, and my own Youth Parliament representatives, Tara Paxton-Doggett and Rowan Ibbotson, who spoke to me about the mental health campaign. A number of colleagues have spoken about the impact of meeting the Youth Parliament representatives. As has been said today, what is important now is to prove that we have not just heard them; we have listened to them, and we are taking action on their words. That is why this has been such a moving and necessary debate.

Members have shared some very personal experiences of mental health and the services and support that they and their constituents have received. All of us will know the cases that haunt us. All of us know that we need to do better. As colleagues have said, over half of all mental ill health starts before the age of 14, and 75% has developed by 18. We know the distress that mental health problems cause to individuals and all those who care for them, and we know that the earlier we intervene, the better.

Children’s and young people’s mental health is a priority for this Government. Not only has the Health Secretary made it his personal priority, but so has the
Prime Minister. It is time for a step change in the way that we deliver mental health services in the UK, and we are determined to deliver that. But we must not underestimate or under-sell some of the progress that has already been made, because that is thanks largely to the efforts of dedicated NHS staff, stakeholders, voluntary services and others. We have heard some success stories today, and it is important that we praise those involved for the hard work that they do in the face of great challenges.

We agree with recommendation 3 that funding needs to increase, as many colleagues have said. That is why we have increased investment in children’s mental health, with an additional £4 billion. While we do believe that it is right that local CCGs, led by clinicians, are best placed to prioritise their spending to meet the needs of local populations, we have been clear that this money is provided for mental health services, and we are requiring CCGs to increase their spending year on year.

Lyn Brown: Has the Minister considered the request from my local mental health providers that the Government consider ring-fencing the money for mental health so that it gets passed to the frontline?

Nicola Blackwood: I was attempting to deal with that point, but obviously not being very clear. As I said, we have been listening to these requests. We are looking very closely at how effectively the money is getting to the frontline, but at the moment we still believe that local clinicians are best placed to decide how to target these services. However, we have put in place a requirement for CCGs to increase spending on mental health year on year. We are also very clear that STPs must reflect the NHS mandate, which says:

“We expect NHS England to strive to reduce the health gap between people with mental health problems, learning disabilities and autism and the population as a whole”.

That will require great strides to be made in improving care.

Lyn Brown: This is happening in Newham, but not elsewhere. How long is the Minister going to wait for it to happen elsewhere before taking action?

Nicola Blackwood: One of the ways in which we are ensuring that money reaches the frontline is through driving accountability through transparency. Mental health services have lagged behind the rest of the NHS in terms of data and our being able to track performance. That is why the NHS will shortly publish the mental health services report, and that will provide data on outcomes, length of treatment, source of referral, and location of appointment.

Mr Kevan Jones: The Health and Social Care Act 2012 contained one provision that I welcomed—allowing CCGs and others to commission services in the third sector, for example. A lot of the good work in this area is done in the third sector, but the problem lies in how the contracts are drawn up, because they are either too big or too complex for smaller organisations to bid for. Will the Minister look at that?

Nicola Blackwood: I am happy to look at it. We are very clear that there is a vital role for the voluntary sector to play in delivering some of these services. We hope that local transformation plans will be part of the way in which this is clarified. The programme to deliver transparency and accountability will be essential if local areas are not only to design effective services that match the needs of their local populations, but to be held to account for delivering them. I will not beat about the bush. We recognise that a complex and severe set of challenges faces children and young people’s mental health services. This area has been undervalued and underfunded for far too long.

While I am happy to investigate funding formulas such as those mentioned by the hon. Member for Ilford North in relation to Redbridge, I agree with him that leadership and accountability are also key to making the changes that we need. That is why we are committed to delivering real changes across the whole system, not just in funding, and to building on the ambitious vision set out in “Future in mind”. I pay tribute to my predecessors for the work they have done to bring those forward. As the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood has said, we need to go further to drive through these changes, which young people have told us they want to see.

Children want to grow up to be confident and resilient, and they want to be supported to fulfil their goals and ambitions. We are placing an emphasis on building in that resilience, on promoting good mental health and wellbeing, on prevention—it is so important, as the shadow Minister has said—and on early intervention, as a number of the recommendations propose. We are looking, in particular, at how we can do more upstream to prevent mental health problems before they arise.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister is about to move on to intervention. Before she leaves funding, which has been pretty key, does she believe that the 8% of the budget...
spent on young people’s mental health—1% for CAMHS—has been anything like adequate? I did put that question to her. If she does not think that that is adequate, could Ministers tell us what they think it should be? If CCGs are ignoring Ministers’ continual urges to them to make pledges, will there be sanctions against CCGs that do not put in that extra funding?

Nicola Blackwood: I think I have already answered those questions. The Government have been clear that we think that mental health funding for children and young people, as well as for other areas of mental health, needs to increase. That is why we have increased mental health funding to local areas and we are putting in place measures to improve accountability and transparency, and the STPs, to make sure that that can be tracked locally. We are going to see how it works in the first instance.

Wes Streeting rose—

Nicola Blackwood: I must continue.

Another issue that was raised is the fact that children and young people want to know where to find help easily if they need it. I want to make sure that I respond to all the issues that have been raised, otherwise it will not be fair to the young people who wrote the report. Children want to know that they can trust such help when they find it. Young people are clear that they want a choice about where they can get advice and support; they want to be able to get it from a welcoming place, based on the best evidence about what works; and they want the opportunity to shape the services they receive. Many colleagues have spoken about co-production.

“Future in Mind” committed to sustaining a culture of continuous evidence-based service improvement, as well as improving transparency and accountability across the whole system, as I have mentioned. A big part of that is producing the datasets that I have mentioned, which will give local areas the ability to hold their CCGs to account. Those datasets will include information on funding. As the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) told us so eloquently—Matthew’s maiden speech has made its mark on all of us—young people want, as we all do, to tell their story only once rather than having to repeat it lots of times to lots of different people. We are committed to delivering a much clearer and more joined-up approach, with services coming together and communicating more effectively.

As numerous other colleagues have said, young people do not want to have to wait until they are really unwell—until they have reached a higher threshold—to get help. Asking for help should not be embarrassing or difficult. They should know what to do and where to go. If they do have to go to hospital, they should be on a ward with people around their age and close to home. So we are delivering a step change in how care is provided and ensuring that access is improved so that children and young people can easily access the right support from the right service at the right time, as close to home as possible. I recognise that this is a process.

“Future in Mind” is more than just a report. It is more than just words. It has already brought together key players, focused efforts and given us the direction for improving services. It is only the start of the journey, however, and we need to maintain the effort, focus and political momentum from this place and in our local areas.

In February 2016, the “Five Year Forward View for Mental Health” set out the start of a 10-year journey to transform NHS care across all ages. The hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) was absolutely right to say that similar problems can be tracked across to adult services. The report was clear:

“The NHS needs a far more proactive and preventative approach to reduce the long term impact for people experiencing mental health problems and for their families, and to reduce costs for the NHS and emergency services”.

A lot of it is simply common sense. The five year forward view for mental health is underpinned by additional funding, which I have already spoken about, and the NHS England implementation plan sets out in detail where and when that money will become available. It builds on the foundation of local investment in mental health services and the ongoing requirement, which I have referred to, to increase that baseline by at least the overall growth in allocations.

“Implementing the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health” sets out clear objectives, which will support improvements to the services that young people will receive. I think it would be helpful if I say exactly what they will be, as they will make practical changes. The first is a significant expansion in access to high-quality mental healthcare for children and young people. At least 70,000 additional children and young people each year will receive evidence-based treatment. By 2020-21, evidence-based community eating disorder services for children and young people will be in place in all areas, ensuring that 95% of children receive treatment within one week for urgent cases and four weeks for routine cases. By 2020-21, in-patient stays for children and young people will take place only when clinically appropriate; will have a minimum possible length of stay; and will be as close to home as possible, to avoid inappropriate out-of-area placements. Inappropriate use of beds in paediatric and adult wards—this has already been referred to—will be eliminated.

All general in-patient units for children and young people will be commissioned on a place basis by localities, so that they are integrated into local pathways. That is designed to address some of the concerns that have been raised today. As a result, the use of in-patient beds should reduce overall, with more significant reductions possible in certain specialised beds.

Those objectives are supported by a refresh and republication of the local transformation plans, which have been mentioned. The plans set out how local areas will work together to improve services for children and young people with mental health problems and for their families, and to reduce costs for the whole care pathway. The plans are, in fact, the richest source of information available to date about the state of children and young people’s mental health services across England.

NHS England has also commissioned a number of thematic reviews as part of an analysis of the LTPs. In July, it published the children and young people’s mental health LTPs, which provide a summary of the key themes. It is fair to say that, essentially, they found that there was a lot of variation in local areas in terms of approaches, quality and priorities. We have heard about that in some of the stories that have been told today. The LTPs are a starting point. They are living documents and are not designed to just go in a drawer. They are reviewed and refreshed at least once a year, and we are
clear that children, young people, families and carers must be involved in the process, for the exact reason given by the shadow Minister, which is to increase accountability and effectiveness and to make sure that the plans actually work.

A number of key themes have emerged from the report recommendations and the LTPs. Recommendations 5 and 6 comment on the need to support the workforce. We acknowledge the need to address the capability and capacity needs of the workforce—from GPs and A&E, to the mental health specialist—to deliver on our ambition to transform mental health services. In line with the eight specific workforce recommendations of the taskforce report, we will work with Health Education England and others to develop a five-year mental health workforce strategy, which we will publish in 2017. That is a serious response to a serious problem, and it is designed to address a lot of the challenges that have been raised today.

As many Members have rightly said, access to services is a priority area and we need to address it. We know that young people do not want to wait until they are really unwell to access services, and we do not want that to be the case, either, so we are tackling the issue. In August 2015, NHS England published an access and wait standard for children and young people with eating disorders, as I have said. From January, compliance with that standard has been monitored via the data collected through the mental health services dataset. It is, therefore, being held accountable and the aim, as I have said, is that 95% of young people will be seen within a clinically appropriate timeframe by 2020. That is just the first of the waiting time standards.

NHS England has commissioned the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health to develop a new evidence-based treatment pathway for children’s mental health. The project will report in March, recommending maximum waiting times for referral to treatment. An England-wide quality assessment will then be used to establish a baseline and trajectory to achieve those national waiting time standards in local areas. The matter was also raised by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is no longer in her place.

We are also taking action on particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people. In April, Alison O’Sullivan and Professor Peter Fonagy were appointed as the co-chairs of the expert working group for looked-after children, established to lead the development of models of care for looked-after children’s mental health, which has historically been a blind spot. The expert working group is about practical outcomes—not just what is needed but how it should be delivered, without jargon, proposing concrete milestones and measures. We expect that work to conclude by October 2017.

However, ensuring access to services will not be enough if young people do not feel confident and safe seeking help. All children and young people should feel able to go for help when they need to, without fear of discrimination or stigmatisation. We have made a lot of progress in tackling stigma in recent years. The fact that young people have been willing to tell their stories demonstrates that.

[Nicola Blackwood]

Time to Change is a campaign that aims to tackle the stigma around mental health. In October, it was given £20 million in funding from the Department of Health, Comic Relief and the Big Lottery Fund. We are committed to ensuring that the Time to Change initiative, which is run by charities such as Mind and Rethink Mental Illness, will work with schools, employers and local communities to do more and go further to reduce discrimination and to raise awareness. It is developing a targeted campaign for young people, working with experts by experience. As “Future in mind” and “The Five Year Forward View For Mental Health” both made clear, co-production is now a fundamental principle in the way we seek to develop and improve services, and anti-stigma campaigns are no exception. However, as many colleagues have said, to make that work, and to see the progress that is so desperately needed, we also have to work closely with colleagues across government, in particular the Department for Education, but not exclusively.

We are determined to continue that collaboration, as recommendation 2 proposes. We have been working closely together to ensure that the vision of “Future in mind” becomes a reality. We are also working together to consider what more can be done urgently—earlier—an issue raised by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and many others—and to provide the right interventions as soon as they are needed. The report’s recommendations will be a valuable resource for us as we do that, including the recommendations on attainment, Ofsted, teacher training and a whole-school approach, which was highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak. We know that this is the weakest link in our current process and we are prioritising activity in that area to ensure that young people get the support they need right from the start.

A number of colleagues have mentioned the issue of online pressures and cyber-bullying. That matter has been taken extremely seriously by the Government Equalities Office, which announced in September £4.4 million of funding to tackle bullying. That includes a number of measures to underpin the fact that all schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy with measures to tackle bullying among pupils, and they are held clearly to account for their effectiveness by Ofsted. However, we know that more needs to be done, including to support parents. That is why the GEO has also invested £500,000 in the UK Safer Internet Centre to provide advice to parents on how to keep children safe and provided support to the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre to support a national roll-out of parent information through schools.

Today’s debate has been important because it has provided an opportunity not just to reply to the details in the Youth Select Committee report, which is so important, but to test the Government’s commitment to mental health reform. I am grateful to colleagues for the time they have taken today to raise concerns, to champion good practice and to propose innovative solutions. I hope that, in my response, our commitment to reform mental health services is beyond doubt. I also hope that it is clear that I believe that it is only through concerted political will, allied with the extraordinary and selfless determination of the mental health workers throughout this country, that we will have any hope of achieving our goal of mental health services that are accessible when and where they are needed.
I look around the Chamber and I hear speech after speech expressing determination to see a change. It gives me courage because great reform requires long-term vision, non-partisan partnership and fine minds. I have seen all three of those today, not just in the excellent Youth Select Committee report, but in all colleagues’ speeches. That truly is a firm foundation for the tough task ahead.

4.14 pm

Helen Hayes: I very much thank the 10 Back Benchers, the Opposition Front Benchers and the Minister for taking the time to be in the House to contribute to this debate. It has been an excellent debate, with some very powerful speeches. Members have acknowledged the scale of the crisis in young people’s mental health, very effectively represented those of their constituents who face mental health issues, brought to bear their direct experience in this field and called on the Government to take a different approach. We have discussed many statistics, and they paint a picture of a heartbreaking reality for young people and families across this country. Many Members have also highlighted the false economies involved in failing to invest properly in young people’s mental health, with the additional costs to the health service, local authorities, the criminal justice system and, indeed, to human beings themselves.

Many Members have paid tribute to the work of the British Youth Parliament, and I want to add my voice to those saying that the work of the Youth Parliament should be debated in Government time. We must continue to build the institution of the Youth Parliament as the voice of young people in our democratic process. It is right and proper that it should be given such a status. The debate has, on the whole, been very consensual, and it has shown the House at its best. I hope that Members on both sides of the House have communicated to the British Youth Parliament, the Youth Select Committee and young people across this country the seriousness with which we take this issue.

I very much welcome the Minister’s response, and her commitment to address this issue and to deliver a step change in young people’s mental health. She is right to point out that this will require resources, leadership and work across Departments. She mentioned work with the Department for Education, but work with the Department for Communities and Local Government will also be very important. As the Minister also has responsibility for public health, she will know the extent to which public health expenditure is so challenged at the moment. We heard from several Members during the debate about the impact of such cuts on mental health and as a direct consequence of them. I welcome her response, but it must be backed up by action, following through and delivering on those commitments.

I hope all Members from both sides of the House who have contributed to this debate will join me in holding the Government to account on delivering the step change we need to protect our vulnerable young people and on delivering a framework of support that will help them to be resilient, confident and healthy as they grow into adulthood.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes the recommendations of the Youth Select Committee report of November 2015 on Young People’s Mental Health; endorses the findings of that report on the need for more support from the Government for mental health services for young people; acknowledges steps taken by the Government, since its response of January 2016 to that report, with regard to some of its recommendations; and calls on the Government to set out what further progress has been made since its response and what its plans are further to improve mental health services for young people.

PETITIONS

Change of use of Abberley Hotel

4.17 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK.

Declares that Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council should not approve the planning application to change the use of the Abberley Hotel to a 32-bed house in multiple occupation (HMOs); further that there are too many HMOs in Walsall; further that Walsall Council’s Housing Standards objects to this application; and further that 194 individuals have signed a local petition on the same subject.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council to reject planning application 15/1266.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

4.18 pm

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality, who are now better known to us all as the WASPI women. I know that this is not the time to make a great long speech, and I do not propose to do so, but I will, if I may, pay tribute to the women who have contacted me during this campaign. They are the most decent, the most honourable and the most well-mannered campaigners I have ever had the pleasure, or not, to come into contact with. They have been fabulous. For completeness, I will read out the petition, which I am afraid is rather long.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Southampton Itchen,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
HS2 Ltd: Communication and Engagement

Movement made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Christopher Pincher.)

4.20 pm

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to raise, in what will be a slightly lengthened Adjournment debate, the subject of the effectiveness of communication and engagement by HS2 Ltd.

I welcome the Minister to the Front Bench. I think this is the first time he has had the joy of responding to a debate on HS2 that I have secured. I hope that he will be in his place for many years to come to respond to future such debates. I have great hopes that his response will be full and encouraging, both to my constituents and to many others up and down the line of phase 1 of HS2.

I thank Buckinghamshire County Council and my local parish councils in particular for their input into the debate, for their perseverance and for their work for greater mitigation in our area; I extend those thanks to local authorities up and down the line, which have worked tirelessly to try to mitigate the damage to their areas.

I am one of the few MPs along the route of phase 1 with the privilege of the freedom of the Back Benches to speak on these matters. It would be remiss of me not to thank my colleagues up and down the line who have had an input into the debate. I pay particular tribute to their researchers, who do so much work on HS2. The burden has fallen disproportionately on our offices as MPs. Although she has absolutely no idea that I am going to do so, I pay tribute to Kate Fairhurst in my office, who has done tremendous work in co-ordinating and working on this subject for a long time.

I am particularly disappointed still to be facing the prospect of having to raise the quality and standard of HS2’s communications and engagement, which have made this project a very difficult one for my constituents in Chesham and Amersham in particular. They have found it difficult to deal with in the past, and I am afraid it still fills them with dread for the years to come.

It would be unfair if I did not recognise some of the efforts that HS2 Ltd has made recently to try to improve its communications. Indeed, it has done so in some instances—for example, the introduction of local engagement managers. But that is too little, too late, and must be set against the background of the scars of communications in previous years, which have left a deep-rooted history of poor engagement along phase 1.

It is fair to say that that has resulted in an atmosphere of mistrust among many of our constituents, up and down the line, along with a great feeling that there is a complete lack of empathy from HS2 Ltd and the people who work for it. In the words of one of my constituents, its “record is poor and they have been talking about more engagement for months, but for the local affected resident at the coalface, it’s hard to spot any change”.

I understand that that view is replicated in the constituencies of many of my affected colleagues. For an organisation with such an enormous operation and rapidly expanding workforce, I think the Minister would agree that this is unacceptable and requires addressing with senior personnel and at ministerial level.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) recently wrote to the chairman of HS2 Ltd to convey her concern that her constituents were not being adequately communicated with, ahead of their petitions to the House of Lords Select Committee. That caused undue frustration. She asked me to introduce that into my speech this evening, because she is at an HS2 meeting herself and is unable to be here.

In the course of preparing for this debate, I have been contacted by Chalfont St Giles parish council, which reports that HS2’s original attempts at engagement, in the form of focus groups, did little to allay the fears of the local population. It was felt that they were entirely controlled by HS2. The council felt that the community events were designed to promote the project, rather than to engage effectively with those who were most affected. It reported to me that HS2 personnel seemed uninterested in tapping into the wealth of local knowledge, which could have helped HS2’s work hugely, in places such as Chalfont St Giles. This point is echoed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden, who feels that more positive solutions could have been generated if HS2 had just listened and utilised local expertise.

I do not know whether the Minister has had the chance to study the design panel for HS2. It is full of the great and the good, with some marvellous members, including leading stars in the worlds of architecture and design. However, what is not as obvious is the local input that we were promised. We were promised that the design of this project would rely on local input to help to get the best possible solutions in areas as the line goes through them.

I think it is fair to say that the earlier community forums are considered to have been disastrous. Great Missenden parish council felt the engagement was part of a tick-box exercise by HS2, which was unable to provide the detail that residents and constituents want. Residents tell me that they think HS2 is going through the motions during community engagement. That is not good enough. For them to come out of the community engagements thinking that it was a one-way-only, top-down discussion, reflects very badly on the quality, content, thought and input that goes into them. The situation was summed up in a recent comment by a parish councillor in Great Missenden:

“The parishioners have no real knowledge of what is happening: in fact, most still believe that HS2 will not happen. This is not democratic. In fact, it is bordering on a dictatorship.”

It is sad that after six or seven years that is how residents feel following an attempt at engagement with the community.

This poor engagement will continue to cause problems with the progress of HS2’s work. As I understand it, there was a fracas at Fairford Leys recently, when HS2 omitted fully to communicate to residents that it would be accessing a site for groundworks. I am told that households were leafleted only after the work had commenced.

I am very pleased to see the Leader of the House of Commons, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), in his place. I know he shares my concern that this kind of incident is a very worrying
Construction is due to begin next year, as the Minister will know. Not only are construction timetables not yet available to residents, but the newly appointed construction commissioner will apparently be unable to intervene in individual cases. The newly appointed, interim construction commissioner came to see me in my office. I have to say that I still question his independence, particularly when I am told that any correspondence should be sent to HS2’s offices. That hardly gives the impression that that commissioner is totally independent from HS2. I said to him—and I think this is fair—that my constituents and others deserve to be informed of what is happening well in advance of construction works. At the moment, if they want to find out anything, they have to ring an HS2 helpdesk, and they have no information about who exactly they are dealing with and no named person to deal with. HS2 can honestly be said to have taken a proactive approach to engagement with the community, but is relying on a reactive strategy, putting the onus on the very people who are adversely affected by the plans.

To pursue this issue, I have invited the construction commissioner to attend the HS2 compensation and mitigation forum, a group in the House that was founded by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) back in 2012. I hope the construction commissioner will come to our next meeting in a few weeks’ time and reassure us that communication on construction matters, not least with MPs and their offices but also with our constituents, will be a priority. I would like to ask the Minister now whether he will talk with the newly appointed, interim independent construction commissioner and try to ensure that when he arrives at that meeting he has more to tell us that we can pass on to our constituents than when he first came for his courtesy call on me last week.

When there is one commissioner, another commissioner always comes along, and in this case it is the residents commissioner. We all welcomed the appointment of the residents commissioner last year, who we thought was there to assist specifically with communication. I have met her several times. I have to say that she is a thoroughly nice woman and I am always encouraged by her intentions. However, the reality is that the impact is very low. First, the Minister should be aware that she, too, does not appear to be independent. She reports to the HS2 chairman, she is paid by HS2 Ltd and she sits in its offices. Again, that does not strike me as an independent operation. The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority certainly does not sit in the House of Commons, but instead sits down the road and is truly seen to be independent. It is nothing to do with MPs, as you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker; in fact, it seeks to regulate what MPs do in their expenses.

Secondly, the residents commissioner only makes recommendations to the chairman. They are in no way enforceable. That seems to me to be pretty weak and to lack teeth. Thirdly, she cannot intervene in individual cases either, which prompts the ongoing question of who my constituents can go to when problems arise. Of course, they go to their MP, and, as we have heard, when MPs have to distribute leaflets with information about a Government project, their offices become only too hard pressed and the burden that disproportionately falls upon them becomes quite tremendous.

The result is a lack of confidence. Residents along the line do not have the confidence that the residents commissioner is a credible independent figure, and thus her role to scrutinise HS2’s communications has, I believe, so far been pretty ineffective. I stress that it is no reflection on her individually. The problem comes from the job and the description that has been given to her and from the approach that HS2 has to this project, which has always been, “We’re doing it whatever; we have the mandate to do it, and you are just getting in the way.” That is the message that has come across to our constituents. When it comes to those two commissioners, it is fair to say that constituents feel that all roads lead to HS2, which is effectively both judge and jury in all circumstances.

I do not know whether the Minister has had a chance to read it, but in March this year the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on which I happen to sit, produced a report on HS2’s communications, following the damning report on its communications by the parliamentary and health services ombudsman. The ombudsman determined that HS2’s actions towards a community in Staffordshire had constituted maladministration. The Committee concluded that “the necessary fundamental changes” had not taken place, and that “the continuing existence of a culture of defensive communication and misinformation within a public body, responsible for the delivery of such a large and highly controversial project, is not acceptable”.

I think you would agree with me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that is not acceptable.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher) has been working alongside Jonathan and Elaine Loescher and the wider community at the heart of the ombudsman’s report for some time now, and in spite of them receiving an apology by HS2 Ltd, the Loeschers have contacted me—and I have been in contact with my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth—to say that very little has changed in practice. HS2 Ltd’s treatment of residents remains poor; it simply does not prioritise community engagement. In fact, there is no one to hold its feet to the fire or to ensure that HS2 Ltd fulfils its responsibilities to residents. Sometimes it feels as if I am the only person holding its feet to the fire on many issues.

I do not know whether the Minister is aware of it, but only a couple of weeks ago, HS2 advertised for four newly qualified graduates to work for six months, at salaries up to approximately £30,000—I am quoting from the advert—to “write the story” of HS2. I have been a Minister, and it sounds to me that the record-keeping
in the Department and in HS2 Ltd is so poor that they do not know how they have got to where they have got to, so they are bringing people in to do some forensic analysis to try to dig out the policy. Frankly, that is not good enough, and it reflects some of the chaos that I see from the outside as being evidence of what is happening in the organisation.

Ultimately, the two commissioners—the construction commissioner and the residents commissioner—have been put in place to hold HS2 to account, and I do not think that the drafting of those jobs and the way in which their remit will operate in each case is going to fit into the Bill. I know that I bang on a bit about HS2 from time to time, but I and others have put considerable thought into the amendments tabled to the Bill, which is currently in the House of Lords.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend may well bang on and on, but she has many admirers in this place for doing so on such an important issue. My constituents and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Jeremy Lefroy) are going to be affected by phase 2a, so I encourage her to go on banging on.

Mrs Gillan: I am grateful for the break in proceedings and for that kind intervention by my hon. Friend. As I have said before, it is never possible to over-flatter a politician! I feel passionately about this issue, as do many others, and if I have the freedom to speak, I am very happy to reflect the views of others. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has himself worked very hard on trying to mitigate this scheme. In fact, I am now alongside two Staffordshire Members. I am second to none in my admiration for the support that I have had from my colleagues who, I think, feel as strongly as I do.

At the time of Third Reading, I tabled amendments proposing the introduction of an adjudicator—an independent regulatory body that could deal with complaints swiftly and fairly. People who are affected by the scheme would have confidence and faith in such a body, and I think that it is still badly needed. I urge the Minister to think about the amendments again before Royal Assent, to accept them and to try to create a body that would give confidence and faith to the people who are being so badly affected.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) is aware, we have a serious problem in our part of Staffordshire. What my right hon. Friend has said about HS2 for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) is suggesting would help enormously to deal with the frequent complaints about the manner in which HS2 Ltd is operating, which is causing local people enormous anxiety. I shall be seeing some of them over the weekend to discuss these very questions. I am deeply grateful to my right hon. Friend, and totally endorse her proposal.

Mrs Gillan: I thank my hon. Friend for what he says. We spent some time drafting the amendments, and some serious and senior legal brains were brought to bear. The Minister is new to his post, so he might not be as familiar with this project as the rest of us, and this would be a good opportunity for him to review my proposal. Then at least I would feel that it had been examined and considered before being rejected, whereas at the moment I feel that the proposal was rejected out of hand because it came from someone whose constituency was affected so badly by the scheme.

I am astounded by the lack of information that HS2 Ltd has about communications. I do not know whether the Minister has had a chance to look at the answers that have been supplied to my written questions over the past fortnight. In preparation for the debate, I asked for the annual budgets for communication and engagement by HS2 Ltd since 2010. The response stated that the figures could not be provided, as “the amount of time spent on communication and engagement activity is not centrally tracked.”

I am astounded that, in spite of all the external criticism and scrutiny of its poor communications, HS2 Ltd is not even keeping track of what it is spending, how it is spending, and who is doing what.

Sir William Cash: The cost of HS2 started at £30 billion, then rose to £50 billion, and is now increasing further. According to the latest estimates from all the experts, it is rising exponentially. One can imagine that it might end up being £80 billion or even more, in which case it would cost more than Hinkley Point, the Heathrow development and a development at Gatwick, if that were also to take place. We are talking about a payment of massive sums for what many people regard as a badly thought out project that will cause a great deal of anxiety and trouble.

Mrs Gillan: It is a case of the three Hs: Hinkley, Heathrow, and HS2; and the greatest of them all is HS2. The Minister has probably heard me say this before, but I still think that the project is so gargantuan that it deserves to be overseen by a dedicated Minister who would keep an eye on it. A sum of £80 billion is larger than the budgets of many Departments of State. It is absurd to think that five Secretaries of State and as many Ministers have overseen this project over a comparatively short period. The lack of continuity is ridiculous. Now we have lost the chief executive, of course, who is going to Rolls-Royce. We have an interim chief executive—Mr Hill, I believe—who comes from CH2M, which has just received a bonus from HS2 for some of its works, and I believe is still in the running to bid for contracts. The arm’s length relationship with contractors does not seem to have been maintained in the current circumstances.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire asked me to raise particular communications flaws in the need-to-sell scheme. Apparently, constituents still find it difficult to speak to a named lead on their case and cannot retrieve information from HS2 Ltd until they have made an application. On Tuesday, in reply to a written question inquiring about the effectiveness of the scheme, the responding Minister told me that it was operating fairly and as intended. That is certainly not reflected in my right hon. Friend’s remarks to me, so that is worth looking into. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to that.

I will not go into the inadequacy of the legislative process through which the HS2 Bill is being put through this House and the House of Lords. That is a matter for
another time but, needless to say, the process itself causes a great deal of confusion and consternation. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) raised with me the excellent point that better communication and provision of information would have negated the need for the House of Commons Select Committee to hear so many petitions. Constructive engagement beforehand could have promoted a dialogue away from the Committee Room, and thus speeded up the passage of the Bill. I think that people felt the only way they could communicate with HS2 Ltd was by depositing a petition and coming along in person to make their case.

I also wish to highlight the poor practice of corridor deals during the Select Committee process. The relocation of the construction haul road in Great Missenden in my constituency was agreed in principle between Buckinghamshire County Council and HS2 Ltd in such a deal. The promise by the promoter altered the evidence given thereafter in Committee and, as it stands, the pledge has not been fulfilled.

The nature of these corridor deals means that vital discussions are not transparent and assurances cannot be enforced. In this case, my constituents feel they are left in a very uncertain and unclear position as to HS2’s intentions towards a traffic management plan that will have an enormous local impact at Great Missenden.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam also asked me to raise the unsatisfactory fact that constituents need to resort to communicating with HS2 Ltd to make their case. The information should have been available from HS2 Ltd at the outset, and it is a great shame that it does not display greater transparency. It must understand that I, as an MP—I think I am speaking for my hon. Friends in the Chamber with an interest in the matter—have always approached this on a twin-track basis. If I could not persuade the Government that this was not the scheme in the right place at the right time, and going to the right places, I would be working hard to mitigate its effect on my constituency, and especially on the area of outstanding natural beauty. However, it always seems to me that HS2 thinks that MPs are working against it, yet if this scheme is going to go through, we will have to accept that, but we need to work with HS2 to improve the outcomes for the people we represent.

Jeremy Lefroy: Phase 2a has not reached Parliament yet, but the effects of blight are felt by my constituents, as they are by those of my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Christopher Pincher), for Stone (Sir William Cash), for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and for Crewe and Nantwich (Edward Timpson). These constituents feel that they are not being given the necessary support for planning if they will have to move house. Some of my constituents’ homes will be demolished in phase 2a, but they are being told that because parliamentary consent for that phase has not been given—the matter is not even before Parliament—nothing can be done, even though they have to make plans over the next four or five years to build a new house. Has my right hon. Friend come across such instances?

Mrs Gillan: What is so depressing is the fact that the lessons from phase 1 that we have tried to point out do not seem to have been learned, and the mistakes are being repeated in phase 2. The burden of supplementing HS2’s poor performance has certainly fallen disproportionately on local authorities. I am fearful about the next part of the process and the planning that will follow, because there will be more and more burdens on our local authorities, whose budgets—let’s face it—are stretched as it is.

Sir William Cash: As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford implied, the fact is that whatever is decided regarding the current Bill as it goes through the House of Lords will inevitably be applied as a precedent for the next Bill. That is why we need to follow closely what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham says. I congratulate him on doing everything possible to get this right now.

Mrs Gillan: Separately from giving evidence and making recommendations on how we should change the procedures of the House, I think that everyone would agree that it is inequitable that our Standing Orders prevent Members of Parliament from appearing as petitioners in the other place. The Chairman of the Committee had no choice but to interpret the Standing Orders in that way, but to remove the right of advocacy from Members of Parliament seems self-defeating and inadequate, and I am sure that Members of both Houses will want that to change.

The burden on local authorities, especially in relation to communications, has been astronomical. The leader of Buckinghamshire County Council told the House of Lords HS2 Select Committee on Monday that the council had spent £110,264 in 2015-16 on community liaison relating to HS2. That was entirely to cover for HS2’s poor communications. The council has asked for retrospective compensation to recover those costs, which I think is entirely reasonable. I hope that the Minister will agree to that request. If he cannot do so at the Dispatch Box today, perhaps he will do me the courtesy of looking into the matter to see how we can compensate our local authorities.

I would like the Minister to note that I find it incredible that a county council can provide actual figures for communication and community engagement, down to the last pound, whereas HS2 Ltd cannot do so. Indeed, the county council has since incurred further costs in assisting HS2 Ltd’s groundwork investigations, as its staff are consistently used to help to mediate between HS2 Ltd and residents when intentions to access land have not been adequately communicated. HS2 Ltd could and should be doing that job satisfactorily on its own, if only it had the will. Prior to the introduction of the local engagement managers, local authorities were expected to plug the gap in communication and to provide residents with information that was not readily available from HS2 Ltd. The Minister should bear in mind the fact that that was all done at the councils’ own expense.

It is not just local authorities, parish councils and residents that are affected in this way; HS2 Ltd’s poor engagement reaches into a wider constituency. I have been contacted by the Woodland Trust, which reports that it has not been engaged on the independent review of biodiversity, as recommended in the House of Commons Select Committee, and that it might now have to petition the House of Lords without the information it needs. It also tells me that information regarding third-party
planning applications has not been forthcoming from HS2 Ltd, and that that has caused unacceptable delays in compensation payments. A project of this size that brings with it such a heavy burden on our environment, in particular the violation of the AONB in the Chilterns, really should ensure that it deals with the detail and follows up with the environmental organisations that are trying to help to mitigate the project’s impact on the environment.

I ask the Minister to take note of the ongoing communication failures and to ensure that he will make sorting them out his priority. This catalogue of errors has considerably hindered HS2 Ltd’s operation—it is the company’s fault—and is costing the taxpayer even more money. The Minister needs to consider creating a scrutiny body with teeth to hold the organisation to account, especially with construction fast approaching.

HS2 Ltd needs a better attitude towards the affected people. When I was preparing for this debate, I thought of two main themes that I wanted to leave with the Minister. First, I want to ensure that there is an overhaul of the communication and engagement strategy and the attitudes of HS2 Ltd. That should be considered at the highest level of the Department for Transport. Secondly, echoing the interventions from my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), I want to ensure that this communication calamity never happens again. Residents who received substandard treatment during phase 1 should be the exception, not the rule. If residents are going to be treated the same way under phase 2, the taxpayer will be paying even more for the project than is anticipated.

We have to reconsider how we do major infrastructure projects. We had an announcement this week on Heathrow, which I welcomed because it will be of economic benefit to Buckinghamshire, my constituency and my residents. We finally got a decision after the Davies commission and years of investigation—the project has been examined from every angle. HS2, however, was written on the back of an envelope by a Labour Transport Minister and immediately adopted by the coalition Government. All those processes were not followed. One system is far too long and the other is far too short. We need to find a way of ensuring that our infrastructure projects are the right projects in the right places, and that communications and engagement are of the highest standard, otherwise greater problems will emerge as such projects progress.

I do not usually talk at such great length and did not realise that I was going to have the luxury of taking so many interventions. I thank my colleagues in the Chamber for their support today, particularly those who must remain silent. I hope that the Minister will assure me that he will use his influence radically to re-evaluate how HS2 Ltd deals with our constituents, and that he will embed a culture of respect, transparency, openness and improved communications.

4.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) on securing this debate on the effectiveness of the communication and engagement undertaken by HS2 Ltd.

I must begin by acknowledging her tireless work, which has had a measurable effect on the Government’s approach. She also highlighted the communications problems that have been a part of the project to date, about which I have heard not only from my right hon. Friend today, and previously, but from other colleagues around the House. The main thing that she asked of me in her closing remarks was whether I would undertake to look at the communication thus far and improve it. I can assure her on that right now, and I will go into this in a bit more detail.

Let me start by putting the HS2 project into context. I know that we might disagree on this, but I believe that HS2 is a vital strategic issue for our whole country. Our rail industry is a huge success and—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Andrew Jones: Our rail industry is a huge success, and that growth is causing huge problems for the capacity of the network. We need to put capacity into the network, which is what HS2 is about. We need to recognise that it will bring connectivity and capacity on the vital routes between London and the west midlands, Crewe, Leeds, Manchester, south Yorkshire and the east Midlands. It will also create space on our networks for other new routes, and give a boost to our regional and national economies. It is vital for the jobs it will create.

Sir William Cash: I know that the Minister is only using those things as a backdrop to the points he is going to deal with in a moment on the specifics that my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham (Mrs Gillan) so ably put forward. Will he accept, however, that report after report has challenged the assumptions on which he has just made his remarks? Although the vote in the House of Commons demonstrated a huge majority for the project, the reports that have been coming out over the past few years have universally condemned the project, on cost and increasing cost grounds, and on many of the assumptions on which he has just put forward his case.

Andrew Jones: It would be a little extreme to say that all the reports that have been written on this project are universally condemning it—I do not believe that to be the case. I recognise that some voices have cast doubts upon the project, or have said that we should be doing a different project or that there could be an alternative use of public money, but there is now real momentum behind this project, which had overwhelming support in this House, with the votes on Second and Third Reading of the phase 1 hybrid Bill being passed by nine to one in favour.

When construction begins next year, attitudes will change on this again. We intend to start construction shortly after Royal Assent, which we anticipate will be towards Christmas or in January, depending on the progress that their lordships make; the commencement of work should be in the spring. At that point, the debate will change. It will not be about whether or not we should be doing this project, but about how we can maximise its benefits, because this project is going to
happen. When the construction does start, HS2 will rapidly become the largest infrastructure project in Europe. A project of the scale, complexity and duration of HS2’s nature requires engagement across many communities, organisations and individuals.

Mrs Gillan: Having just confirmed the scale and complexity of the project, does the Minister agree that it would be sensible to have a dedicated Minister for it, as it is of such size that it needs supervising closely? It is clearly out of control at the moment.

Andrew Jones: I would not say this project is out of control. The apportionment of responsibilities is mercifully way above my pay grade, but I am thoroughly enjoying having responsibility for this project, because it is an exciting one that will transform our rail industry. It is our long overdue recognition that we need to start taking responsibility for our own transport futures. We are still trading off Victorian infrastructure, which shows not only how significant the ambitions of our Victorian forefathers were, but how we need to address the situation and take responsibility for ourselves.

Let me get back to my point about the scale of the project. We are dealing with a project of enormous scale, complexity and duration, and we are talking about one of the largest communications and engagements challenges ever undertaken on an infrastructure project in this country. On a project of this scale, we cannot leave the communications and engagement to chance. The Government and those who enact the policies of the Government, such as HS2 Ltd, have a duty to communicate clearly and openly with everyone, but above all with those on whom Government policies may impact and, in some cases, disadvantage. All of that takes time, resources and professionalism. Above all, the underlying attitude has to be to treat individuals and communities with respect. That point underpinned many of the remarks of my right hon. Friend. It is very disappointing to hear that there are huge concerns about this, and that people feel that that has not happened. I personally undertake to take all the points from today’s debate to HS2 Ltd, and to have further conversation about them, because the attitude that has been described is unacceptable and will have to change.

Jeremy Lefroy: I very much respect the attitude of the Minister towards the project and this debate. Will he also mention to HS2 another concern of my constituents, which is that when they are suffering from great stress as a result of this project—we are talking about some fairly elderly folk—there is no particular provision for them at their local GP surgeries to receive some kind of additional counselling to help them overcome it?

Andrew Jones: I will most certainly look into that. My hon. Friend always speaks up as a great champion for his constituency, particularly in health matters, and I am happy to take his point forward.

Communication and professionalism are the principles that HS2 must apply, but not in a profligate way. We have taken a very positive and cooperative approach to publicly funded communications under this Government and the coalition Government. Basically, I am talking about doing more without spending more. By 2015, we were actually spending 47% less on communications than six years previously. HS2 must be focused in its communication.

It might just help if I explain some of the things that have happened before talking about the future. Over the past few years, HS2 Ltd has delivered what has been estimated as the largest public consultation that we have ever had in this country. Through public events, exhibitions and information boards, the company has engaged with more than 30,000 people. The High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill Select Committee has heard more than 1,578 petitions, compared with 205 petitions for the Crossrail Bill. Overall, HS2 Ltd estimates that it has interacted with more than 140,000 people, received 80,000 consultation responses, dealt with 37,000 helpdesk inquiries, engaged with 20,000 people at meetings and events and, last year, sent out approximately 396,000 pieces of literature.

All of that says to me that there are things happening in scale, but all of the concerns that have been articulated by my right hon. Friend indicate that we have much further to go in this piece.

Sir William Cash: As my hon. Friend will know, the word consultation means “I hear what you say”, but it does not mean that “I will do what you ask”. In fact, the attitude that has been highlighted by my right hon. and hon. Friends, and that I have had personal experience of, is that people are listened to, but then nothing much happens after that. That is called communication, not consultation.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend makes a legitimate point. Consultation in the worst cases can simply be a tick-box exercise—a process that has to be undertaken for lots of different elements of public policy or for planning applications. That is not good enough, but during the progress of the Bill, we have seen many changes in the original proposals, the consultation and the route and the communication around it. We are not in that place where people are just going through the exercise and not listening, but I do not want people to think that their voices will not be heard. We must ensure that people recognise that their views are respected. That goes back to my earlier point about ensuring that, underpinning everything, there is an attitude of openness and respect for individuals.

Mrs Gillan: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I am making no progress, but yes, I will give way.

Mrs Gillan: I am sure the Minister will—he has a good 20 minutes, and he thought he was going to have only 10, so he has plenty of time.

Yes, in my area, for example, we have had route changes, but the proposal that HS2 should come up in the middle of the football pitch in the middle of Old Amersham was geologically incompetent, and it had to be changed because it was impossible for it to come up in that particular area, so they moved it along to Moulton’s wood. However, the change was made by the Select Committee here in the House of Commons on additional provision 4, so it was not HS2 or the Department that were listening; it was actually the House of Commons
[Mrs Gillan]

Select Committee—our colleagues—that was listening and made changes. We in the Chilterns area would still like further tunnelling to protect the valuable and fragile landscape. However, that is rapidly diminishing into the great beyond and is impossible, but I am hoping that, maybe, the Minister will give me encouragement that he is listening and that he could achieve that for us.

Andrew Jones: I am, indeed, listening. I am not entirely sure that I can promise extra tunnelling in the Chilterns—that was a very big ask. We have, as a House, and through this project, been over that ground in some detail. However, the point remains that consultations are to genuinely listen to local input so that projects can be improved, whichever part of our public services it is. That cannot mean that everybody gets what they want—that is not possible—but it certainly means that people should be treated with respect and that it is not just a tick-box exercise.

The point about the numbers I was going through earlier is that there is already scale to what is happening. These are big numbers, but the big numbers have to be backed by practical help. In April 2014, an improved assistance package for property owners close to the route was announced. I would stress that the Government are committed to fairly compensating land and property owners directly affected by HS2. Most large infrastructure projects compensate property owners only when statutory compensation measures apply. Given the time it will take to develop HS2, which is a most unique project, the Government recognise that earlier discretionary schemes help those property owners who are most severely affected by the proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) raised the point about those most affected by blight in phase 2a. They can submit a blight notice, and that means, potentially, face value for property—10% homeowner’s payment and costs. I will write to my hon. Friend with details of that so he can pass those on to his constituents and anybody else who may contact him.

Residents with properties on the full phase 1 and phase 2a routes currently have access to a package of compensation measures and assistance. Overall, these are available much more widely than for other infrastructure projects, and, indeed, offer more choice. We intend to bring forward proposals for long-term property compensation and assistance schemes when the HS2 phase 2b announcement is made later this year.

The need-to-sell scheme is, I believe, operating fairly. I will of course pick up the points my right hon. Friend mentioned. We already have updated guidance to reflect learning from the scheme since its inception in January last year. In particular, a change made earlier this year allows a successful applicant to choose one of the two initial valuers, either from HS2 Ltd’s pool or any Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors-registered valuer.

Sir William Cash: It has been brought to my attention that there have been proposals for tunnelling through sand and gravel, and that in such circumstances an enormous of time will be wasted given that it is not possible to do that because it just falls in.

Andrew Jones: I am not a geologist, but I am aware of concerns about the ground conditions on the route for phase 1 and phase 2a. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) has highlighted the challenges regarding salt mines. These issues will be tackled in full and in detail by geologists. I recognise the challenges involved in a project with significant tunnelling, but, as a country, we have learned more about that through the progress made on Crossrail.

My right hon. Friend has made very clear the frustrations of not only her constituents but those of her colleagues’ constituents. HS2 Ltd acknowledges that it has not always got communications right, as we know. It did not in the case of Flats Lane near Lichfield, as the parliamentary and health service ombudsman’s report and the inquiry by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee laid bare. I am not here to make excuses for the company. We must deal with all those affected with fairness, and fairness requires the highest standards of engagement. I believe that HS2 is an organisation that is learning, and it needs to learn and improve over time. Communications on phase 2 reflect the lessons of past engagement. I cannot correct what has happened before, but I can seek to learn from it, to make sure that the company has learned from it, and to correct and improve things for the future. Much has taken place and much more is planned.

On phase 2a, HS2 Ltd has seen 2,184 people at 13 information events held this month and last month, as well as numerous meetings with councils and action groups. It has also met individuals directly and indirectly affected by the 2a line of route. In addition, 1,487 people have been seen at phase 2a property events.
Vital as good engagement on phase 2 is, the first phase of HS2 is poised at a significant threshold—the start of construction. HS2 Ltd will specify the behaviours it expects of its contractors in their engagement with residents and communities. For contractors working on HS2, key performance indicators on community engagement will form part of their contracts, and HS2 Ltd will measure their approach to this. The phase that we are entering will see many more people working not just on HS2 but all through the HS2 supply chain. The number of potential interactions between members of the public and the project will therefore increase. It is important to note that this is not just an HS2 Ltd issue; it is an HS2 Ltd and supply chain issue.

Mrs Gillan: One of the key things I have tried to put across during this debate is the fact that people do not have confidence in HS2 or in the independent commissioners who are supposed to represent their interests if things go wrong. Does the Minister agree that for HS2 to have an interim chief executive who comes from a contractor that has already received contracts from HS2, and that is now bidding for further contracts from HS2, makes it look as though there is a conflict of interest? Does the Minister agree that it hardly engenders confidence in the public that the project is being anything other than steamrollered through by people who are connected and who do not share the best interests of those who are affected by the scheme? Is that a relationship that the Minister is happy with? I think that there is a conflict of interest.

Andrew Jones: We sought to make sure that the project continued in its critical phase of delivery when Mr Kirby left to join Rolls-Royce. People leave companies all the time. He had a very good offer to go into Rolls-Royce, and he has taken it. “Man leaves company” is not necessarily news, but it would be news if the project faltered. We seek to secure continuity of delivery while we engage in a full and open recruitment process for a replacement for Mr Kirby. I understand all the points that have been made about trust and communication. Trust is easy to lose and difficult to gain. As the project develops, the company will simply have to work much harder to rebuild trust. It takes ages to rebuild something that can be lost in a moment. As I have said, we cannot correct what has happened in the past. I know that there are frustrations from communities, councils and colleagues here. We have to learn from them and put in place measures in HS2 and the HS2 supply chain, with a means of appeal. We can come on to the commissioners in a moment. Those have to be the principles by which we can plan for the future. The company is developing its plans for working with contractors to deliver engagement plans for each area, and they will be captured in a public code of construction practice.

An announcement will be made shortly on HS2 Ltd’s appointment of a director of community engagement, who will answer directly to the CEO. In addition, HS2 Ltd has recruited engagement managers for the phase 1 route, and their numbers have increased from six earlier this year to 26 today. They will be the main points of contact for local communities and will be responsible for acting on the concerns of those communities. Moreover, the engagement managers will be responsible for ensuring that the issues that are raised with them are addressed by HS2 Ltd in a timely and open manner.

As a statutory undertaker, HS2 Ltd has been required to appoint an independent construction commissioner. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesham and Amersham highlighted her meeting with Gareth Epps, who was appointed to the role on an interim basis in July. His is an interim role, but we envisage that it will increase after Royal Assent. It would be inappropriate to start adding to the cost base by allocating offices and taking on staff until we have clear Royal Assent. We intend to make sure that that role is independent and away from HS2 Ltd. Sir William Cash: I want to use this opportunity to register my concern, about which I am writing to the persons responsible, regarding the temporary construction facility of a railhead near Stone, in my constituency, which will affect Sylmerton, Eccleshall and Stone itself—as well as Yarnfield, of course, which is where I am going on Saturday. I just thought I would get that on the record so that the Minister could pass on that message to the people he is talking about.

Andrew Jones: That message is now firmly on the record. It is inevitable that when projects of great scale arrive in any area, they will attract enormous public interest, public concern and, in many cases, public enthusiasm. We need to make sure that we get this right, and Members of Parliament have an important role as a natural place for a resident who is concerned about a national policy initiative to go.

The construction commissioner will mediate in unresolved disputes between HS2 Ltd and individuals or bodies, including under a planned small claims scheme. He will also monitor complaints and advise on how to reduce them where possible, and he will scrutinise HS2 Ltd and the community engagement work of its contractors, to provide a clear steer for the company. As I have said, following Royal Assent we expect it to become a permanent role, and I intend to have regular contact so that I am fully informed of any issues up and down the line.

I have alluded to the variety of communities and groups with an interest in HS2. The company understands the importance of a tailored approach. Its equality, diversity and inclusion team is at the forefront of engaging with harder-to-reach communities, including perhaps those with a language barrier. There have been concerns in the Camden area, for instance. That highlights the importance of local representatives, so local government has a significant role to play in HS2.

HS2 Ltd provides briefing sessions for local authority elected members and chief officers, and it meets, briefs and seeks input from them. I have met authority leaders
in Birmingham and Manchester in the past few days. They are looking at the project in a very encouraging and exciting way and are considering how they will be able to redevelop their areas when the project lands. However, it is not just about redevelopment; it is also about construction work. HS2 Ltd, local authorities and other bodies, such as Highways England, have to engage properly in order to plan the building process effectively.

Mrs Gillan: Will the Minister give an undertaking that he will look at my amendments relating to the adjudicator?

Andrew Jones: I am coming to that and the answer is yes.

HS2 Ltd also has to engage with business organisations, to ensure that they know how to take advantage of the opportunities provided by HS2. I want HS2 to be a project that is from the UK for the UK, with UK contractors bidding for and winning business.

This is a project that matters to everyone, and I believe that it is in the national interest. Of course, it matters particularly to those whom it directly affects, and doing what is right by them includes excellent communications and engagement. That is what I and, most importantly, those along the route are entitled to expect from HS2, and it has given me that commitment. It is seeking to learn and build on what has happened before.

I will visit the HS2 offices in Birmingham shortly to review the community engagement plans. I will sit down with the team to discuss them and I will go through all the points that have been made by colleagues today. I can certainly provide an undertaking to review the amendments, as requested by my right hon. Friend. I will also consider her point about compensation to local authorities and write to her.

The point that I really want to make is that we cannot correct the past. This is a project that is happening. I believe that it is exciting and necessary and that it will transform our rail industry and provide a huge opportunity to regenerate large swathes of big cities across our country. Ultimately, I believe that it is a project that we will be proud of as a nation, but we have to make sure that we deal with the issues that have been raised, including building trust and communicating better. I can certainly give colleagues the undertaking that they can raise issues with me and that I will then take them up with HS2 right away. I want to make sure that, from the moment we set about building the project and right along the length of its line, people are treated with openness and respect, and that through that we can build the trust that has been missing, as judged from the comments of colleagues today.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.
Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private. Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Before I begin my remarks, I place on the record a declaration of interest. I have a small number of properties in the private sector, and I am a vice-president of the Local Government Association.

The reality is that, in this day and age, homelessness results from many different causes. It could be because of a relationship breakdown, the end of a private sector tenancy, someone being ill or injured in an accident, or many other causes. As Members of Parliament, we know that often someone who reaches that crisis of homelessness in their lives will naturally go to their local authority to seek help. The sad fact is that when someone is threatened with homelessness and goes to their local authority they will as likely as not be told, “Go home, wait until the bailiffs arrive and come back when you are literally on the streets.”

When someone is on the streets—when they have reached that terrible crisis point in their life—they arrive at the housing office and the people there do a checklist: is the person addicted to drugs or alcohol; do they have children under the age of 16; are they suffering from some terrible illness or other problem?

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing this Bill. He talks about local authorities and he is right that changes need to be made to legislation, but does he agree that if this Bill is to be successful there needs to be urgent Government funding behind local authorities so that they can tackle mental health, drug abuse and so forth, and that without that extra funding the good aspirations of the Bill will not work?

Bob Blackman: Clearly, the Bill is part of a strategy. It is not the sole basis of this approach. Under the new doctrines operating in this Parliament, new duties on local authorities mean new money for local government. I hope to hear that from the Minister later on.

After the checks, if someone is priority homeless the local authority will house them, probably in emergency accommodation, which is expensive to the local authority and not very suitable for the people who have to be housed. The non-priority homeless are told to go out and sleep on the streets, on a park bench, or in a doorway, and then they may—may—be picked up by a charity under the No Second Night Out programme. That is an absolute national disgrace. When employment is at the highest level ever and we have a relatively low level of unemployment, having one single person sleeping rough on our streets is a national disgrace that we must combat.

For 40 years, we in this House have forced local authorities to ration the help that they give. I passionately believe that people enter public service to deliver a service to the public, not to deny them a service.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this important Bill. He points to the fact that local authorities will make an assessment and some people will be placed in...
temporary accommodation as a result. Does he agree, however, that far too many very vulnerable people still end up sleeping rough, sofa surfing or sleeping on the streets, including, for example, people discharged from hospital or from custody?

Bob Blackman: That is precisely why I am introducing this Bill. Anyone who is sleeping rough is extremely vulnerable. They are liable to be mugged and to be attacked. Women are likely to be raped. Horrible things happen to people who are forced to sleep rough. I do not want to see that happen in this society any longer.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Blackman: If I may, I will make a bit of progress. When I was drawn second in the private Members’ Bills ballot, I asked myself what I could do that would make a difference. At the time, I never realised how popular I could become, literally overnight.

Mr Smith: On his popularity, will the hon. Gentleman give way? [Laughter.]

Bob Blackman: I will.

Mr Smith: I too congratulate the hon. Gentleman on introducing the Bill, which I fully support. On prevention, does he agree that in Wales the Labour Government have introduced measures very similar to those in the Bill? They are starting to work. Unlike in England, homelessness is dropping. He talks about a false economy. The Welsh Government have put money up front to deal with this issue, but I am sure they will save money in the long run.

Bob Blackman: I will come on to the situation in Wales in a moment.

The anticipated savings will include direct savings to local authority homelessness teams. Drawing on the lessons from Wales, which the hon. Lady rightly raises, academies commissioned by Crisis estimate that a projected 20% increase in prevention and relief activity could produce an additional cost of £43.9 million, but that those savings will be offset by a £46.8 million reduction in spending on people who are already homeless. That is partly due to reductions in the use of temporary accommodation and a greater focus on preventing homelessness. Over time, this should reduce the number of people who lose their homes in the first place. This would require more intensive support through either a relief duty or an offer of settled accommodation under the main duty of homelessness.

The Bill should also make savings for other public bodies. Research by Crisis into the cost savings of prevention and relief duties in England suggest that in just six months we could save £2.88 million for the criminal justice system and £1.2 million to £3.8 million for the national health service, including over £500,000 of savings for accident and emergency departments alone. What we know is that people who are sleeping rough are far more likely to suffer from respiratory diseases and they have to use the NHS repeatedly.

In Wales, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 came into force on 27 April 2015—a great day, the one after my birthday. The experience gained from that legislation has helped to inform measures in the Bill in certain areas. Wales has seen a 69% reduction in the number of households owed the main homelessness duty, with only 1,563 households owed the main homelessness duty in the first year of the new prevention and relief duties. In the first year, 7,128 households were provided with prevention assistance, of which 4,599, or 65%, had duties. In the first year of the new prevention and relief duties, 72% of temporary accommodation, even half that reduction would save some £37 million.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am here to support my hon. Friend and his excellent Bill. I just observe, however, that when London boroughs seek
temporary accommodation it disrupts the housing market in Wycombe for my constituents. Does he agree that we need many more affordable homes, to both buy and rent, everywhere, but especially in London?

Bob Blackman: The Bill does not deal with supply, but that is an important issue. It is clear that we need to increase the supply of affordable homes right across the country, but particularly in London.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman suggests there will be a saving to local authorities in London, so why does my council in the London Borough of Redbridge estimate that the Bill will lead to additional costs of £5 million for our local authority?

Bob Blackman: There will be an increase in costs associated with the help and advice, and prevention duties. Clearly, that needs to be funded by the Government. I am sure we will hear good news from the Government when the wind-up speeches take place. There are beacons of excellence across the country, where homelessness is not an issue and local authorities carry out the prevention duty properly. I do not want to comment on particular councils, but I suggest that the hon. Gentleman advises his council to look at the Bill very carefully. We need to make sure that London councils support the Bill, recognise their duties and seek funding for them.

The Bill seeks to revolutionise what happens in housing offices. I received an email from a young lady in Wales. Carol Martin is a line manager for homelessness and housing options for a rural county council in west Wales, with many years of housing experience in both England and Wales. She wrote that since the changes:

“It has taken a total rethink of the way my staff work and has needed additional funding, but we are changing things around to take a preventative approach at the outset. It was certainly not an easy process but with a strong belief it can be achieved, some additional types of training and strong negotiation skills it really does work...the roles within the team are more positive due to the help they are able to give, and the clients coming through the doors are more likely to join in a mutually agreed Personal Housing Plan where the clients take some responsibility as well as the Officers, all working towards a positive outcome.”

That is precisely what my Bill seeks to achieve.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill addresses the cruelty of the current system? What is brilliant about the Bill is that it will allow local housing staff to express more of their innate compassion and kindness. Like many MPs, I have found staff to be incredibly helpful when people are in desperate need—a gentleman in Richmond borough called Brian Castle does outstanding work—and the Bill will help them to utilise their great abilities.

Bob Blackman: That is the aim—to revolutionise the culture in local authorities and housing offices that provide a service.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman for introducing the Bill, and I am pleased to hear his acknowledgment that if it is going to work, it will need to have resources behind it. Let me put this point to him about prevention. Prevention must mean what it says. I recall an Adjournment debate in which it was pointed out that a previous Conservative administration of Birmingham City Council was using the term “prevention” as a means of passing the buck to others to give advice to people threatened by homelessness. It is really important that prevention means prevention and not just passing the buck.

Bob Blackman: There are beacons of excellence in local authorities, some of which do a really good job on preventing homelessness. Unfortunately, the norm is that they do not. We must ensure that they do not pass the buck, that they come up to the plate and that they deliver for homeless people.

The aim of the Bill is, first and foremost, to ensure that no one, but no one, is turned away at the door. Everyone should be entitled to some form of support before they get to the stage where they literally have nowhere safe to stay. No one should go to their council for help, only to be told, “Come back when the bailiffs have arrived.” This Bill ensures that everyone, regardless of priority need status, is entitled to receive free information and advice to help them with their situation; and it means that 56 days prior to someone becoming homeless, they will get help. The council will have to produce a personalised housing plan to create a tailored road map for preventing homelessness in that crucial period, so that both the applicant and the council have an agreed set of steps to fulfil the prevention of homelessness.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the Bill forward today, but will it guard against substandard accommodation? We would not like to see people being placed in substandard accommodation, which is the big issue up and down the country at the moment.

Bob Blackman: I am coming on to that particular issue in a few moments.

The Bill will also ensure that local connection requirements are working in a way that prevents people from moving from one city to another or one part of London to another. People demanding housing in London, for example, would obviously put undue pressure on the system.

The Bill also makes sure that everyone takes an aspect of personal responsibility, so that people will be rewarded with good outcomes for co-operation and engagement with the process. It will bring about a culture change in councils—away from a crisis response towards prevention strategies and a more compassionate approach to helping people who are in that desperate crisis.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that I support his Bill, and it is good to see that MPs can turn up on a Friday when a Bill is genuinely popular and important to Members of Parliament. Will he confirm that the Bill will stop some of the perverse incentives that I saw when I volunteered for St George’s Crypt in Leeds, where local authorities were turning away people who did not have a drug or alcohol addiction because people with those addictions were seen as a priority? The people who were turned away felt that they were effectively being told that if
they wanted to be housed, they had to develop a drug or alcohol addiction. Will his Bill stop those perverse incentives?

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for the Bill. Yes, we have to stop these perverse incentives that are encouraging people to go down such routes. The reality is that the vast majority of people become homeless through no fault of their own; they just want help and advice from the local authority. The Bill will make sure that they get that help and advice at the time when they need it—not just on the basis of priority need.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I would like to join the universal hymn of praise to the hon. Gentleman. I suggest that anyone who wants to understand the reality of homelessness in London today should read “This is London” by Ben Judah. Speaking as a former homeless persons officer at the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we did not lack empathy or sympathy: what we lacked was housing, and we need to know how to address that. On the point about priorities, I am very proud that this and the last Government have prioritised people leaving the armed forces. We have a military covenant, so will the Bill still include that prioritisation of people leaving the armed forces?

Bob Blackman: I can confirm that the Bill does include priority for the armed forces and for people leaving the armed forces.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his Bill and I wholeheartedly support it. I am glad that he has referenced the absurd situation whereby people have to wait until the bailiffs arrive to evict them before they can get help from the housing department. That is one reason why private landlords are so reluctant to take on housing benefit tenants as well. Will my hon. Friend reference another particularly vulnerable set of people he has not mentioned so far: children leaving care? It can be ridiculous when such people can be evicted even from council-owned housing only for the council then to have to pick up responsibility for them at greater cost and with huge social implications for those vulnerable children.

Bob Blackman: I can confirm that the Bill will deal with care leavers. They are included in line with one of the suggestions made during the pre-legislative scrutiny process of the draft Bill.

The Bill will help to stimulate partnerships between local authorities and other public bodies by making sure that key public services are part of the process and have a duty to refer anyone identified as homeless to the responsible local authority. It also creates a power for the Secretary of State to introduce a statutory code of practice, providing further guidance on how local authorities should deliver their homelessness and prevention duties. This will be amendable and helpful when it comes to raising standards or sharing best practice. I do not want us to stifle local authorities that have creative schemes, but I want to make sure that all local authorities are brought up to the standard of the best.

In acknowledgement of the point raised by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), the Bill will help to make sure that private sector accommodation has been checked by the local authority when the authority secures accommodation for vulnerable households, ensuring that it meets the specific suitability requirements, including the legal checks required of properties, before being offered to people.

I have now described the ambit of the Bill, and it would be fair to say that it has been a long process to get to this stage. Crisis convened an expert panel of council representatives, lawyers and housing experts as well as others from the charity sector to look at ways to update homelessness legislation in England. I want to put on record my particular thanks to Jon Sparkes, Matthew Downie and Maeve McGoldrick from Crisis, particularly for their exceptional support throughout this whole process and for working with me to put this legislation together and help it reach this stage.

We drew on the Select Committee report and the work of the expert panel, publishing a first draft of the Bill in August. It was then put through pre-legislative scrutiny. The Select Committee on Communities and Local Government held an inquiry and produced a report on the draft version. The Bill is complex and it is unique in that it originates from a Select Committee report, has been scrutinised by the Select Committee and has been substantially amended as a result.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend has set out all the steps that he has taken prior to this morning in preparing the Bill. Does he agree that he has set out the gold standard, if I may put it like that, for what other Members should do before they bring private Members’ Bills before the House, and that Members should not just turn up and expect them to get through?

Bob Blackman: When I set out on this journey, I did not realise just how much work was going to have to be done. If Members are bringing legislation to this place to change the law, I believe they should go through a long process and ensure that their Bills are thoroughly tested before they present them.

The Select Committee recommended that clause 1, on the extension of duties to 56 days, should be retained—and the Bill has been kept in line with that recommendation. The Select Committee also found that the Bill’s original measures on the consequences of non-co-operation did not offer sufficient support to vulnerable households. As a result, this aspect was completely reworked, with the bar for non-co-operation during the prevention or relief stage raised to the level of “deliberate and unreasonable refusal to co-operate” to ensure greater protection for vulnerable people. Further safeguards have been introduced to ensure that any household in priority need status is found to have deliberately and unreasonably refused to co-operate will be made an offer of a six-month tenancy. That change is supported by the homelessness charities involved.

The prospect of 56 days of emergency accommodation at the end of the prevention stage, regardless of priority need status, was criticised by the Communities and Local Government Committee. While it agreed with the idea in principle, it added: “we also recognise the reality that it is not feasible for councils to provide accommodation to all homeless people.”
We heard evidence that suggested that there might be some unfortunate unintended consequences, such as the stimulation of the growth of a market in substandard temporary accommodation—warehouse-style accommodation, for instance—or the diversion of resources from vulnerable people.

Primary legislation is not a panacea. It is not always the best way of tackling an issue properly, especially an issue with a complex range of causes. I am therefore very pleased that the Government have now announced a package of measures—at a cost of £40 million—to tackle rough sleeping, with Manchester, Newcastle and Southwark becoming “trailblazer” councils for preventive work. I believe that that will be a far more effective and flexible way forward, and I commend St Mungo’s in particular for all the work that it does in this regard.

The Committee recommended that clause 2 include the words

“those who have experienced, or are at continued risk of, domestic violence and abuse”.

That has been duly done, and is covered by subsection (2)(d).

In respect of the proposed changes in the definition of a local connection, the Committee recommended that the definition in the original legislation be left unchanged. That too has been done, although a minor correction has been made to the original text to deal with a long-standing issue relating to care leavers, and to ensure that they are protected.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh), and his all-party group on ending homelessness, for all their support. I also commend the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chairman of the Select Committee, for all his help and guidance during this process, and for ensuring that the pre-legislative scrutiny was conducted in a fair, transparent manner. As a result, we have ended up with a Bill which I believe has all-party support.

I am delighted to have secured Government support. I took into account the views of many interested parties, and on Monday the Government finally announced that they would back the Bill. They will fund the core elements of the Bill, and it would be great if the Government would assist in addressing the financial pressures that local authorities will face to ensure that they are protected.

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I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and his team of officials for working so hard to ensure that the Bill was in a suitable state to be passed.

I know that the Bill cannot do everything. It will not tackle issues relating to supply, and it will not be a magic bullet to clear the streets of homeless people overnight. What it will do, however, is introduce a long-term cultural change which will, over time, bring about a different way of working among local authorities that will stop people from getting into the terrible position of being homeless in the first place.

Let me relate just one story from my constituency. I will not name the individual concerned, but he had lived in west London and fallen on hard times. When he approached the local authority for advice, he found himself passed between various staff members before falling into an agreement with a housing association. He was evicted from that property, and moved further west. He approached the local authority there, and the local Member of Parliament. Again, he was passed between council staff members. He ended up sleeping rough sporadically, or in his car. After a while he was given a room by a support group, but he left the property shortly after beginning the tenancy as a result of a mutual agreement with the management. He then approached a third local authority.

It was at this point that the man contacted my office for help. That third local authority had told him that he could not be housed. No help was offered, despite his obvious need. My staff approached the office of an MP with whom he had had contact in the past, as well as a support officer who had helped him at one stage. There is a strong suspicion of an undiagnosed mental illness. Without a permanent address, it is difficult for the man to retain a single GP and obtain a diagnosis, and without a diagnosis, he is not considered vulnerable. The cycle just repeats itself. It is important to ensure that everyone is given help, advice and support from the start to prevent such situations from developing.

It is vital for Members, here and in the other place, to refrain from adding amendments to the Bill if it is to succeed. Private Members’ Bills are inherently vulnerable because they have a limited amount of time to get through Parliament, so amendments are likely to cause this Bill to fall in its entirety. I shall welcome short contributions from Members today, as well as volunteers to serve on the Bill Committee. Certain organisations have expressed concerns about the drafting of some clauses; if the Bill succeeds today, I shall undertake to investigate them fully in Committee.

The Bill has received the maximum possible pre-legislative scrutiny, so Members can be confident that it will be workable and has been properly costed. Homelessness is a complex issue, and no one piece of legislation can be the sole solution. The Bill is one part of a larger strategy, but it is a key part, and will produce a revolution in local authority housing offices.

I thank all those who have helped to guide and produce the Bill, but in particular I thank my long-suffering parliamentary assistant, who, over the past six months, has done virtually nothing except work on the Bill.
The Government have proved their commitment to social justice in backing it, and, in doing so, have also demonstrated that the Conservative party, led by our current Prime Minister, is the truly reforming, progressive party that is delivering after 40 years of legislation that has prevented local authorities from offering a service to homeless people.

10.8 am

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Let me begin by expressing my thanks and gratitude to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), not merely for his Bill but for the enormous amount of work that he has done over the last few weeks in building a coalition of support across the House and among outside organisations. We should not underestimate his commitment, or his success in building that support for his Bill.

Members have referred to the work of the Communities and Local Government Committee. We in the House are used to following precedents—we seem to do it all the time—but I think that, on this occasion, we have actually created a precedent. A report from a Select Committee has provided the basis for a private Member’s Bill, the Bill has then been subjected to pre-legislative scrutiny by the Select Committee, and the Committee’s subsequent report has helped to produce the Bill in its final form. That, I think, is unique. No one can find an example of its being done before. It is an important example of the two ways in which Back Benchers can best shape and influence legislation in this House—private Members’ Bills and Select Committees—coming together in a powerful way to produce legislation that has support right across the House and will, I hope, reach the statute book. I thank all my colleagues on the Select Committee for the work they have put into it.

Homelessness is a growing problem, as can be seen from the 50% increase in local authority acceptances since 2010 and the growing number of rough sleepers. We also know that the figures do not reflect the true situation. The UK Statistics Authority has said that the figures are not fit for purpose and the Government have agreed to review them, but this is a difficult job. It is difficult enough trying to count rough sleepers. The St Mungo’s estimates for London are eight times higher than the Government figures. Some 40% of homelessness cases are caused by the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy, often because the tenants cannot afford to pay the rent. In Westminster, the gap between the average rent and the local housing allowance is £500 a month. But it is not just Westminster: in Cambridgeshire, the gap is £250 a month. Those are large figures. If the local housing allowance is frozen from now until 2020, the gap will get worse. Recommendation 2 of the Select Committee’s first report on homelessness states:

“There is therefore a case for the development of homes for affordable rent which we encourage the Government to act on by working with local authorities to deliver the homes that are needed at a local level.”

It is helpful that the new Minister for Housing and Planning is beginning to reflect that point in his comments. We look forward to the White Paper and the autumn statement, which hopefully will recognise that although homes to buy are important, there are many people who cannot afford to buy and who need a home for rent. That is something for the Government to consider.

Emma Reynolds: I welcome my hon. Friend’s focus on the housing crisis and the failure of the Government to deal with it. Obviously, successive Governments have failed to build enough homes. May I bring him back to his point about supply? Is it not the case that some of the Government’s policies, such as forcing councils to sell council homes and watering down section 106 agreements to focus purely on starter homes, rather than council homes, are making the problem much, much worse?

Mr Betts: Personally, I agree with my hon. Friend. The Select Committee looked at this matter for our report on housing associations and the right to buy, and that was reflected in our report on homelessness. We accepted that there should be a housing programme to provide more homes in local areas to reflect local needs, and that it should include homes to buy and homes to rent. That was agreed across the parties. There is a need to recognise that housing markets are different across the country and that what is appropriate in London is not necessarily appropriate in the north-east. It is appropriate to look at local need and provide the homes that are needed in particular areas. There was all-party support for that.

The Select Committee looked at the problem of the growing gap between private market rents and the local housing allowance. Some 40% of homelessness cases are caused by the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy, often because the tenants cannot afford to pay the rent. In Westminster, the gap between the average rent and the local housing allowance is £500 a month. But it is not just Westminster: in Cambridgeshire, the gap is £250 a month. Those are large figures. If the local housing allowance is frozen from now until 2020, the gap will get worse. Recommendation 2 of the Select Committee’s first report on homelessness states:

“Local Housing Allowances levels should also be reviewed so that they more closely reflect market rents.”

There was cross-party agreement on that. It is a problem that in many areas, when people are made homeless, there is no social housing for them to go into and no private rented housing they can afford either. That needs to be addressed.

There are also problems with supported housing, although the Government have rowed back from their initial intention to relate the cost of supported housing to the local housing allowance. This still needs to be thought through. There are particular problems for people in supported housing who get back into work and then find that they cannot meet the cost of supported housing because housing benefit is withdrawn completely. That problem was raised with the Select Committee by a lot of young people during our inquiry and it needs to
be addressed. People must be able to get back into work without finding, suddenly, that they have lost their supported housing at the time they most need it.

Mr Andrew Smith: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Select Committee on the work they have done. Is there not also an acute problem that arises from the cuts to housing-related support? For example, Oxfordshire County Council, because of cuts in Government support, is drastically cutting the support it gives to local homelessness hostels and threatening to end it altogether in three years. Even with all the measures in this Bill, if that went ahead, it would be a disaster because hostels would close and people would be forced on to the streets.

Mr Betts: Certainly, when the initial proposal was made that the costs of supported housing would be related to the local housing allowance, virtually every provider of supported housing said that they would not be viable. The Government have rowed back from that and are now talking about splitting the housing benefit element and the care and support element. That might be a sensible way to help people who get jobs and ensure that they do not lose all their support, but the Government might still want to think again about the proposal to force supported housing providers to reduce their rents each year. That will cause problems for many of them and they are still raising it as a concern.

The Select Committee found that there was a need to offer better support and advice to people who present as homeless. As the hon. Member for Harrow East said, the Bill will not end homelessness, but it will address a very real problem. We saw some good examples of local authorities dealing with homeless people. In Birmingham, we saw a truly joined-up service, with the housing authority, the children’s service, charities and the health service all working together. Unfortunately, that is not the case everywhere. Crisis sent its mystery shopper into 87 local authorities and 50 of them were found to have got it wrong. The variation in support for homeless people is simply unacceptable. Crisis was very clear about that when it came to the Select Committee, and our report said:

“We have received too much evidence of councils and their staff treating homeless people in ways that are dismissive and at times discriminatory. This is unacceptable.”

Hopefully, the Bill and the better code of practice that the Government are going to bring forward will address those issues.

The hon. Member for Harrow East outlined the important measures in the Bill, which I and the Select Committee support entirely. The extension in the time when homelessness should be addressed by local authorities from 28 days to 56 days will provide more time for preventive work. The measures to improve support and advice are very welcome, as is the proposal for a personal plan for individuals who present as homeless. It is important to talk to people about what is and is not possible in addressing their homelessness needs right from the very beginning.

I hope it can be written in at some point that, in addressing those needs, regard should be given to the care and support that homeless people get from family members and others, and to the schools their children go to. Perhaps that can be contained in the code of practice that Ministers will bring forward, because those things are important. We heard evidence of people being offered homes that were a two-hour journey from their children’s school. If at all possible, that should be avoided.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this important Bill to the Floor of the House.

On the point the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) has just made, I want to say that families have changed: there are many more broken families and single men and women out there. We need to treat them all equally, especially a man who becomes single but still wants access to his family and the school his children go to. We need parity across the system, with single men treated equally if they become vulnerable and homeless.

Mr Betts: There is a very real problem in that for local authorities, which can end up providing two homes for a family when it splits up. That is a real challenge and I have a lot of sympathy with local authorities, but equally with the people who want to keep contact with their children and maintain good parental relationships.

I welcome the personal plan and the preventive measures, and particularly the measures in clause 1 and a stop to the nonsense that homeless people, who are already stressed out and traumatised, should have to go through a court process and sometimes end up being evicted before the local authority will help them. That is crucial to the success of the Bill and to giving homeless people a better deal.

I have something to say about the wording of the Bill. Local authorities can decide they will force people to go through the court process if they can show they “have taken reasonable steps to try to persuade the landlord to—

(i) withdraw the notice, or
(ii) delay applying for an order”.

That may be reasonable if authorities use the measure reasonably, but I am worried it provides a loophole that authorities that are not being reasonable could use to force more people through the court route than intended. We will need to closely monitor the legislation to make sure that unintended consequence does not arise.

Stephen Pound: My hon. Friend speaks from a position of great knowledge. I entirely endorse his point about schooling: anyone who goes to Slough station at 7 o’clock in the morning will see 20 or 30 children wearing Ealing school uniforms, making a two-hour journey. That is heart-breaking.

One of the fastest-growing areas of homelessness is parental exclusion. It seems to be perverse to ask a mother or father to evict, through the courts, their daughter or son. Does my hon. Friend agree that parental exclusion should be examined in detail in Committee?

Mr Betts: The hon. Member for Harrow East will know far more about the intended mechanics of the legislation, but I think the point is that when someone is threatened with homelessness they go to the authority, and now they will be entitled to proper advice and support, including the working out of a personal plan,
from the very beginning. That is a key part of the legislation. It will not solve every problem for everyone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness, but it should provide a much better service for people in the situation that my hon. Friend mentions.

The duty of public authorities to refer to a housing authority someone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness is very relevant. I ask the hon. Member for Harrow East, however, whether there is a possibility at some point of extending beyond a duty to refer, to a duty to co-operate. If someone is homeless, they often have mental health problems or are faced with domestic abuse or other issues related to their homelessness such as unemployment or benefits problems. The Committee’s report on homelessness recommended having a joined-up approach, and it would be an improvement to get all public authorities working together.

Finally, it is crucial that we get the code of practice in place. I would like to hear from the Minister whether the code will be available for Members to look at before the end of our consideration of the Bill. The Government have codes of guidance at present but unfortunately they do not always work. A classic example is that currently in the code—a Minister has recently written to councils reminding them of this—if a local authority does an out-of-area placement of a homeless family, they are supposed to tell the receiving authority that that family is coming to them because they may have other needs that need addressing. In many cases that does not happen, however, despite the guidance saying it should. A code of practice ought to strengthen the code of guidance, and authorities ought to have to follow it. We want to hear that Ministers will put in place proper monitoring arrangements to make sure all the good measures are delivered in practice for people who are homeless or are threatened with homelessness.

This Bill will not remove homelessness, as the hon. Gentleman has accepted. However, there has been such a cross-party effort to try to get this right, from the hon. Gentleman, from the Select Committee and from a wide group of organisations including Crisis, that we hope it will improve the situation for the homeless and those threatened with homelessness in a very meaningful way.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. No fewer than 29 Back-Bench Members are seeking to contribute to the debate, meaning there is a premium upon economy.

10.25 am

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of my Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) not just on deciding to tackle what is a very thorny issue, but on the way he has developed the legislation. His open, collaborative approach means the Bill contains proposals that are workable, have been tested in the Committee and have cross-party support. That is why I am delighted to co-sponsor this Bill as a Committee member, and as a former housing Minister.

In the year I was housing Minister, I took the opportunity over Christmas 2012 to learn a little more about this subject by working as a volunteer for Crisis in one of its shelters, and it was a real eye-opener. We all deal with this as constituency Members, but when we are there as an individual listening and engaging and doing what Ministers rarely have time to do, which is work with individuals, that really changes our views and aims. I want to put on record my support for Jon Sparkes and his team at Crisis and its many volunteers for all they do. I also pay tribute to Crisis for handling this Bill so openly and collaboratively, which means it is taking a just cause and turning it into good law. Many other pressure groups could learn from that.

As so many other Members wish to speak, let me canter through the issues. First, we have rightly heard that homelessness is hugely complex. It manifests itself in different guises: people might be sleeping on the streets, in shelters, or in a house but sofa surfing. It is also immensely complicated in terms of the way it can be measured. The current snapshot statistics are not sufficient: they do not provide a clear picture. One outcome of the Select Committee inquiry was to encourage the Government to look at extending the CHAIN—combined homelessness and information network—database statistics, which are year-round, by rolling them out beyond London. I hope the Minister will respond to that point, because if we get a better view throughout the year of the nature of the problem, we will deal with the causes more effectively.

On the causes, while it is clear that the increase in the turnover of tenancies is a factor, it is not the only factor. For many people, the reason they find themselves on the streets is less to do with housing and more about underlying problems. Indeed, for some people their homelessness is a symptom of other problems. That is why mental health issues, addictions, family breakdowns and the challenges around debt frequently feature among the homeless. People can often cope with one of those problems, but the moment when those problems coalesce can be when their lives collapse and they turn up at the local authority. So if we are to tackle homelessness, we need to understand the complexity of the causes.

That is why I am so pleased to see that 20 years on from the Housing Act 1996, this Bill shifts the policy and the law to prevention. As Members have said, the danger is that action occurs only once people are facing crisis. Clauses 1, 2 and 4 are important because they enable local authorities to intervene in a way that helps to prevent homelessness. Change the law and the policy and practice will follow. Until now we have tended to deal with the issue once people become homeless, which has proved to be more expensive and difficult. More important perhaps, if we only deal with the problem once people have been turfed out of their home, it is far more traumatic for them, especially when there are children involved.

The hon. Member for Sheffield South East touched on the question of how to raise the standard of advice and support across local government. Many local authorities do a fantastic job and I want to express my admiration for the housing officers in my own district of East Herts and the many others I have met. They do a rewarding but difficult job, dealing with family crises on a daily basis. The Select Committee inquiry revealed the huge variation in the advice and support provided by different councils. This is not, as we might suspect, simply a
difference between councils in different parts of the country with different problems. In fact, there are variations between neighbouring authorities with almost identical social issues. To use a catchphrase, there is a postcode lottery for those in need.

As a Minister, I tried to promote best standards of practice and to use those standards to lever up the rest. That had some good effects and we saw some really important improvements, but I have to say now that, three years on, I recognise that they were not enough. I have been a reluctant supporter of the provisions in the Bill on statutory codes of practice. I back them now, but I did not do so initially. If they are clearly drafted and focus on outcomes, such as mandatory codes—I note that they are plural in the Bill, not singular—they could be targeted to raise the standards of service in the weakest authorities. I fully accept that the Local Government Association and others have said that we need to be very careful about this. Of course we need to be careful about how we draft the codes and ensure compliance. The codes should also be matched by a continuing effort from the Government to reward best practice.

Clause 2 will broaden the duty to provide advice and information. All of us, as constituency Members, will recognise the different categories that come before us locally, including people who do not quite meet the standards and are not regarded as priority cases. The Committee had an important meeting with young care leavers, and I am particularly pleased that that group is included in the Bill. Those young people were very candid about the system, which currently ignores them once they reach adulthood. They were initially cautious about talking to us—they do not normally engage with strange politicians in suits—but the conversation flagged up the fact that many of them were sleeping rough. Yes, some of them were sofa surfing, but sadly some of them were turning to drugs and even to prostitution. It is therefore really important that that group is specifically included in the Bill. The fact that councils will now be required to recognise them as a vulnerable group is really important too.

The Bill offers a great opportunity to reduce, but not remove, homelessness. I think we all understand that this is an opportunity to focus on prevention and to raise the standards of advice and support across the country. It is also an opportunity to ensure that more people get help sooner. In that sense, the Bill offers real hope, but I would like to add one rider. Given the mood music coming from the Government, I think we might get a good answer to this point. I say to the Minister that we can hope to make progress only if the Government play their part. It is fantastic that Ministers have stepped up to the plate and that they are backing the Bill, but many councils will require additional funding in order to fulfil these new commitments. I trust, given the Minister’s positive body language, that we are going to get a useful response from him on that point, as we would expect. Today offers a chance for the House and the Government to send a message of real hope to those without shelter. Let us seize this chance and let us back the Bill.

10.33 am

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk). He has spoken this morning with a combination of policy expertise and personal experience. He made a telling point towards the end of his speech about the priority that the Bill gives to young people leaving care, which I really welcome. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on his Bill and also on the way in which he has gone about securing it. His sponsors are all members of the Communities and Local Government Committee, including my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), and for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). Together, they have produced the first ever pre-legislative scrutiny report of a private Member’s Bill. That has been helpful, in that the Bill before us has been significantly amended as a result of the Select Committee’s report.

The Bill is well supported, and there have been good briefings on it by campaign charities including Shelter, St Mungo’s and, above all, Crisis, for which it has become something of a crusade in recent months. I am glad that we got confirmation in the House on Monday from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government that the Government intended to back the Bill. That is a tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones). I know very well how much work is required behind the scenes to get all parts of the Government, not least the Treasury, lined up to support a private Member’s Bill. Those of us who have seen him at meetings, receptions and debates in recent months know how hard he has been working to secure the Government’s support.

We on the Labour Front Bench welcome the Bill. I back the Bill and I welcome the cross-party support for its aims, which are to provide more help earlier for people who are threatened with homelessness, and reduce the number of people hit by the misery of homelessness. I also welcome the Bill because it builds directly on similar legislation that was introduced in Wales by the Labour-led Government in 2014. Importantly, however, that was not an isolated piece of legislation, but part of a 10-year strategy.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Did my right hon. Friend see the comment by Simon Rose, the housing management officer at Newport Council, that for every pound Newport Council spends on its homelessness policy, it saves £4 as a result of the legislation introduced by the Welsh Government?

John Healey: I have not seen Simon Rose’s comments, and I would be grateful if my hon. Friend could send them to me. He makes the point that the extra cost required to support this Bill will be a good investment in the long term, and I hope that Ministers will recognise that. Preventing homelessness will prevent higher, longer-term costs. It is early days, but the experience in Wales in the first year following that legislation has been encouraging. In 65% of cases, homelessness has been successfully prevented when at-risk households have been helped by councils. That means that there are nearly 5,000 people and families in Wales today who last year could have been homeless, but who have instead benefited from the help offered by the councils.

This is a good, useful Bill, but it is only a first step. The hon. Member for Harrow East was right to say that legislation is not a panacea that can reverse the rapidly rising level of homelessness. The Bill is not a silver...
b) We cannot legislate and claim to be tackling homelessness. We cannot legislate and lay the blame on councils. If the hon. Gentleman really wants to reverse 40 years of rationing, he cannot do it by redesigning the system, which is not the right effort to build more homes. The hon. Gentleman must do two things: fund the cost of the Bill in full, and tackle the causes of the growing homelessness crisis in the country. Those are the two tests with which we Opposition Members will hold the Government to account, hard.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the practical measures in the Bill, but I also heed my right hon. Friend’s comments about the need to accompany the changes with a real effort to fund the costs in full, and tackle the causes of homelessness. First, fund the costs in full, and secondly, tackle the causes of homelessness. The work to assess and agree the extra costs of the new duties or, if we like, burdens on councils that are in the Bill must be done urgently and openly. It cannot be done in some backroom deal between the Treasury and councils. Local government must have confidence in and involvement in the process. That is the first commitment that we want the Minister to give to the House today. Beyond that, councils rightly want to know that any additional funding that is needed. The number of new social rented homes started in Labour’s last year in government was 40,000; the number started last year was just 1,000.

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. I hope that the cross-party spirit in which we tackle this Bill may, in due course, lead to more of a cross-party spirit in tackling the bigger housing challenges that he mentioned.

I return to our two tests. First, the Government must fund the costs. The Minister told the Select Committee that he hoped to complete a costs estimate of the Bill before Second Reading. He has not, but in answer to a parliamentary question this week he confirmed to me:

“The Government will fund any additional costs in line with the longstanding ‘new burdens’ arrangements.”

The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point. We often talk about people losing their homes; does he agree that people do not lose their homes like they lose their keys but are often being forced out of them by Government policy? We need a joined-up strategy of exactly the kind he is describing.

John Healey: We do indeed. Increasingly, the trend is that people face the threat of homelessness and, indeed, are made homeless by breakdowns in private rented contracts, and they are often evicted by a private landlord. To tackle homelessness, we have to tackle the causes of homelessness. We must build more affordable housing, act on the rising costs and short-term lets for private tenants, and reverse the crude cuts in housing benefit that hit some of the most vulnerable people.

In today’s cross-party spirit, I direct the Minister’s attention to two planned changes that he simply must stop. If he does, he will find almost as much support for doing so among Conservative councils and colleagues as he will among the Opposition. Both of the changes are part of the toxic legacy for housing left by the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), so perhaps there is plenty of scope for common ground. First, how can councils house the homeless if the Government are going to force them to sell off the better council houses every time they become vacant? The Minister should drop that plan from the Housing and Planning Act 2016.
Secondly, how can councils house the homeless if homeless hostels face closure because the new housing benefit or local housing allowance falls so far short of the housing costs? The Minister should fully exempt supported housing from the changes to housing benefit.

Finally, I turn to the hon. Member for Harrow East and his cross-party sponsors. The Opposition wish them well during their further detailed discussions and debates with the Government. We wish the hon. Gentleman well in moving forward with the Bill, and in securing the action required to fund the costs and tackle the causes of the homelessness crisis in our country. To the extent that he does that, he will have the Opposition’s full support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Just to be helpful, lots of Members want speak and I want to get everybody in, so if brevity can be the order of the day, we will ensure that the Bill is tested and that, hopefully, everybody can unite at that stage. I am worried that we might end up talking it out if we are not careful.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): Like many colleagues present, I am pleased that the Government have put their support behind this much needed Bill. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has worked tremendously hard to get to this point, and that he has received great support from Crisis and St Mungo’s. It is a credit to the Bill that so much expertise has formed its building blocks, and it fully deserves the attention it has received today.

It is a tragedy when a person becomes homeless. It is also deeply saddening that homelessness doubled between 2010 and 2015. The misery is plain to see across many of our high streets and neighbourhoods. Kent is no different: the number sleeping rough there has doubled, and that is indeed the case in my own local community. My local authority, Medway Council, has conducted a survey to detail rough sleepers in the area. However, as I imagine is the case throughout much of the country, it is conceded that the true figure in Medway could be much higher than recorded.

The unfortunate people sleeping rough go through experiences that many of us cannot imagine in our worst nightmares, sometimes even under the radar. In Medway, we recently had the tragic death of 28-year-old Samson Paine, who was homeless in Chatham town centre. Samson’s partner, with whom he shared a life on the streets, has spoken emotionally about their struggles and how, eventually, they acquired a tent in which they could get some decent sleep. Although housing had been offered previously by a charity, under current legislation there was sadly little that Medway Council could do. We have in place a strong local network of organisations to help the homeless, and the council does offer good advice, but we should always do more when vulnerable individuals are forced to live on our streets.

In Rochester and Strood, we are blessed to have some of the hardest-working charity groups helping the homeless to get back on their feet. Emmaus Medway provides, as it does across the country, a supportive community for the homeless, allowing them to regain their dignity and independence. As a companion of Emmaus, those who are homeless can stay as long as they like within the caring principles and spirit of the community. This summer it celebrated its 25th anniversary in Rochester with a day of “bargains galore”, with the generous proceeds raised from my community going straight to the movement.

Our area also has Caring Hands, which offers a Christian response to the problems facing the marginalised in our society, including the homeless. Big focuses for Caring Hands are children and young people who have come out of care, people with addictions, those with mental health issues and ex-offenders who are looking for help in Medway. Each week, it provides meals and snacks, showers, laundry and a clothing exchange to its regular visitors. It offers that support and it, in turn, has a lot of support within our local community, including from many local businesses.

That work in my constituency is inspiring and it has extremely wide support throughout the local area. However, prevention is of course better than cure. A greater focus on preventing homelessness should, over time, reduce the number of people who lose their home and require more intensive support or accommodation. I know that it is important for councils to see an end to homelessness and, as in Medway, they would much rather have it prevented in the first place, so it is sad that we hear of many examples where a local authority can give its assistance only once a person has already slept rough. The system needs to be strengthened to ensure that these difficult choices are reduced. In the end, we need to move towards services having the ability to offer meaningful, personalised support, whereby struggling households and individuals are assisted to identify solutions to prevent homelessness quickly.

I am pleased that this Bill is setting out to address the prevention issue. Regardless of a person’s priority needs status or local connection, no one should be forced on to the streets when measures are still available. A single woman living on the street should not be there, just as much as a young family should not be. With the appropriate backing, it is right that our local government receives the means and is given the duty to prevent families or individuals from being forced to live on our streets.

I am hopeful that our local authorities will be given the necessary funds to ensure that this legislation works and that we achieve the results that everyone wishes for, but it should also be a case of, “You need to help me for me to help you.” It is crucial for the success of this legislation that households take their own steps and initiative to resolve their homelessness. It will be in most people’s interests to get themselves off the streets and back into a home that offers warmth, shelter and a place where a family can flourish. The incentives are there and the cultural barriers within households stopping them from seeking help must come down, too.

We are all aware of the introduction of similar legislation in Scotland and Wales. It is impressive to see the scheme in Wales already providing positive results in just its first year, with 65% of households applying for prevention assistance having a successful outcome. I am hopeful that that statistic will rise at the end of its second year and beyond. Through this Bill, we can get to the stage where we share best practice, both locally and nationally, across all regions of the United Kingdom.
[Kelly Tolhurst]

To conclude, I believe that in a civilised society it is unacceptable that people should be faced with the fear of homelessness. It is therefore vital to help the most vulnerable in society to get their lives back on track before it is too late or the damage is done. This important Bill reflects the compassionate society we all hold dear, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for bringing it forward today. I fully support him in his endeavour.

10.54 am

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), particularly given her comments about Emmaus, which is by far the most impressive group working and producing practical results in this area. I had the experience of visiting Emmaus, and, uniquely, the people there insisted that the visiting MPs washed their dishes after the modest meal that we had. This was a symbol of the democratic nature there; MPs, no matter who we thought we were, were on the same level as the homeless people and companions in the house. Emmaus is a splendid institution.

The hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) deserves our full congratulations on introducing this Bill. May I urge everyone else to follow his advice to keep a Bill simple and not to adorn it with amendments? I once had the experience of the late Alan Clark and the late Eric Forth making speeches in support of a Third Reading of a Bill I had. I then realised to my horror that neither of those two colourful figures actually understood the Bill, and the only way of getting it through was to make a 13-second speech in case they understood the details and then sabotaged it. Simplicity is the way of getting things through in this House.

The Welsh Government, to their credit, already have this measure. It is the best of legislation, because it is not overambitious; it does not attempt to change the world. We know the problems of homelessness. A lot of it is to do with mental ill health, or with addiction to drugs or alcohol. Homelessness is a very complex issue and there is no simple solution to it, but they have introduced this measure modestly and it has been very successful. May I commend another measure that the Welsh Government took, which is on consent for organ donations? About three years ago, I had a constituent visit me who was waiting for a heart transplant. This 19-year-old boy found that there was a shortage of donors and six months later I attended his funeral. Again, we should look at what is happening in Wales with the presumed consent measure and follow that example.

I have a half-hour speech written out, but I will not burden hon. Members with it. On the Bill, I wish just to say something to my Labour colleagues. A simplistic way to solve these problems is to say that the Labour party should end the sale of council houses. That is a very controversial issue, and may I commend the work of the late David Taylor, who was a councillor in Leicestershire and a marvellous MP? Members should read a great book about him called “Clockwinder Who Wouldn’t Say No”. He was a model MP, and anyone who wants to should read that book and find out—

Stephen Pound: Who wrote it?

Paul Flynn: Don’t bother buying it, as it is much too expensive—come to see me. [Interruption.] No money is made from it. Those who remember David will know of the sad circumstances of his death. I believe he was killed by press criticism, which destroyed him, because he was a great Christian gentleman who was undermined by an attack on him; he dropped dead a fortnight later. I mention him today because when he was on the council, long before he became an MP, he and Newport’s council did the same thing. Long before Thatcher sold council houses, we decided, for good socialist reasons, to sell council houses, because it is not property that is theft in today’s housing world, but rent. We could not continue, in good conscience, to deny the people who support us so well—the council house tenants—the chance of acquiring an appreciating asset: a house. I say that we must not take that road, as that would be the wrong way to go, and there are other ways of tackling the problem.

This Bill is a fine Bill, and it is wonderful to see a progressive, highly intelligent and practical politician following the example of socialists in Wales.

10.58 am

Mr David Burrows (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). Like everybody else, I pay great tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the promoter of the Bill, and I am proud to be one of its cross-party sponsors.

Several weeks ago, the Prime Minister took to the stage at our party conference to deliver her vision for Britain: a country where every single person, regardless of their background or that of their parents, has the chance to be all they want to be, where government stands up for the weak and stands up to the strong.

Hon. Members might forgive Henry for his scepticism. At the age of 22, Henry found himself on the streets after being physically abused and thrown out of his home by his father who refused to accept that he was gay. Vulnerable and in desperate need of help, Henry arrived at Emmaus, which inspired him to work for its expansion. He is a symbol of the democratic nature there; MPs, no matter who we thought we were, were on the same level as the homeless people and companions in the house. Emmaus is a splendid institution.

The point of this Bill is to ensure that the causes of homelessness are tackled, so that people do not reach that crisis of being without a home. Inevitably, that means empowering councils and other agencies to focus more on the drivers of homelessness. Sadly, in the front
seat is family relationship breakdown, which for six out of 10 young people is the main cause of homelessness, according to a Centrepoint report this week. This Bill will provide the clarity that those at risk of homelessness gravitate to central London because they are allowed to by legislation—to see the real street homeless. They can acquiesce—not least because the burden of the pressure falls predominantly on the welfare budget. For those under 18, that amounts to £9,000 per young person per year, rising for 18 to 24-year-olds to £12,000. That amounts to some £560 million a year just in terms of homelessness. The Government’s £40 million announcement is welcome, but those figures put the reality is that we need to ensure that the good practice of homelessness. The Government’s £40 billion is unworkable in London and that it will increase homelessness. That is a huge shame. In their words: “This is likely to detract from the very effective homelessness prevention that already takes place.” They are in denial. I wholly disagree with them. We need to respect that the funds and support are needed. We need to look at those without recourse to public funds, and to support those who do not have family or local connections. I say to my council and others that what is unworkable is what Crisis reported, which is that what was offered to the 50 out of the 87 mystery shoppers—the people acting as single homeless people—was wholly insufficient. They reported a lack of private interview rooms and the insensitivity of staff, which was akin to public humiliation. Sympathy and empathy, which are there in individuals, were sadly in short supply. The poverty-related shame and stigma were reinforced by what they received from their local authorities. That must end. That is what is unworkable. It is unworkable that many were just dismissed with a selection of leaflets that they were unable to understand or to decipher. Some were simply told to browse on Gumtree. That is unacceptable in this day and age, just as it is unacceptable to see the rising level of homelessness.

We must ensure for the good conscience of our nation that we do not just let people fall back on the priority need and “sitting on our hands” aspect of homelessness. That is unacceptable in this day and age, just as it is unacceptable with the very complex needs that those people have?

scheme of No Second Night Out and the rest. They can effectively sit on their statutory hands while others pick up the bill. This is what this Bill seeks to address by ensuring that there is co-operation, relief and a duty of prevention, and I welcome that.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con) rose—

Mr Burrows: I will press on so that others can speak.

We need to do what we can to tackle this issue. I am therefore disappointed, but not surprised, that my borough of Enfield and other north London councils in the North London Housing Partnership have sent round a submission that is very critical of this Bill. It says that it is unworkable in London and that it will increase homelessness. That is a huge shame. In their words: “This is likely to detract from the very effective homelessness prevention that already takes place.” They are in denial. I wholly disagree with them. We need to respect that the funds and support are needed. We need to look at those without recourse to public funds, and to support those who do not have family or local connections. I say to my council and others that what is unworkable is what Crisis reported, which is that what was offered to the 50 out of the 87 mystery shoppers—the people acting as single homeless people—was wholly insufficient. They reported a lack of private interview rooms and the insensitivity of staff, which was akin to public humiliation. Sympathy and empathy, which are there in individuals, were sadly in short supply. The poverty-related shame and stigma were reinforced by what they received from their local authorities. That must end. That is what is unworkable. It is unworkable that many were just dismissed with a selection of leaflets that they were unable to understand or to decipher. Some were simply told to browse on Gumtree. That is unacceptable in this day and age, just as it is unacceptable to see the rising level of homelessness.

We must ensure for the good conscience of our nation that we do not just let people fall back on the priority need and “sitting on our hands” aspect of homelessness. That is unacceptable in this day and age, just as it is unacceptable with the very complex needs that those people have?

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Last night, I attended an event organised by TELCO, the citizens’ organisation for east London. It is working to establish a community land trust. The event was hosted by the Salvation Army, which, in a few weeks’ time, will open a night shelter in my constituency. It does that every winter. Two thirds of the people who stay in that night shelter will not in any way be affected by this Bill because they have no recourse to public funds. There are many thousands of people on the streets of London who are sleeping rough and who, because they do not have EU treaty rights or for other reasons, have no recourse to public funds. That homelessness problem will continue regardless of what this Bill does.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Is it not true that if we are to deal with street homelessness, which many people think we are talking about when we are discussing homelessness, it will require a lot more money to deal with the very complex needs that those people have?
Mike Gapes: Yes, I am coming on to that matter. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) made an unfair attack on his local authority. He said that the staff were not doing their job properly. He implied that people not getting services was somehow the fault of the council and its staff. I was concerned when I read in the report of the Association of Housing Advice Services, which brings together people from local authorities all over London, that it has calculated that the extension of homelessness prevention duties to single, non-vulnerable people will lead to an additional estimated cost for all 32 London boroughs of £101,641,728. Frankly, £40 million from the Government is peanuts compared with the additional costs for London alone. In an intervention on the promoter of the Bill, I pointed out that my council, Redbridge, has said that the Bill will cost it £5 million. Redbridge is suffering a major homelessness problem. In my borough of 278,000 people, 64% of householders own their own home, only 11% live in social housing, and 25% rent privately. Systematically over the past three years, large numbers of private tenants have been evicted from their homes in Redbridge because of benefits changes and landlords pushing people out so that they can get higher rents. Every day, I am contacted by people in hotels in Bath Road, Hounslow who have been placed there by my local authority because it cannot find any accommodation in Redbridge. A few months ago, my council outbid Kent County Council for ex-Army accommodation in Canterbury. That got national publicity. It happened because people cannot be moved out of the hostels in Redbridge—they are blocked because there is nowhere else to go. We face an ongoing crisis.

This Bill, unfortunately, is a classic piece of wishful thinking. It is gesture politics of the worst kind in that it wills the ends but does not provide the means. It is about feeling good about voting for something that sounds good, having been pressed to do so by pressure groups and campaigns. The Bill should not be called the Homelessness Reduction Bill but the “Homelessness Recognition Bill”. It will not provide any additional social housing or good-quality private rented accommodation in my constituency. It will not provide any money for local authorities to offset the additional £5 million that it estimates will be necessary owing to the bureaucratic and staff requirements that will result from it.

I could go on at length, and I am tempted to do so after the attitude of the promoter of the Bill, who seemed to say, “Take it or leave it, and don’t amend it.” The Bill needs to be looked at very closely because it has implications in a whole range of areas leading to costs and processing issues. I will concentrate on just one or two of them. The proposal to change the definition of “homelessness” does not give us any extra temporary accommodation. We cannot deal with these problems simply by shuffling things around so that women with children are unable to get accommodation in the borough because somebody who is single and homeless has had it instead. That means, potentially, more people going out of borough. There are issues and implications to do with legal judgments about the definition of what local authorities can do when they send people out of borough. We have a major crisis in housing in London generally, and certainly in east London, and this Bill does not deal with that.

The Bill contains an entirely new duty to provide people with accommodation for a maximum period of 56 days if they have nowhere safe to stay. That is supposedly going to solve the problem, but it does not—it simply shuffles the criteria around. We have in the Bill various—

Bob Blackman: I am very tempted to allow the hon. Gentleman to continue, but I think he is looking at the original draft Bill rather than the Bill presented today. The 56 days’ emergency accommodation provision was removed at the request of the CLG Committee because of the resource requirements and because London authorities, in particular, said that it would be unworkable and cost far too much money. I trust that he will understand that it has been removed, and that probably removes his principal objection to the Bill.

Mike Gapes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I look forward to seeing the final version of the Bill after it has come out of Committee. I accept that he has made some late changes to the Bill, mainly because the CLG Committee came up with the proposals referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). My principal objection to the Bill concerns the obligations and requirements on cost, which will be considerable on my borough and many other boroughs in London.

The Bill has considerable resource implications. Redbridge Council has calculated that there will be between £3.2 million and £4.3 million in additional accommodation costs, and extra staffing costs of £673,000. That is just for one borough. My local authority has faced £70 million in central Government cuts over three years. At a time when we are cutting services, restructuring and reorganising, and down to the bare bones, this could be a significant additional burden. Moreover, councils all over the country face an autumn statement that is potentially going to be not very friendly towards them.

There is, of course, an argument that we should just pass the Bill today and hope for the best. I look forward to, and will listen with great interest to, what the Minister says when he winds up. He needs to reassure me—not just me, but Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors and rate payers all over the country—that these measures are going to be fully funded, and not just for one year, or two years, or some transitional period. He needs specifically to take account of the needs of London, where there is a massive homelessness crisis. The alcohol services, mental health services and provisions for dealing with rough sleepers who have no recourse to public funds must also be looked at, because the failure to deal with those issues properly is a blight on our society. This Bill does not address that, and that is why I am raising my concerns today.

11.17 am

David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): I am very pleased to be standing here today in support of, and as a sponsor of, the Homelessness Reduction Bill, as it deals with an issue that I have pushed since I was first elected here. As a new Member, I was elected to the Communities and Local Government Committee, and one of our first tasks was to outline inquiries to be looked at. My work with homelessness charities in my constituency, and my experience as a former leader of a local authority, had made it clear to me that not enough was being done to tackle homelessness, so I pushed for the Select Committee to undertake an inquiry into the issue. This was widely supported by Committee members, and the inquiry ran from December last year until July.
In March this year, with another member of the Committee, I set up the all-party group on ending homelessness. That member was of course Jo Cox, the former Member for Batley and Spen. I would like to take this opportunity to pay my own tribute to Jo. She readily agreed to help champion the issue of homelessness and to serve as vice-chairman of the APPG. Her energetic approach to problem solving and reaching out across the House has been well documented. I know that if she were still here, Jo would be in the Chamber today supporting this Bill. Jo would be pleased that the issue of homelessness has been pushed up the political agenda during the course of this Parliament. It speaks volumes that so many colleagues from across the House have given up a valuable day in their constituencies to be here in Parliament for this important Bill.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on promoting the Bill. I know how much work he has put into it and to secure cross-party support and, most significantly, the support of the Government.

Indeed, I am pleased that the Government have announced their support for the Bill, and I welcome the measures and additional funding that they are putting in place to tackle homelessness. That shows that the Government are taking the issue of homelessness seriously and that they are committed to supporting the most vulnerable in our society. I am especially grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), for his help and patience on the issue, because I have talked to him about it at length for many months.

May I also take this opportunity to thank charities and organisations from across the homelessness sector for their support throughout the process? They have provided invaluable knowledge and expertise, which has been essential to the work of the CLG Committee, the APPG on ending homelessness and, of course, the Bill.

I also thank the staff at Crisis for their support and, indeed, my own office staff.

It is disturbing that in the United Kingdom in the 21st century, support for homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless can be so inconsistent from area to area, and that so many people continue to fall through the net. That situation has existed for far too long, and it is my hope that the Bill’s provisions will not only result in positive changes to the support structures in local councils and other public bodies, but lead to a cultural change in the way in which all public bodies view homelessness and their role in its prevention.

The measures will not, of course, be an issue for local authorities that already provide support that is suitable or that goes above and beyond the call of duty, but will be a positive step to improve standards in other authorities that have fallen behind. We have heard too many examples of local authorities that hide behind the current law and force people into hardship and circumstances that none of us would want to see.

I am sure that we have all heard shocking stories of people being forced to sleep rough before they could access help from their local council, and of instances where people have been required to make their own situation intolerably worse before they were eligible for help that, if it had been provided earlier, would have prevented them from having to sleep rough at all.

Of course, local authorities already do a huge amount to help relieve homelessness for families and vulnerable people, but that help must be extended to single homeless people. Our failure to have adequate provisions in place to help those people who are disproportionately affected by mental health problems, is a serious anomaly, and I hope we will address it.

The factors that lead families and individuals to become homeless are, of course, numerous and complex. They include relationship breakdown, substance abuse, mental illness, lack of suitable housing and the leaving of care or the armed forces. Often the reasons are not limited to any one single factor, and the exact circumstances are unique to each case. That means of course, that those at risk are often already in touch with at least one public body, possibly more, such as social services, the NHS, their local council or a branch of the armed forces. It also means that there is significant potential for preventive intervention at an early stage.

When speaking to healthcare professionals, mental health workers, and even officers concerned with the welfare of service personnel leaving our armed forces, I repeatedly hear that, when they identify an individual as being at risk and attempt to intervene, they are often frustrated by the lack of help they receive from local housing authorities. That is generally not because there is a reluctance to help people, but because the structures they work within do not always properly support cross-agency working or allow them to support specific individuals.

Importantly, the Bill does not place an additional duty of responsibility on public bodies, but empowers them by giving them a louder voice when dealing with housing authorities. That, together with the enhanced requirements placed on local councils to help those at risk of homelessness within 56 days, means that the Bill represents a significant step forwards in the provision of more support.

Understandably, one of the main concerns about this Bill in local government circles is the additional financial burden that it will place on authorities. We heard positive news from the Government earlier this month and I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say later in this debate.

In conclusion, this Bill can make a significant difference to the lives of many vulnerable people who at present are at far greater risk of homelessness than is acceptable. It is clear that the current system is not providing adequate help to those most at risk, but the Bill’s measures can create a framework and culture in the public sector where earlier intervention, better cross-agency co-operation, consistency of support and equal help for all qualifying homeless people becomes standard. Today we have an opportunity to take a stand and to make that happen.

11.24 am

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I welcome the Bill and think that it will make a real difference with regard to early intervention and prevention and to broadening the scope of assistance to those who are currently defined as non-priority—a category that often masks the real range of experience of many of the people who are seeking help for homelessness. In common with many of my Labour colleagues, I have major
reservations about the capacity to deliver the proposals. I will touch on that, but I still think that it is worth supporting the Bill. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on promoting it. Crisis on its work in support of it, and the expert panel that helped to draw it up.

A number of Members have mentioned what has happened with homelessness over the years. As a Member of Parliament in central London, and before that as a councillor, I was there when homelessness exploded in the 1990s and through the early part of the last decade. I then saw the progress made over the second half of the last decade in bringing down the rates of homelessness and rough sleeping, but the problem is worsening again. We have heard about a doubling of rough sleeping, but rough sleeping is only the tiniest tip of a huge iceberg. It is an intractable and difficult issue, but one that masks a much wider problem of homelessness.

We know that acceptances of households that are in priority need have gone up by a third in the past few years, and that 58,000 were accepted as homeless last year, but that also masks something much bigger. I am surprised that we have not heard anything this morning about the existing local authority framework for homelessness prevention and relief, which is a series of measures intended to prevent homelessness in priority groups. Last year, 220,000 households received help through prevention and relief, and more than 1 million households have received prevention and relief assistance since 2010. That gives us an idea of the sheer scale of the problem that we have to confront. It is clear that not enough is being done in the present circumstances.

I welcome the Bill because I think it will help to bring about a cultural shift and reach people who are currently not receiving assistance. Like many colleagues, I know those people as individuals, not as statistics. Anna had terminal cancer and heart failure. She was single and lived in a private rented property that the landlord was seeking to recover because of a rent shortfall. She sought help from Westminster in order to have settled and less stressful accommodation for her palliative care. She wrote that the council “are saying that they are unable to register me” for a council property, “because homes are in short supply and only people with severe medical conditions or welfare problems can apply for it.”

Anna was dying. We fought for a year to get her housed and won only just in time.

Ahmed, who was 21, was thrown out of his home and then a hostel, for behavioural problems, and was stabbed through the hand while sleeping rough. He was diagnosed with psychosis, but was repeatedly turned away from the council as non-priority. I took him to a central London hostel myself, but it turned him away because his problems were too severe for it to accommodate him. That case took two years of court battles to resolve.

I first met Heidi when she was lying in bed, sick from chemotherapy for breast cancer, in a private rented flat with no facilities and two tiny children, waiting for the bailiffs to come before the council would provide her with accommodation.

There are many young people like Jamal, who was severely depressed and slept in his car because of violence in the home, which was worsened by severe overcrowding: there were six of them in a one-bedroom flat. I could not demonstrate that he was homeless, because it could not be verified that he was sleeping in his car and I could not get anybody to that part of London.

Trey was 19 years old and slept in terror in the doorway of his mother’s repossessed flat. He was too afraid to go anywhere else to sleep, but it was impossible to get anyone to verify that he was sleeping rough.

Finally—these have been just some of many examples—Michael was sleeping rough in the west end after being refused priority, and the medication that he was required to take for his condition had to be kept refrigerated. During the review of his homelessness decision, he was told, wrongly and unethically, that there was no need to accommodate him, because it was possible for a local GP surgery to store his medication.

Those are the kinds of cases that I hope the Bill will do something to resolve. Those people have complex problems but cannot get over the threshold of priority need. They need additional advice, assistance and support, not simply a list of telephone numbers to ring. I am sure that, as I have done, colleagues have sat and run those numbers for hours on end but have been unable to get assistance. In some cases, councils do not even record applications from vulnerable families; they are turned away without an application even being taken.

Measures similar to this Bill in Wales have made a real difference. I hope that the Bill will make a comparable difference in England. In common with many of my Labour colleagues, I feel that welcome though these provisions are, they have been introduced in the context of a rapidly deteriorating situation. Only one in five private landlords in London now accepts households on housing benefit. There are fresh housing benefit cuts to come, and the Housing and Planning Act 2016 will worsen the provision of social housing in central London.

I will give the House just one tiny statistic: there were 300 people sleeping rough in Westminster every night last year on average, and housing associations in Westminster alone have sold 300 one-bedroom flats to meet the Government’s targets. Life is not quite as neat as that, but it goes to show that the problem is worsening on the one hand and the ability to respond to it is worsening on the other. The Government’s welfare and housing agenda reforms will make the situation worse.

The Bill will be equivalent to running up a down escalator, but I still think it is worth doing and I want it to be supported. As we have heard from the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, there are some drafting problems, particularly in clause 1, and some things need to be tightened up as the Bill progresses, but it is a welcome Bill. Unless the Government address the underlying causes, which, in many cases, they have created or are deliberately making worse, I fear that the Bill will not bring about the transformation that we want.

11.31 am

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who highlighted with great passion her constituents’ complex needs, which the Bill is designed to address.
It is also a pleasure to rise in support of the Bill. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on introducing this truly historic Bill. I commend him not only on his stewardship of this landmark Bill, but on the incredible campaign that he has led to bring it to this stage.

As a member of the Communities and Local Government Committee, I was pleased to take part in the prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill. Today I am pleased to join other Members in the House who not only support the Bill but who, like me, are co-sponsors. The Committee’s inquiry on homelessness shone a light on many of the issues that my hon. Friend has taken up and addressed in the Bill. I join colleagues in paying tribute to the homelessness charities across the UK—particularly Crisis UK, St Mungo’s and Shelter—which gave us their time and specialist knowledge, met me privately and advised the Select Committee on this groundbreaking legislation.

During our inquiry, we saw some incredibly brave people, who came before our Committee to speak about their experiences and share their stories of being homeless or sleeping rough. They gave powerful, personal evidence of how vital the first steps in getting help were; how the first contact with their local authority, at the front desk, can inform their future; how important that point in their story is; and how often it can determine whether they have a home or a future on the streets. I commend the work of staff in housing offices across the country, but we have heard that there is a real disparity in the quality of service received by people who need help. That disparity was explained by Mateasa, a young woman who used to be homeless and who now acts as a mystery shopper for Crisis. She told us that she was constantly surprised by the different experiences that she had when approaching local councils for assistance. She said:

“As I approached them under cover, I was an eighteen year old girl who had been kicked out of her house by her parents. Generally the stereotype around that would most probably be that it was my fault: that is the reason why I was homeless. A lot of the time I was advised to work out what my problems were with my home life. I was never asked if I was being abused by my parents or what the problem was.”

Changes proposed in clause 2 of the Bill to section 179 of the Housing Act 1995 place a duty on local housing authorities to provide advisory services that give information and advice, and that are designed to meet the needs of, among others, victims of domestic abuse, persons suffering from mental illness or impairment, and care leavers.

I welcome provisions in the Bill that make it easier for care leavers to show that they have a local connection with both the area of the local authority responsible for their welfare and the area in which they lived while they were in care, if those were different locations. That matters, because it will oblige local housing authorities to provide advisory services, or to secure the provision of information free of charge, to prevent homelessness and make people aware of their rights. We must ensure that those protections are robust enough to secure adequate safeguards for these at-risk groups.

More important for care leavers are the local connection criteria established in clause 8, under which all care leavers who are owed duties as children are deemed to have a local connection. Importantly, where the young person was looked after by a county council, they will have a local connection to any district in that county. Such stability will help to ensure that they can maintain their contacts and friendships, which can be so important to their wellbeing.

I would like to draw attention to the plight of vulnerable women and girls. St Mungo’s reports that 44% of its female clients have experienced domestic violence, 19% experienced abuse as a child and 32% said that domestic violence contributed to their homelessness. The changes to section 179 of the 1995 Act will mean that housing authorities have to provide or secure a service that gives women and girls who are in such dreadful situations protection from homelessness when it is most needed.

The same applies to individuals suffering from a mental illness or impairment. Research published in February this year found that four in 10 people who sleep rough have a mental health problem, and that they are more likely to be stuck sleeping rough for longer than a year. That is a major problem that the Bill seeks to address. Clearly, early intervention and prevention have the potential to make a positive impact on the lives of such vulnerable people.

That is why I welcome the core principles of the Bill. It introduces requirements for local housing authorities to carry out prevention work, with the formulation of a personalised plan. Ultimately, the legislation will need broad co-operation to bring about a cultural change whereby we focus efforts on prevention instead of intervention at crisis point. As I have said, the fact that there are disparities in service quality came across strongly from the evidence given to the Committee. I am pleased that the Bill will help to ensure that people know what their rights are and how they ought to be treated, and that girls such as Mateasa who turn to their local authorities for help are treated with kindness and respect, and given the advice that they need to prevent them becoming homeless.

It is a privilege to serve on a Select Committee that has taken such an active role in not only inquiring and reporting on such an important issue, but scrutinising and supporting the Bill. I am pleased to stand in the Chamber with so many Members of this House who share the common goal of reducing homelessness. I believe that the Bill will go some way to achieving that aim.

11.38 am

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): As a sponsor of this vital Bill, I am proud to support it. It is the first major reform of homelessness legislation for 40 years, and it is an opportunity to make a fundamental difference to the lives of thousands of people in England. I thank Members on both sides of the House who have taken time away from their constituencies to support the Bill. We are engaged in a very special process, which I hope will lead to genuine reform.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for choosing to progress this private Member’s Bill, and for his commitment to it. He heard the same evidence as the other members of the Communities and Local Government Committee, and it is entirely to his credit that, as a member of the governing party, he chose not to turn a blind eye and defend the status quo, but to champion vigorously the need for change. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield
South East (Mr Betts), who, as Chair of the Committee, led the inquiry. I also pay tribute to the Committee Clerks and specialists, whose work contributed to an inquiry that was innovative and rigorous, and that was directly and extensively informed by the experience of those who are, or have been, homeless, and those who seek to support them.

Finally, I pay tribute to Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo’s and Homeless Link for the work they do every day to support growing numbers of homeless people, and for the research and evidence that they have provided to underpin this Bill. I mention Crisis in particular, whose mystery shopper research and No One Turned Away campaign helped to expose the inadequacies of the current homelessness legislation.

As a relatively new Opposition Back Bencher, I have found Select Committee work rewarding because it is evidence-based scrutiny. The evidence on homelessness is incontrovertible. Homelessness is increasing, and the current system is not fit for purpose and cannot cope.

This Bill takes that scrutiny a stage further and provides the opportunity to change the law based on the evidence we have received. The pre-legislative scrutiny by the Select Committee has strengthened the Bill and allowed the views and concerns of a wide range of stakeholders in this legislation, including councils—my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) raised many of those concerns—to be listened to and understood, and it has enabled the Bill to address some of these concerns. It is a better Bill as a consequence.

It is fitting that we are debating this Bill almost 50 years to the day since the first broadcast of “Cathy Come Home”, which exposed the harsh cruelties of the post-war housing crisis; that coincided with the launch of Shelter and eventually led to the passage of the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977. That Act created the statutory duty to house people in priority need and to advise those who do not meet the criteria.

The need for this Bill can be summed up by the experience of my constituent, Ros. She is a 69-year-old widow who lived in a privately rented flat for many years. Served with a section 21 notice out of the blue, she was unable to find anywhere else affordable to rent in the local area, and approached her local council for help. Ros came to see me, and I wrote to the council in support of her claim that she was being made homeless through no fault of her own. To my horror and to Ros’s great distress, the current law determined that her age alone did not make her vulnerable, and that the council did not have any duty to house her. She waited for the bailiffs to arrive and then approached the council again. The council gave her a list of organisations that she could call who might be able to provide accommodation. All of them required a referral from the council if Ros was to access the accommodation.

The council acted entirely within the current legislative framework, and in the face of crippling demand on its resources, it had no other choice. Ros spent several months sofa surfing, in great anxiety and uncertainty, before moving into sheltered housing, where I am pleased to say she is now settled. Ros’s situation left me deeply uncomfortable. Her homelessness was absolutely no fault of her own. She could have been my mother or my aunt. In the same circumstances, I would have expected help to be available for one of my relatives, yet there was no obligation to help, which seems too harsh. If the council had a prevention duty, Ros could have been helped before the bailiffs arrived. The sheltered housing, for which she was eligible in any event, might have been found earlier, and her transition could have been managed without the level of anxiety she suffered.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Hayes: I am afraid that I am not taking interventions because so many other Members want to contribute.

The housing crisis in the UK is unprecedented since the post-war period. Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness. The number of people sleeping rough has doubled since 2010, the number of people accepted by councils as being owed the main homelessness duty increased by 26% between 2009-10 and 2014-15, and the number of people receiving prevention and relief support was up by 33% in the same period. The ending of a private tenancy is now the single biggest cause of new homelessness applications.

The majority of single homeless applicants are not covered by the current homelessness legislation; for them, councils need to provide only basic advice and information. However, there is little detail in the current legislation on how that should be provided, and there is no minimum quality for the information provided. In 2014, Crisis’s mystery shopper exercise found that in 50 of 87 cases, people received inadequate or insufficient help.

Many councils provide a very good service, and I pay tribute to the councils I represent, including Southwark Council, which has recently been recognised as a trailblazer for its prevention work. However, the variability between, and sometimes within, councils is not acceptable. Our Select Committee inquiry heard evidence from several witnesses who had been homeless, including Daisy-May Hudson, who has made a powerful film called “Half Way” about her family’s experience of homelessness. The evidence showed that far too many people feel that when they approach their council for help, they end up feeling like an inconvenience, judged for their circumstances and stripped of their dignity.

There is a strong rationale for a system based on priority need, but in the context of a housing crisis, having priority need as the only criterion means that too many people go unsupported, with harsh consequences. The Homelessness Reduction Bill seeks to ensure that help and support for homeless people is established on a fairer footing, and that the focus of councils’ work on homelessness shifts to prevention. Prevention is important because the costs of homelessness are so high. Recent Crisis research has shown that failing to tackle homelessness early costs the taxpayer between £3,000 and £18,000 for every person in the first year alone. The Government have estimated that the annual gross cost of homelessness to the state is up to £1 billion. Much of that cost is borne by councils through the scandalous costs of nightly-rate temporary accommodation. Ensuring that everything that can be done to maintain someone in their own home is done, or helping people to manage a transition to another stable home, should reduce local authority costs.
The Bill introduces a new prevention duty and a new duty to provide an applicant with 56 days’ help to find alternative suitable accommodation. It broadens the range of people who will be helped, and it makes the help more meaningful. Of course, additional obligations cannot simply be passed on to councils without the resources to fulfil them. I am pleased that the Government support the Bill, but the Bill introduces new burdens on local authorities. The Government must therefore make good on their support by granting local authorities the resources to deliver these new obligations. It is important that we see an announcement in the autumn statement that gives local authorities comfort on this point. We need to be absolutely clear that councils will be funded to meet the new duties.

Finally, we cannot debate the law as it affects homeless people without mentioning the wider housing crisis. We will not solve the scandal of homelessness by creating a new legal framework if the Government’s wider housing policy continues to contribute directly to making the crisis worse. Although I welcome the cross-party commitment to this principled reform of homelessness legislation, I call on the Government: to change their approach to housing more widely; to fund the building of the council homes we urgently need; to stop the forced sale of precious council homes; to reform the private rented sector to give more security of tenure; and to reform the benefits system so that people do not become homeless because the local housing allowance cap on housing benefit does not come close to covering their rent.

In the face of the evidence I have seen in my constituency and in the Select Committee inquiry, we cannot wait for all these measures to be in place before we reform homelessness legislation; the Government must back up their commitment to this legislation with resources. I urge colleagues to support this principled reform, which has the capacity to make support for homeless people fairer and more meaningful, and to enable far more people to be helped when they most need it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Brevity will help as well.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I will try to live up to that, Mr Deputy Speaker. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) made an outstanding speech. She and her fellow members of the Select Committee should feel proud of what they have done to support my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in getting the Bill this far. Homeless cases are some of the most troubling we see in our surgeries because they bring with them many overlapping aspects of human misery. We are assisted in our work as Members of Parliament by fantastic organisations in our constituencies, of which I will list two: Loose Ends—to call it a soup kitchen would not go near the level of support it gives to homeless people—and Two Saints, a hostel. I commend the words of the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith), and I say to the Minister that it would be a shame if the Government’s great work to support this Bill were undermined in any way by local authorities being unable to continue funding contracts for hostels across the country. I also pay tribute to Citizens Advice for preventing many people from becoming homeless in the first place.

I commend my hon. Friend for how he has guided this Bill. He said that primary legislation is not always the best way to address such problems, but his introduction of the Bill in a cross-party way, with pre-legislative scrutiny, is exemplary. Most concerns raised by local government have been addressed, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about that.

The concept of new duties meaning new money is excellent, but I draw hon. Members’ attention to what happened in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. As this Bill progresses through both Houses, I encourage my hon. Friends, despite the excellent Minister here today, to put on the record what “new money” means. I have a recurring problem in my constituency with the funding of a new burden under the 2012 Act, which I hope the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) is about to resolve.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have been absolutely right to raise the perverse incentives that currently mean that local authorities, however compassionate councillors and staff are, have to play a game of brinkmanship with someone facing a potential crisis in their life. If the Bill goes a long way to addressing that, the fullness of time will show that the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) about a glass-half-empty approach will not be realised.

At the moment, a perverse pressure is put on the private rented sector not to make housing available to people on housing benefit and other vulnerable tenants. I speak with some experience on this, in regard both to the situation in London and to providing affordable housing in rural areas. There are small tweaks the Government can make that would go a long way to addressing some of the problems people face in the housing crisis that has been referred to.

I hope the Bill will blur the divide between providers, whether local government, national Government through policy creation, charitable sector agencies, such as mental health agencies, and the police. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for putting a specific list in clause 2, which details a proposed substitute section 179 of the Housing Act 1996. Proposed new section 179(2) states:

“The service must be designed to meet the needs of persons in the authority’s district, including, in particular…care leavers…former members of the regular armed forces…victims of domestic abuse”.

I will not list the rest because there is not time, but it also mentions “persons released from prison”. In my local homeless forum—this is going back a few years, so I hope things have got better—I heard of people leaving prison and going back to the community where they had offended. Their benefits did not come through on time, so they sofa surfed, possibly with someone with whom they had offended in the past, and we can write the script after that. I hope that the work done on the Bill by my hon. Friend and the Committee will help to resolve that.

I conclude by echoing the praise for Crisis, which is a wonderful organisation, and mentioning a couple more. The Depaul Nightstop UK service provides free,
safe, secure emergency accommodation for single young people, predominantly aged between 16 and 25. The homes are vetted and have trained volunteer hosts. That is an extraordinary service which we could roll out across our constituencies. A web-based solution could deal with many of the problems that have been raised. I mention finally the Centre for Social Justice, which I am honoured to be involved with, along with one of our former colleagues in this place, Brooks Newmark. It is doing very interesting work, building on success in places such as the United States and Finland, talking about early intervention and whether the current legislation is fit for purpose—I hope to an extent that that is being addressed today—and, beyond legislation, building on best practice.

Let us be able to say that, on our watch, collectively across the House, we have tackled what is one of the most shaming—to use my hon. Friend’s word—features of modern society. Let the huddled figure in the doorway and the hidden figure in the myriad other forms of homelessness described so eloquently be addressed; with the Bill and with the actions of a Government who really want to take forward social reform, we will be able to do so.

11.53 am

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I arrived early in the Palace of Westminster this morning. In the tunnel between the tube station and the entrance I passed four people asleep on the floor. I do not think that I have ever been past quite as many as that before; there are often people sleeping there but the fact that there were four was a very visible reminder of the growing scale of the problem that we are rightly discussing.

Next Tuesday, the NEWway homelessness night shelter in my constituency will open its doors for the fourth year. Some 14 churches, led by Bonny Downs Baptist church, which stare the initiative, will each provide shelter and a meal for up to 15 single adults for one night each per week; seven churches will do so for three months, and then another seven for the following three months so, from November to March there will be places and meals available for 15 adults every night of the week. Last year, NEWway night shelter obtained the quality mark from Housing Justice, which supports church-based homelessness initiatives around the country. Housing Justice estimates that 500 churches, church halls, synagogues and mosques opened up to provide overnight shelter last winter. I imagine a larger number will be doing so this winter.

NEWway has provided accommodation for 225 people in total in the past three years. It has been able to help about a third of those people to secure long-term housing. The co-ordinator, Jonathan Adams—he used to design racing cars for a living—has done a fantastic job. Caritas Anchor House in Canning Town, of which my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) and I are patrons, supports more than 200 single homeless adults at any one time, and provides employment support and rehabilitation for them as well. Both those organisations have been among those lobbying us to support the Bill that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has introduced this morning. Anchor House developed a very impressive online application, the Global Noticeboard, to support homeless people, housing providers and others. It hopes, believes and is confident that, in widespread use, that would significantly shorten the accommodation delays currently experienced and endured by homeless people.

These are wonderful initiatives, and, as is so often the case, faith groups are on the frontline of meeting need, but they argue, rightly, that they should not be having to deal with the scale of the homelessness crisis that we are facing today. I warmly commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward the Bill, and also commend the organisations that he has been working with. I welcome the work of the Welsh Assembly Government, also, who came up with the ideas that have given us the blueprint for this.

Susan Elan Jones: As a Member of Parliament from Wales, I must say that I think the legislation in Wales has been absolutely transformative on this. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the need to share best practice between both Governments is pivotal?

Stephen Timms: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. This House should extend its thanks to the Welsh Assembly Government for those ideas, which have brought about change there and will, I hope, do so in England as well.

I want to press the Minister to set out some information—it has been hinted that he will do so—about what resources there will be to enable the new burdens in the Bill to be discharged. We have heard some quite large estimates of the additional costs. The East London Housing Partnership currently estimates that implementing the Bill in east London will cost local councils £18 million in the first year. Now, that is a good deal less than it was estimating a month or so ago, as a result of the changes that the hon. Member for Harrow East talked about, which were made in response to the Communities and Local Government Committee, but it is nevertheless a substantial cost, and we need reassurance that such costs will be met, or at least some figures that indicate what the Government believe the costs will be.

I very much welcome the fact that local councils will be taking on these new responsibilities. There is the potential to transform the service, as we have heard, and I very much welcome the fact that the Government are supporting the Bill, but they also need to shoulder their responsibility and confirm—I hope very soon—that additional funding they will provide to enable local councils to play their part.

We heard that some London councils were saying that the Bill was unworkable. I think almost certainly that that view would have been expressed before the changes were agreed. I do not think that that is the view of councillors in north London or elsewhere, but we need assurances on the resources provided by the Government to enable local councils to take forward these welcome additional responsibilities.

11.58 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the way he has piloted the Bill through its initial stages and prepared it for Second
Reading. He worked with outside agencies and ensured pre-legislative scrutiny by the relevant Select Committee, of which he is a member. That scrutiny has resulted in a better Bill. With 18 pages and 13 clauses, this ain't no ordinary private Member's Bill. He has secured the support of outside agencies, with a public campaign and the lobbying of Parliament. I pay tribute to those from The Housing Link in my area who came down for that. That work has paid off this morning.

No one can be in any doubt that homelessness is a real problem. The Department for Communities and Local Government’s rough sleeping statistics for England estimate that the number of people sleeping rough has increased from 1,768 in 2010 to 3,569 in 2015. In my own local authority area of Bury, the figures have varied from a peak of 10 in 2013 to a rather doubtful zero in 2014, and to nine last year.

Of course, no legislation of itself will solve the problem of homelessness. Many people volunteer, and many people work in charities, the third sector and local authority housing departments, striving day and night to help those who find themselves either homeless or under threat of being made homeless. For example, my own church of St Anne’s in Tottington regularly collects for, and provides help to, the Booth Centre in Manchester. I place on record my thanks to them all for their work.

I support the proposal to ensure that single people who are homeless or facing homelessness are not discriminated against simply because they are single and do not fall into one of the priority groups. It must make sense to extend the time period during which help can be offered. The old adage that prevention is better than cure is no truer than when it comes to homelessness.

One of the underlying causes of homelessness is, of course, the supply of homes. It is therefore incumbent on all social housing providers to keep their voids to a minimum. The other side of the equation, however, is something we have not really heard about this morning: demand and the effect that immigration is having on the supply of housing. A net figure of 300,000 people coming into the country every year, all of whom need a home somewhere, must be having an effect on the number of homes required. It must be having an effect on homelessness. It must also be having an effect on rents. Nevertheless, I support the Bill.

12.2 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing forward the Bill and the manner in which he has done so. He has fostered cross-party working and pre-legislative scrutiny from the Communities and Local Government Committee, on which he sits. Given the time restrictions and the interest in speaking in the debate, I will try to be brief. I want to make three points.

First, homelessness is an issue that is close to my heart. Some 34 years ago, my mother and I found ourselves in that situation. As a single parent, my mum applied to the local council for a council home. Fortunately for us, we were able to stay with friends of hers while we waited for a flat to become available. We were then lucky enough to secure a council property.

I do not remember that experience, but my mum does and I know that she experienced the warmth, sanctity and relief that moving into a council property brought to our small family. We were lucky. In the 1980s, local councils could quite easily give people in our situation that sort of help and support. Frankly, it was a lot cheaper than what would happen now, three decades later. We would have been put into emergency accommodation or the private rented sector, where we might not have been able to afford the rent. I welcome the shift the Bill is trying to engender, from cure to prevention.

I welcome the fact that the Government are supporting this legislation, but they are pursuing wider policies that go against the grain of the progress that the Bill is trying to make. For example, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has already asked the Government to rethink, and I agree, the idea of forcing councils to sell off council homes to fund the introduction of right to buy for housing association homes, which will result in fewer and fewer council homes being made available. Since the 1980s, we have lost 1.6 million council properties, the majority of which have not been replaced.

A second example is watering down section 106 agreements and replacing affordability requirements for starter homes. I think we should help people to get on the housing ladder, but, as many of my hon. Friends have said, some people will simply not be able to afford to buy and will have to rent. Thirdly, the Government need to reflect more widely on the cuts to local councils, both broadly and particularly in the area of public health. We know that within the complex web of reasons for homelessness, addiction is one driver and councils are increasingly finding it difficult to provide the support.

My second main point is that since the Government came to power in 2010, after the progress made during our 13 years in power before that, the number of rough sleepers has unfortunately doubled—the hon. Member for Harrow East was honest about that—and homelessness is increasing, yet that is not happening in either Scotland or Wales. A few moments ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) was urging the Government—I echo his remarks—to learn from the experience in Wales.

In his opening speech, the hon. Member for Harrow East said that new duties must bring new money. He is absolutely right—and that is what has happened in Wales. It has introduced very similar provisions, ensuring that single homeless people get the support they need as well, while also introducing a specific pot of money. In this financial year, for example, local authorities in Wales were given £4.9 million. As a result of backing up legislative reform with money, we can see how to make a real impact on people’s lives by reducing the number of people who find themselves homeless.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): In the London Borough of Redbridge, the cost of temporary accommodation has risen by £5 million in the last two years, and my council estimates that some of the welcome measures in the Bill might place an additional burden of an extra £5 million. I thus strongly support my hon. Friend’s point—that the new duties are welcome, but they must be properly funded.
Emma Reynolds: Following on from my hon. Friend’s point, we all know from our own local council areas that homelessness is a problem, but I have to say that in London the scale of the problem is of a totally different magnitude. When we think about this Bill, we have to make sure that London councils get the resources they need. If they do not, Wolverhampton Council, Birmingham Council, Sheffield Council and other councils around the country will also be affected. When people are made homeless, they are often forced out of borough to places where housing is cheaper. I am not a London-centric MP—I am from the west midlands—but we need to pay specific attention to London. I am not being purely selfish about this, but when there is a problem for London, it then becomes a problem for other parts of the country. I hope that the Minister will reflect on that when he deals with the money resolution for the Bill.

That was to be my third and final point, but let me add that councils need extra resources. Many of them are already trying to do preventive work, although, as we heard from the hon. Member for Harrow East, that is not the case in every part of the country, and we need to engender the cultural shift to which he referred. Budgetary pressures on the good councils are preventing them from doing more. Each year, through a range of interventions, Wolverhampton Council prevents about 1,500 households from becoming homeless, and it tells me that homelessness is rising, but it is receiving no extra money to help it to tackle that rise.

Any extra money that we give to councils must include resources that will enable them to do something about the private rented sector. As we heard earlier from the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), 40% of homeless people find themselves homeless owing to eviction from privately rented accommodation. When I was shadow Housing Minister, we had an ambitious programme to improve the regulation of the private rented sector. I know that Wolverhampton Council would like more power to regulate the private sector and support good landlords, while ensuring that those whose properties are in poor condition are forced out of the market.

I support the Bill, but if the paper on which these measures are written is to mean anything, it must be backed up by resources.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. If Members continue to speak at such length, I shall not be able to fit everyone in, and the Bill is too serious for that. I want to ensure that every Member has a fair chance.

12.11 pm

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): We take our homes for granted as a basic given, but imagine not having a home, or having a home that is threatened. I cannot imagine that, and I cannot imagine the inner strength that people need in order to keep going when doors shut and systems work against them, as though they were designed to prevent people from having a roof over their heads rather than to provide one. That is why I support the Bill.

I entered politics to create opportunities and offer chances, and in that context no Bill is more fitting than this one. It epitomises what we, as politicians, should be doing: helping and supporting the most vulnerable in our society. Homelessness can happen to anyone, as I know from my constituency. None of us has a special immunity to it. Being homeless is not a choice, but a collision of several issues at one time that affect people in all walks of life. Today, however, we do have a choice: a choice to support those who need our help.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has worked tirelessly to produce a Bill that will transform lives in my constituency, his constituency and the country. It contains many common-sense measures that are intended to prevent homelessness from the off, and to address the fact that some of our current processes exacerbate the situation. In Wiltshire, we have a double-whammy disadvantage. Homelessness in the county is often hidden: the official figure is very low, but the real one is considerably higher, which means that local charities struggle to bid for grants and initiatives. Prevention is key, and we can rest assured that many measures in the Bill will prevent homelessness, including the extension of the period for which an applicant is threatened with it from 28 days to 56.

I am especially pleased to note the duty to give vulnerable homeless people the support that they need. Under the relief duty, there will be better support for those with wider needs through partnership working with bodies such as the NHS. That might have helped some of my constituents. One constituent who came to see me told me that his house had burned down, and he had subsequently suffered post-traumatic stress. He was trying to look after his family, but was told that he could not move into a different property because he would make himself intentionally homeless if he did so. Another constituent, who suffers from severe mental health issues, needed to live where there were open spaces. He was offered an urban property, refused it, and was then told that he had no other options. Looking at things in the round and working with bodies such as the NHS might have helped those constituents. These are real people with real lives. They need our support, and they need their circumstances always to be reviewed in context. That is achievable through partnership working.

One of the most significant aspects of the Bill is that, despite retaining the protections under priority need, it will open up more support for other vulnerable homeless people and help them to secure accommodation. The relief duty means that all who need help will receive it. It sounds simple, but the system is currently arbitrary, and people often do not get the help that they need because councils’ hands are tied. Currently, it is hit and miss whether people get the help they need and whether they are deemed “priority need” or not. That is simply not good enough.

Doorway is an exceptional and inspirational charity in my constituency. Its chief executive has said that the Bill has the potential to significantly improve the system and local lives. It will free up more time for the charity to offer support to people, because it will not be fighting for those who are viewed as just vulnerable and not priority need.
Expanding the support that people receive beyond priority need will ensure that rough sleepers have a better chance of getting accommodation before they develop drug and alcohol conditions, since most newly homeless people do not have complex needs of that nature. That will stop the system exacerbating such problems. Currently, we wait for people to become worse, which reduces their chances, increases the costs in the long run and makes it difficult to place them.

Critics of the Bill have suggested that it will not fix the problem of homelessness because the root cause is a lack of affordable homes. Although more housing does need to be built—and we are addressing that—this criticism fails to recognise the flaws in our current homelessness legislation. This Bill will help to prevent homelessness.

The Bill will help young people in particular by ensuring that young people who leave care have a “local connection” to the local authority that was providing their care, and will therefore be housed locally. I recently visited the w home in Chippenham, where I discussed with young people the impact of being housed locally, and that impact is astonishing.

This is an historic opportunity to improve the system to address homelessness. The Bill will increase the support for vulnerable homeless people in Wiltshire and make the hit-and-miss approach that depends on whether someone is deemed “priority need” or not a thing of the past. It will create a universal approach and introduce a universal standard. Ironic as the term may be, it will remove the postcode lottery service that homeless people receive in the UK.

12.17 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I, like many other Members, welcome and support the Bill, which will enshrine in legislation the principle that prevention is better than cure. That principle should drive reform across our public services, whether in the NHS, early years or reducing crime and reoffending, because prevention gets better results for people and better value for taxpayers’ money.

I will talk briefly about what is happening in my city and the excellent work that Leicester City Council is doing to prevent people becoming homeless. It is a huge, uphill task. We currently have 11,200 households on our housing register. That has gone up 18% over the last year. Like many other areas, we have also seen a big rise in the number of rough sleepers. The number of families in Leicester who are seeking help because they are at risk of homelessness has gone up 25% in the last 12 months to just over 1,200 a year, and the number of single people and couples without children seeking help because they are at risk of being homeless is up by a staggering 39%.

As many hon. Members have said, there are many and complex reasons why people are at risk of being homeless. Many people are fleeing domestic violence or there may be a family or relationship breakdown, but the council tells me that the main reason for the recent increase in my city is people being evicted from the private rented sector. I have seen many such cases in my constituency. That happens either because they cannot afford to pay the huge increases in rent or because the landlord decides to sell. I echo the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who said that one reason why many landlords are selling up is that housing allowance has been frozen since 2014 and is not keeping up with market rents.

Despite the huge increases in demand and the challenges my city council faces, the number of people who end up being placed in temporary accommodation has remained roughly stable over the last two years at about 1,000 a year. That is because of all the hard work the council is doing on prevention. It helps people to solve their housing benefit problems and deal with rent arrears; it offers debt advice and legal advocacy for people in the private rented sector; and it offers a mediation and conciliation service if there has been a breakdown in the relationship with friends or family. We are also working very hard with other agencies to tackle the problem of people facing repeat homelessness, working in particular with the NHS.

But there is a cost to providing this help and advice, and I am concerned that the huge cuts to local council budgets could put this work at risk, which would make no sense because preventing homelessness is so much better for the families involved—for the children, who can stay in a safe and secure home and do their homework, and for the parents, who can go to work. It also saves money for the council and for the NHS, because we know that homelessness increases mental and physical health problems. So the Government must fund the provisions in this Bill, and I welcome the fact that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) recognises this must be part of a much wider strategy to deal with the appalling lack of housing in this country, and especially the need for more affordable and social housing.

I have one point in particular for the Minister: please drop the proposal to include supported housing in the local housing cap. This would have a devastating impact on precisely the sort of services, like hostels, that my constituents need if they do eventually end up homeless. But overall this is an important step forward. Prevention is better than cure, so I welcome and support the Bill.

12.21 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): May I begin by extending my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on using his place on the ballot to introduce a Bill on such an important subject? I am delighted it has achieved Government support. I also want to place on record my thanks to Crisis and St Mungo’s, which have worked so hard to put this Bill together. I know a little about Crisis because my mother volunteered with Crisis at one of its London centres over Christmas last year, an experience she would thoroughly recommend to hon. Members.

I have had a huge number of letters and emails from constituents asking me to attend this debate. The one letter which particularly stood out to me came from my constituent Nathan May, aged 12, who explained to me how he had been helping with a number of local homelessness outreach projects through his church. He told me that he had seen homeless people sleeping rough in all weathers and was upset that they had nowhere to go in the cold and the wet. He could not understand how this could be possible in Britain in 2016 and urged me to do something. Well, Nathan, I hope that, with all my colleagues here today, we are doing something with the passage of this Bill—not
ending the problem, but taking an important first step on the road to ending the misery of homelessness that either causes or contributes to so many other social problems from family breakdown, to mental illness, to alcohol and substance use, to children being unable to fulfill their potential because they do not have a stable home environment.

I want to speak a little about homelessness in Kingston. When people think of Kingston, they probably think of a leafy borough next to Richmond; I believe that is what Lord Prescott said when he stood at the Dispatch Box in 1998 and changed the funding for places like Kingston in a very negative way. But such opinions come from looking at the average prosperity in my borough, which masks some areas of real social deprivation with all the problems any urban constituency has, including homelessness.

The type of homelessness that I am most often contacted about is street homelessness: people who are either sleeping rough, or begging on the streets, or street-drinking during the day. This is something that we should not be seeing anywhere in 21st century Britain, but it is only a very small proportion of the overall homelessness problem in Kingston. It is a problem I am determined to tackle in my time as an MP, and I am aware that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) announced a sizeable homelessness fund in his last Budget. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister today to update the House on how that fund might be accessed for projects like wet shelters for people with drink and drug problems in places like Kingston, so they can be built and put into operation, because many of my constituents are clear that one person sleeping rough is one person too many.

But in terms of scale, the far bigger problem is what we might call technical homelessness, which this Bill addresses. I have completed over 5,000 pieces of constituency casework since I was elected, and over 40% of them relate to housing or homelessness. Typically, a family are living in a flat in the private rental sector. The landlord seeks to increase the rent beyond what they can afford or, more commonly, serves them with an eviction notice because he wants to renovate or sell the property. The family want to stay in the area, perhaps because they work there or their children go to school there, but they cannot afford anything else in the private rental market so they become unintentionally homeless and are owed a duty by the local authority.

The next step is temporary accommodation, but unfortunately for many families in Kingston, that accommodation could be in Ealing, Hounslow or Croydon. That means that their children have to be transported to and from school, often involving a two-hour round trip each day. Others have an equally long trip to reach their job, and this is very disruptive. I find these cases particularly sad to deal with because even if I tell the family that I will write to the head of housing for them, I know what the answer will be. I will be told that they will just have to wait because there are 173 other households that have been in exactly the same situation even longer. The council will tell me that it wants to help, but it has no more temporary accommodation in Kingston.

The housing waiting list in Kingston stands at over 9,000, and some people have been on it for more than a decade. The straightforward answer might be to build more homes, but even before we take into account the high land values in Kingston, we have to ask ourselves where we are going to find the space for 9,000 units. The Conservative council in Kingston is currently working on a plan, with funding from the last Mayor of London, to rebuild and increase the density of the Cambridge Road estate, but even if that and other projects take place, it will not solve the problem. That is because house prices, and therefore rents, in Kingston are rising sharply, and more and more people are going to find that they cannot afford to pay their rent. I am therefore pleased that the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), who no doubt has similar problems in his own area, is realigning the focus of his Department from buying to renting. I am also pleased that the Bill includes a number of robust measures that will help to solve the problem. I want to touch briefly on the matter of funding. It would be remiss of me not to say that my borough’s head of housing, Darren Welsh—a man not prone to exaggeration—welcomes the duties set out in the Bill but estimates that without additional funding there will be a shortfall in Kingston of around £500,000 per year.

In conclusion, I want to thank all the excellent charities in Kingston that do so much to combat homelessness. Without them, we would be nowhere. They include the YMCA, the South West London Law Centres, Kingston Churches Action Against Homelessness, the Joel Project at St Peter’s church, and Kingston Churches Together, which provides winter night shelters. I am genuinely grateful, as are all Kingston residents, to those organisations and to the volunteers who support them day in, day out. I thank them for all the work they do. That work will be supported by the Government, through this Bill. I thank the Government for supporting the Bill, and I thank all the hon. Members who have come to the House to support it today.
The evidence that the Select Committee heard in its recent inquiry was shocking and compelling. The impact of homelessness and the lack of a safe roof over your head can be absolutely devastating. As a former local government councillor in Glasgow, I know how many organisations and their staff are working hard every single day to try to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place and ensure that they are helped at that point of need.

There are still too many people sleeping homeless on the streets of Glasgow. Despite initiatives such as the Night Shelter, more needs to be done. We currently have homelessness rights hubs, which are a partnership between the council, Govan Law Centre, Glasgow City Mission and The Marie Trust. Importantly, of the people who have engaged with the hubs, 90% have been accommodated and more than 250 have seen an increased income. For homeless Scots who find themselves in London, as some do—I spoke to one such young man a few weeks ago—there are organisations such as ScotCare and Borderline, which work hard to ensure that people in London who have come from Scotland are looked after.

The Bill contains significant improvements to English homelessness legislation. I am particularly glad to see the stress put on prevention and relief duties, as well the strengthening of duties on advice and information. I hope that the Government’s stated support for the Bill will extend to fully funding such initiatives. Will the Minister confirm whether there would be Barnett consequentials to such funding? We could use the money well in Scotland.

I wish to touch briefly on some of the issues that must still be addressed before homelessness can truly be seen to be reduced. The Bill makes a valuable and worthy contribution to the debate, and builds on the evidence from Wales, but we still need action on one of the fundamental causes of homelessness: the lack of affordable housing. The hon. Member for Harrow East acknowledged that we need to increase supply, which is important.

In Scotland, we have been able to deal with the change to the duty on priority need because we are building affordable homes. Between 2011 and 2016, we have built 33,490 affordable homes, including many for social rent, and in the years up to 2021 we hope to build 50,000 more houses, both for sale and for social rent. We have abolished the right to buy, which means that those new houses are kept within local authorities’ pools, where they are available to people. Private lets are just too expensive for so many people, and that is driving homelessness.

In its submission on the Bill, Shelter said that “the mismatch between the theory and practice of homelessness law will only deepen if this legislative change is not accompanied by significant changes to councils’ availability of suitable accommodation—if this is not addressed, we will be setting this Bill up to fail.”

I am sure that no one present wants to see that.

The Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), mentioned the evidence given by young people who had experienced homelessness. All three of the young people who bravely and forthrightly gave evidence to the Select Committee—Mateasa Grant, Daisy-May Hudson and Ross Symonds—said that the priority should be to build more council housing and make private lets more affordable. The Government have not done nearly enough to regulate private lets, which are so expensive and are the real burden on the benefits budget.

We need to look at the structural drivers of homelessness, which relate to the end of a tenancy and the affordability of social and private rents. As Scotland has done very successfully, we must look again at the right to buy. Shelter is stressing its effect in high-value areas, which are a real pinch point for housing need. I call for the end to the cap on housing benefit at local housing allowance rates—another thing that Shelter has asked the Government to look at. This morning, Mary Taylor, the head of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, said that the LHA cap has the potential to be even more significant for housing than the bedroom tax.

Will the Government learn from what the Scottish Government are doing? Many Members have mentioned the impact of homelessness on young people, which is exacerbated by the policy to remove housing benefit completely for 18 to 21-year-olds. The Scottish Government are reversing that policy, because we have the option to do so. I call on the Government in Westminster to do that as well, because it is clear that young people are being unfairly left out and disproportionately affected.

Like other Members, I call on the Government to ensure that supported accommodation continues to be available and does not lose out from the proposals on the LHA cap.

The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) mentioned Emmaus, which I also visited last week. A lot of these organisations, including ARCH in my constituency and Blue Triangle, which works with young people, are making an intervention that can prevent people from becoming homeless. Again, they can get people back on their feet and will ensure that they work for them as long as is necessary, and that will end that cycle of homelessness.

We need to look at services for women, particularly those who are coming out of prison and those facing domestic violence. Our Committee heard evidence that women are putting themselves at risk to avoid being on the streets—sharing accommodation with people or getting into relationships where it is unsafe for them to do so. We need to consider that very carefully. The hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) mentioned Home Office policy and forced destitution, and we also need to consider that, because many of the people sleeping rough on the streets have nowhere else to go, because they have no access to public funds. That is a real danger for them and they are reliant on volunteers from organisations such as Positive Action in Housing in Glasgow. I shall finish there, merely adding that the Bill is a great start but a lot more needs to be done and considered by the Government.

12.35 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who has provided us with a Scottish perspective. I rise to support the Bill and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I also pay tribute, as others have done, to the Communities and Local Government Committee for its support and prelegislative scrutiny work, and to the Government for supporting the Bill.
I am passionate about tackling homelessness and serve as an officer of the all-party group on ending homelessness. I could not let this debate go past without paying tribute to the amazing charities in the UK, particularly those in my constituency: Beacon House; the Colchester emergency night shelter; the churches that run soup kitchens every evening of the year and pop-up shelters in winter; YMCA; and Emmaus.

I am conscious that many Members wish to speak, so in the interests of brevity I wish to focus on just one area of the Bill. I have long had concerns about how our local authorities define “homelessness” and those making themselves “intentionally homeless”. I have concerns that local authorities are not tacking homelessness at the earliest possible point. Without question, I wish to see a greater emphasis on prevention, and this Bill certainly shifts the emphasis. I suspect that all hon. Members here have seen the briefing sent out by the Local Government Association, which says:

“Councils want to end homelessness and are already doing everything they can within existing resources to prevent and tackle it.”

With the greatest respect, I would very much question that.

As was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), who is no longer in his place, some local authorities take their responsibilities incredibly seriously but, sadly, others simply do not. I have raised concerns that Colchester Borough Council is routinely telling those seeking help to stay in their properties until the bailiffs evict them. The council has failed to address the need for temporary accommodation. Despite it having been run by the same people for eight years, and it having run a surplus of £200,000 last year and running a surplus again this year, it is still sending people to temporary accommodation 20 miles away, in Ipswich. That is not acceptable.

I wish to give hon. Members an example of a family who had done all the right things but struggled to pay their rent in the private rented sector. They had gone to the council for help because they were falling into arrears. Their landlord served them a section 21 notice, and the council then advised them to stay in that property until the point at which they were evicted; otherwise, they would make themselves “voluntarily homeless”, and would lose all rights to support. I thought, “That cannot possibly be right. How could we possibly advise people to put themselves in an adverse position?” I therefore wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), and I hope you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for reading out his reply. He said:

“We have been extremely clear that authorities should take every opportunity to prevent homelessness wherever they can, that they should not insist that tenants wait until bailiffs arrive before they help. This is poor practice and as you so rightly point out leads to other problems further down the line. The Housing Minister wrote to all local authorities in February on this issue. He made clear that to operate in this way contravenes statutory guidance and that local authorities should not be placing households in this position. The letter also made clear that it is no longer reasonable for a household to remain in a property once a valid section 21 eviction notice expires and that leaving under these circumstances does not make them intentionally homeless.”

Why is this terrible advice still being given, when vulnerable people are relying on it? Why are people still coming to my constituency surgeries week after week saying that councils are giving them this terrible advice?

As a former property solicitor, I can say that had I given such adverse advice to my clients, I would have considered myself to be negligent, yet our councils are giving out that advice on a weekly basis. It is bad and potentially unlawful and it must stop. It pushes families into crisis, and it comes with huge social cost. Families are being told that they have to wait until a bailiff evicts them. They are seeing their children forced out of their homes when they did the right thing in approaching the council at the earliest available opportunity to seek help. It leads to considerable debt and potential county court judgments, which means that, even in the future, when the council says, “Sorry, we don’t have any social housing available, but we’d like you to go to the private rented sector,” the families will not find a landlord to take them. Who will take them when they have a CCJ against their name, and no references other than one saying, “They sat in our property and didn’t pay their rent”—and that was on the advice of the council?

These families have no savings and no deposit for future rental properties. Moreover, what does it say to private sector landlords in our constituencies when the council tells their tenants to stay in properties and wait until they are evicted? Landlords face the costs of tenants not paying rent. Let us not forget that landlords often have mortgages, too. They are losing out on money, and, more importantly, they have bailiff fees, court fees, and all sorts of other costs to pay. There is reputational damage.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): In my first 100 days as an MP, I have heard from one family every four days that they are facing homelessness and eviction, but are deemed to be not vulnerable enough. In the past week, I have been emailed by 300 Tooting constituents who are alarmed by this problem. They are asking me how a family is not vulnerable enough when they are having to resort to sleeping on the streets. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising these points. We have all heard in this Chamber today that the issue needs to be addressed, and I am thankful that that is happening.

Will Quince: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. Every Member in this Chamber will have had such an experience, which is exactly why it is so important that this Bill enters the statute book. Ironically, all those negative social costs and the adverse advice being given to our constituents come with a financial cost. It costs the council more to wait three to six months, because it has to put the family into temporary accommodation. It cannot get them into private sector rented accommodation because of the CCJs against them; no landlord will take those families. By acting at the point at which the family rightly comes to ask for help, the council would save money. Councils up and down the country that act like Colchester Borough Council are acting negligently. They are giving terrible advice that is against Government guidance and, I think, unlawful.

In the interests of time, I will conclude. I fully support this Bill, particularly because the definition of homelessness applies to households served with a notice seeking possession. Really importantly, the Bill contains
strengthened advice and information, and a personalised plan, which means that every single family that comes forward has to be assessed and looked after on an individual basis. I urge all colleagues to support this Bill.

12.43 pm

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): I am delighted to speak today, but I will not stand here and pretend that this Bill will solve the homelessness crisis, because it will not. It will not build a single new home; it will not place more properties in the social sector; and it will not reduce the crippling rents that my constituents face.

My constituency of West Ham is in the London borough of Newham, and we, like other London boroughs, are bearing the brunt of this housing crisis. An average family in Newham looking for a home cannot think about buying one, because the average house price is £352,272, which is simply out of reach of all but a few.

The majority seeking a home want to enter social housing, with its affordable rents and more secure tenancies—let us face it, families in private accommodation often have to move yearly—but there is a waiting list of 16,755 households. As a result, many families have no choice but to look at homes in the private rental sector. If they were affordable, that would not be so bad, but they simply are not.

According to the Valuation Office Agency, the current median rent for a three-bedroom property in the private sector in Newham is £1,600 per month. Detailed research from the council shows that the median household income in the borough, after tax and benefits, is £18,604, or £1,550 a month. That is right: the average private sector rent in our borough is higher than the average after-tax income. It is truly a disastrous situation.

With such an acute housing crisis, it is no wonder that Newham Council has to deal with a huge amount of cases in which residents are threatened with homelessness. In 2015-16, the council received 2,488 homelessness applications, whereas Ribble Valley Borough Council in Lancashire received just seven. Newham’s rate of homelessness acceptance—that is, the proportion of households that it accepts as homeless—is almost five times higher than the English average. That is striking.

The council faces an unenviable task, with a huge workload and shrinking resources.

In Newham, we have great charities such as Caritas Anchor House, which provides temporary accommodation and support for our homeless community, who are trying to get off the street and stay off the street. This year, it supported 37 residents into full-time employment and 84 residents into independent living. It is not just a shelter; it is a source of community support with high-quality professionals. It provides hope for those who desperately need it.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. My borough of Hounslow is also suffering in similar ways, with thousands on the waiting list and people becoming homeless. I have been struck by the fact that when I go to schools and ask about under-achievement, the issue of housing repeatedly comes up. Children’s uncertainty about where they are living and will live has an impact on their levels of attainment, as well as their wellbeing. Does she agree that this is a completely false economy, with a long-term impact on our prosperity?

**Lyn Brown**: I certainly do agree. I often say that I was privileged to live in a council flat in east London, and that provided me with the security to learn and do as well as I could. My little sister, who is no longer little—well, she is little, but no longer young—is doing well as a solicitor, and I am standing in this House. We could not have done that without the security of a council property behind us.

This week, I met some of the people living in Anchor House, and I was really impressed by their resilience and aspiration. One woman entered Anchor House soon after being evicted following a mental breakdown and hospitalisation. She was on the streets for some time, but found her way to the charity. She is now training to be a youth worker and wants to take a degree to help her career. I met a man who decided that living on the streets was better than living at home, because that was the only way that he could free himself from the company of family who were encouraging him to take drugs. He is now clean and training to be a tunneller. These people were excited by this Bill, because they thought that it would prevent people from finding themselves in the same situation as them. It is because of their hope that I support it.

If the Government are not to destroy the faith of those people, two things need to be done. First, the duties on councils must come with up-front, realistic costs. There was a 26.5% increase in households assessed for homelessness in the first year after new homelessness duties were introduced by the Welsh Government. The Welsh Government anticipated that, and thankfully funding was provided to deal with it. We can expect even greater increases in our workload in London, where the housing crisis is that much more acute. In fact, boroughs such as Newham will have to process an additional 7,581 applications a year as a result of clause 3, and that must come with proper resources.

The Government must provide sufficient funds for the Bill’s money resolution, but they must be based on the needs of those local authorities that will have to deal with the extra workload. It is no good giving extra money to areas that, frankly, do not have such needs or concerns about the workload, and less money to those of us who do. The Government should not pass the buck without the bucks.

The Government also have to acknowledge that changing council duties is only one small component in the fight to reduce homelessness. More homes need to be made available in every sector, and more services and support, such as those provided by Caritas Anchor House, are needed to deal with the complex needs of those who have been driven to street homelessness. The Bill could be a step in the right direction, but only if it has appropriate Government support.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. Before I call anyone else to speak, it surely must be obvious that this Bill has support from all around the House. There is very little disagreement and argument going on among Members. Therefore, I must urge Members to speak for fewer than five minutes. If everyone who has indicated to me that they wish to speak, and who has just stood wishing to speak, speaks for as long as the average speech so far, the Bill will not receive its Second Reading, because it will be talked out. The point
I implore Members to think about other people as well as themselves.

12.51 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I shall do my best to comply with your urgent call, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I had not intended to be here on what is usually a constituency day. I had not intended to speak and I was not convinced that the Bill would deliver what my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) intended, but I have changed my mind and I will explain why.

Every MP can relate to the points made by my hon. Friend, especially the one about people who are about to be made homeless being told, “Come back when the bailiffs arrive.” I remember the first time a constituent raised that experience with me. I challenged my local council about it, and a housing officer explained that the law did not allow her to do what she might want to do, and that, even if it did, the council could not afford it.

I do not recognise the description a Labour Member gave earlier—I think that the phrase came from Crisis—of council housing teams being dismissive and discriminatory. My experience is different from that and from the experience of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince). One of the things that has come out of this debate is individual Members’ different experiences of their local councils.

The members of the housing team at Gloucester City Council are among the hardest working and most patient civil servants I know. They deal with angry, tearful and frustrated individuals who sometimes—I stress sometimes—have impossible expectations, and they juggle a waiting list that will take years to resolve. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has said, it is other changes by the Department that will alter the supply of housing, not this Bill. He is absolutely right to say, however, that waiting for the bailiffs to arrive is not remotely the way to prevent homelessness. His aim to change that through the Bill is a good cause, and I join others in congratulating him on doing something about it.

I was worried that the Bill would load considerable additional responsibilities on our councils. Individual pathways for every potential homeless individual or family will need significant additional resources, and I had real concerns—some of which the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) raised with great indignation—that, without Government backing, the Bill would add responsibilities without providing the resources to deliver them. As the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) said, that would pass the buck without the bucks.

Government support for the Bill changes that. We do not know yet what that support will amount to—my hon. Friend the Minister will enlighten us—but the provision of additional resources to actually make this Bill happen is key. This will make a real difference to all the faith groups and agencies in Gloucester that work hard to help the homeless. I am talking about the Gloucester City Mission, in particular, and all those beside them in the George Whitefield Centre making a real difference.

I want to raise two or three issues that I hope might be taken forward in the Bill Committee. The emergency accommodation available in small cities such as Gloucester is often needed by people from outlying rural areas who are in trouble, and that has an impact on our ability to look after everyone who needs help. The local connection provision in the Bill, not least for those who are leaving care, needs to be looked at carefully. Local connection is currently undefined, and I encourage my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East to establish a minimum term of one year.

Likewise, the duty to refer to other Government bodies needs more than a note saying: “Please give the bloke in the sleeping bag outside McDonalds a home.” I have seen similar notes. The situations behind them are often complex, and the individuals involved do not always come from Gloucester or from anywhere very close to us. I hope that that issue will be tackled.

When the Bill is passed, expectations will be raised immediately, and it will take time for the changes to happen. May I urge my hon. Friend to consider transitional funding, time and training for a starting period? May I also encourage him to look at the housing provider’s duty and ensure that co-operation from them is more effective? Perhaps the LGA can help with that. Those are details, but that is where the devil often lurks.

Let me end by saying that the Bill is an important one, and that the complex underlying issues will need to be resolved. I welcome what my hon. Friend is doing, and I look forward to hearing the Government’s support for the Bill.

12.56 pm

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing forward this important Bill and raising awareness of homelessness across the country over the last few months. For a number of years I sat with him on the Communities and Local Government Committee. I know that he has taken this issue seriously, and he has gained considerable knowledge of it. His experience as a councillor and council leader gives him a good understanding of homelessness and the challenges that it poses for communities. He has brought that knowledge to this debate, and we should all reflect on it.

Like the hon. Gentleman, before entering Parliament I spent a lot of time focusing on homelessness as a social researcher and working at the Big Issue in the North for two years. During that time, I worked with charities and local authorities, and I saw what worked and what did not work. Some local authorities went the extra mile to support homeless people, while others failed to do so. I hope that the Bill will encourage and enable all local authorities to raise standards across the board.

In my constituency, I have seen at first hand the good work that local people are doing to combat homelessness. I am pleased that Rochdale Council has made preventing homelessness a priority, and I commend the great work done by charities, which Petrus does on a daily basis in Rochdale.
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that additional funding must be made available to help councils to support the good intentions in the Bill?

Simon Danczuk: Absolutely. The point has been made that the measures have to be resourced, and I am sure that the Minister will address that when he speaks.

In the borough of Rochdale, Petrus provides a drop-in support service for vulnerable people who are experiencing homelessness, and people who are at risk of homelessness and marginalisation. The advice and support that the charity gives its users is vital. However, with rough sleeping on the rise, politicians at a national level must also act immediately to help to prevent homelessness. This Bill will ensure that fewer individuals slip through the safety net. It will ensure that they receive the support that they need before it is too late.

There is no doubt that more must be done to tackle the causes of homelessness, but the Bill is a step in the right direction and it is imperative that we all support it.

12.59 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I shall endeavour to follow the brevity of the hon. Member for Rochdale (Simon Danczuk). At the risk of repeating others, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on introducing this essential Bill. This is the most significant legislation on homelessness since the Housing Act 1996, and I am pleased that the Government are joining me in supporting it.

I am abandoning all my notes, probably much to the disappointment of the researchers in my office, but I will make a couple of points. Before becoming an MP I visited a couple of organisations for the homeless. One was called the Cyrenians but is now known as Changing Lives—Members from the north-east will know that organisation—and the other is St George’s Crypt, which my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) mentioned earlier. Those remarkable organisations are doing terrific work, and visiting them was a wonderful opportunity to learn a little more about the issues around homelessness and the need for the extra support and advice that those organisations provide. This Bill will go a long way towards addressing some of the issues that those two organisations, and others like them across the country, seek to address.

My husband spent 12 years serving in the Royal Navy, and we often hear statistics about the high proportion of ex-forces people who find themselves homeless. A lot of work has gone into reducing that number, and charities such as the Royal British Legion, the Salvation Army and others are doing tremendous work on that issue. I am pleased to hear references to the armed forces covenant, which is another area where we must continue to seek further improvements.

I will wrap up having spoken for just over two minutes—I hope that others will follow my example—by saying that I welcome this Bill. I look forward to following its progress through Committee and the other place as it hopefully becomes law.

1.1 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I support this Bill, and I will set out the reasons why over the next couple of minutes. It is shameful that the national trend in homelessness is upwards, and has been so for the past six years. That is true in my area of Coventry, where the number of households accepted as statutorily homeless has increased year on year, with the city’s rate of statutory homelessness above both the regional and national averages.

We know that people can become homeless for a variety of complex and overlapping reasons. In Coventry, the most common reason for homelessness is the ending of a tenancy in the private rented sector, which has increased significantly over the past five years and now accounts for 34% of statutorily homeless households in the city. The next most common reason is family or friendships no longer being willing or able to accommodate a person, and after that it is the breakdown of a relationship.

Although existing homelessness legislation offers much needed support to the extremely vulnerable, its limited scope and restrictive nature means there are still too many people who receive little, if any, meaningful help from local authorities. This is particularly true for the single homeless or those who are found to have made themselves intentionally homeless. For those groups current legislation neither prevents them from losing their homes nor acts as a safety net to protect them.

The Bill seeks to address those limitations and to modernise current legislation. Together, the provisions in the Bill will ensure the introduction of stronger and more robust statutory prevention and relief duties, as well as extending the reach of those duties to include people who would currently be refused help because they are not considered a priority. That is an extremely welcome step in the right direction and will make a positive difference in the fight to address the scourge of homelessness.

With any such extension of legal duties on local government comes new costs and requirements, which must, in turn, be accompanied by the extension of adequate funding and appropriate powers from central Government. It is imperative that the necessary means be provided to enable local authorities to implement the new duties successfully.

I have never been homeless. I have always had a safe and secure home, which is fundamental for everybody’s wellbeing, but I know only too well some of the factors that may cause a person to end up on the downward spiral towards homelessness. We have heard many such examples today.

This Bill forms only part of the wider solution needed to end homelessness. If the country is to have an effective and sustainable housing policy, we must adopt an overarching strategy that combines these legislative changes with structural housing, welfare and employment reforms that not only ensure an increase in the supply of affordable homes but address the ever-increasing gap between household incomes and rents.

1.4 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Bill, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on bringing it forward. I thank Crisis for giving us so many updates.

Although I welcome the Bill, it is important to recognise the work our local authorities already do to help the homeless. Portsmouth City Council deserves praise for
the way it works with the homeless across the whole spectrum. The number of families in temporary accommodation has fallen. The council’s housing options team already assigns a caseworker for each family at risk, but as other Members have mentioned—in particular, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—our concern is that people have to go all the way to the point of eviction before an authority can help them.

Last week I saw three examples of people in that situation at my constituency surgery. One was a serving member of the armed forces. I therefore welcome clause 1, which redefines homelessness and gives protection to those at risk at an earlier stage than is currently the case under the 1996 Act. Replacing the current 28-day period with a 56-day period will give more reassurance to those in difficulty, and more time for preparing a plan of action. I hope that that will be of help to the people I have been seeing in my surgery, and in particular people affected who are in the armed forces; it is a disgrace that someone in the armed forces had to come to my surgery because he does not have somewhere to go when he leaves the forces next month.

I am also pleased that clause 2 reinforces the duty to provide advisory services, but it is not only the local authority that can provide advice; there are plenty of charities in the sector, such as the Roberts Centre in Portsmouth, which provides a tenancy support service. Last year the centre helped 86 families, and I am pleased that it is funded by the Government’s supporting people service.

Finally, as others have mentioned, clause 8 gives greater protection to care leavers, but I would like it to go further. I believe the state should be taking a parental role by looking after care leavers until the age of 25. Many parents, myself included, have children in their 20s who are still living at home. The state ought to do the same for care leavers. Care leavers should also be supported to move outside their local area if seeking work or educational opportunities. Those vulnerable young people need support wherever they go and live. I hope that that will be taken into account in Committee. We know that they face many risks, and we can do something to reduce one of those risks with the Bill.

The charity Crisis estimates that reducing homelessness could free up £370 million a year of public spending. We also know from the Welsh experience that early action can prevent homelessness. I am therefore really pleased that the Bill enjoys support from all parties, and hope we can send a unanimous message from this House that we are all backing it today.

1.7 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for bringing this important Bill forward to the House; I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for all her work in generating and fostering cross-party support for the Bill.

The hon. Member for Harrow East has already mentioned the staggering figures for people sleeping rough in London. The 8,096 people whom we have failed and who are sleeping out on the streets of London should make us hang our heads in shame. The figures for my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn are not much better. The DCLG statistics show that the number of people sleeping rough on the streets in the Camden side of my constituency has increased by one third in the past five years; in Brent, in just one year and one borough, we have dealt with 55 homeless people looking desperately for somewhere to live. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) has already outlined the very complex needs of some of our constituents trying to find houses.

The number of deaths of homeless people that have happened in my constituency recently is really tragic. I will give one particular example. After a bitter night, Steven Percival, a man who used to sell The Big Issue on the streets of Camden, was found dead on the steps of a NatWest branch. He was always smiling, and was trying to make ends meet, but in the end he died. It is not just that theirs are lives of hardship; the truth is that, for a lot of homeless people, there is no dignity in dying.

Putting aside the people who are homeless for one second, I also welcome the Bill’s inclusion of a duty to protect those at the risk of homelessness. There is an attempt to bring in personalised plans for those threatened with homelessness. In the Brent side of my borough, there are currently 700 people waiting to be housed in temporary accommodation because they cannot afford the soaring rents in the private rented sector. Brent already has the highest number of families in temporary accommodation, which makes us realise that they could be added to the overall homelessness figures. Again, these are statistics that should make us hang our heads in shame.

I am pleased that the Government support the Bill, but it is not enough to just pay lip service. There are a few conditions that need to be met before we can accept that the Government are fully behind these measures. First, they must allocate sufficient funds for the measures to be implemented—a point that has been made over and over again. Secondly, they must stop selling off council homes. Thirdly, they must regulate the private rented sector, eliminating revenge evictions and rogue landlords. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, they must build more houses.

I will end on this note. I used to be a local councillor and I worked with excellent council officers. The worst thing we can do when someone comes to us and says, “I don’t have a bed to sleep in, I don’t have a roof over my head,” is to turn them away on a cold, bitter night. It is not a lack of will on the part of local authorities; it is a lack of resources.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), I must congratulate the last few speakers who have been very brief and to the point. We can relax a little now. Five to six minutes is fine, but no more than that. The trouble is that if I say five minutes, those five minutes will become seven, so I am still saying five. Those who have taken two or three minutes should take the brownie points.

1.11 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): You gave us the four-minute warning earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will stick to that. There are many points I would
like to make, but I will focus on just one as it is important that we proceed to the key moment of letting the Bill, which I support in principle, go forward to the next stage. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I want to focus on how the measures in the Bill will be paid for. Like many hon. Members, I have the concern that while the Bill is very fine in principle, there is a danger of passing it into law and finding that our local authorities do not have the resources to implement the duties it puts on them. I am sure the Minister will tell us that he has put his hand down the back of the sofa in Marsham Street and come up with the money we need to support this—I hope he does—but I would like to suggest one way we might consider paying for the measures in the Bill.

This is about intervention in the housing market. We should remember that the Government already intervene in the UK housing market to the tune of many billions of pounds. We should consider ring-fencing some of the profits from the Help to Buy scheme. At the moment, the Government’s stake in residential property from all equity loans, going right back to those under new Labour such as HomeBuy Direct and First Buy, is £4 billion. That cash is not sitting there available for us to spend. However, it is being redeemed at an increasingly fast rate.

Last year, redemptions on equity loans—money to the Exchequer—amounted to £183 million. From a social point of view, when somebody redeems an equity loan from a scheme such as Help to Buy, they will do so because they have benefited from Government money to get on the property ladder. At that point, they will have either sold the property or re-mortgaged it and become a fully fledged 100% property owner—a part of the property-owning democracy to which we all aspire. It would be a very powerful signal if, at that point, we were to share some of their success with the people at the sharp end. That would be a more holistic housing policy.

We could still repay the Government debt and Government interest. In the time that the £4 billion has accrued, house price inflation has, since 2013 alone, been 23.3%. Even if 10% of that was profit, that is still £400 million, or £150 million a year for the rest of the Parliament. That is my main point. I hope the Minister will at least give consideration to having a joined-up housing policy, so that schemes such as Help to Buy in effect become a social impact bond. The whole of society will benefit from this way of robustly funding the commitments in the Bill, and councils will not be left out of pocket.

1.14 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on all the hard work he has done on the Bill, and on approaching the issue in an inclusive cross-party way. However strongly I feel that his party in government has a lot to answer for when it comes to homelessness, I know that none of that attaches to him personally. I am glad to see that such a worthy cause has such an effective champion.

I also congratulate the members of the Communities and Local Government Committee on dedicating their time to the Bill—by questioning the Minister on the
point to the example set for us by the Labour Government in Wales, who have had very similar legislation in effect since April last year. After a year, 45% of homeless households were found secure accommodation for at least six months, and two thirds of households assessed as threatened with homelessness had that prevented for at least six months. There has also been a significant drop in the number of households in temporary accommodation.

However, the Welsh Government have not stopped there. They are funding affordable housing, both to rent and to buy; they are protecting the Supporting People programme; and, unlike the Government here at Westminster, they are not forcing local authorities to sell vacant homes to the highest bidder. In other words, they are serious about tackling both homelessness and its underlying causes.

I welcome the Minister’s support for the Bill, but I urge him, too, not to stop there. I urge him to see the Bill not merely as a sticking plaster, but as a starting point for a better housing strategy. Let us provide support for those who find themselves homeless, let us assist those who have the threat of homelessness hanging over them, but let us also work to remove that threat from so many of our constituents who have been let down by six years of failed housing policy.

1.20 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). I share her support for the Bill, but I could not help noticing one or two specific points that she made. There was, for example, her talk of local government funding. My memory goes back reasonably well over the last two years, and I am reminded of what the current “Strictly Come Dancing” star and former shadow Chancellor Ed Balls said about the extra funding that Labour would make available to local government. It was a round figure, to say the least, and it was not the figure 10.

It has been interesting to hear some of the comments that have been made today, but I want to return to the welcome and genuine cross-party spirit that produced the Bill. As a constituent pointed out to me on Twitter a few moments ago, we need to be clear about the fact that homelessness is not always visible. It is not just about people sleeping rough on the streets. Indeed, most homelessness is not about someone sleeping in a shop doorway, although that may be the most visible manifestation of it, and obviously the most concerning. Much of it involves people who are not in appropriate accommodation, such as families who are living in houses that are too small for them and their needs, or people who are sofa surfing. Some people do not have a home of their own, and would be out on the street but for a kindly family member or friend who says, “Here is the sofa”—or the floor—“and you can at least be somewhere warm and dry.” That, however, is not much of a step up from being out on the street.

Wendy Morton: Could not those sofa surfers, and others who are not actually visible to us when we walk around our constituencies or around London, be described as “the hidden homeless”? Does that phrase not encapsulate their situation?

Kevin Foster: Absolutely. They are indeed the hidden homeless. Similarly, although people in temporary bed-and-breakfast accommodation—which is also mentioned in the Bill—are not actually out on the street sleeping rough, no one could call A and B a home. It is not an appropriate place in which to live. I remember one of the occasions on which I opposed my own party locally, a few years ago. There was a debate in Torbay about the future funding of the local hostel for the homeless, and I made it very clear that I could not support an alternative that involved the use of some of Torbay’s B and Bs. While they are fine for a week’s holiday, they are certainly not places in which people should be housed other than in the most extreme circumstances.

I must pay tribute to some of the organisations in my constituency that are doing so much work to help those who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Anode, which is based in an old monastary in Paignton, provides goods such as cheap furniture to help people to get back into housing. Those who have been homeless, especially those who have been sleeping rough, do not have furniture, and are unlikely to have the means to pop down to a local shop and buy some. The Leonard Stocks Centre in Factory Row is the hostel that I mentioned a moment ago. Along with the charity Shekinah, which assists with its management, it works to ensure not just that people have homes to go to, but that rough sleepers can be given a basic breakfast and have their clothes sorted out. It has a rough sleeper outreach worker who is a former rough sleeper himself, and on many occasions he has been able to give people the confidence that they need.

I often make the point that no one chooses to sleep on the streets. Some people may feel, owing to mental health conditions or other issues that have arisen in their lives, that that is the only choice that they can make, but it is never an active choice.

Of course, it is always worth mentioning the Salvation Army and its citadel in the centre of Torquay, which does so much to support people and families who have been homeless or who are at risk of homelessness.

For those who are wondering, I have no intention of attempting to talk the Bill out, but I will make a few more points on why it is such important legislation. As a number of people have said, the current criteria date from 1977 and were amended in 1996. It is clear that they need to be updated. Only last week in my surgery, I found myself advising a family who had been issued with a notice of eviction by their landlord that they would be rehoused, but that they would probably have to wait until a week or two before the bailiffs are due to throw them out.

On that front, I am pleased that the National Landlords Association supports the Bill because landlords are put in an invidious position. They know that someone probably will be rehoused, but they have to get to the point of almost sending the bailiffs round for that to happen, rather than prevention work being done. That is why it is important that the emphasis in the law changes from dealing with people who will be on the streets imminently or who are on the streets, which is a particular issue in London, to working before that point to prevent people becoming homeless.

Mike Wood: Was my hon. Friend as startled as I was to discover that in the last quarter, nearly 5,000 people were judged to be homeless but not a priority case?
Does he welcome the changes in the Bill to address those extremely vulnerable people who are not covered by the existing legislative framework?

Kevin Foster: I could not have put it better myself. The excellent briefing note prepared by the House of Commons Library talks of the fear that a bit of “gatekeeping” is going on when people approach local authorities. It is hard to see how 5,000 people can be defined as homeless but not a priority. The changes proposed in the Bill are therefore very welcome.

It is also welcome that, as was mentioned earlier, the armed forces will remain a priority. Those who have put their lives on the line for this country should know that there will be a home fit for a hero awaiting them when they leave the forces. There are sometimes issues with locality, and I accept that there are unique issues if someone is looking to return to certain parts of London after their service. However, it is part of the duty we owe to servicemen and women who have put their life on the line.

I welcome the debate we have had on the Bill today, and I welcome all the clauses in it. We will now move on to the detailed Committee process to finalise it and ensure that it tackles the issues we all wish to see tackled in order to reduce homelessness. That is why I think it is appropriate that the Bill receives its Second Reading. I will still be thinking about the people who are left out of work for other reasons, and every family and put food on the table.

Kevin Foster: I could not have put it better myself.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): In the interests of the 94 people sleeping on the streets of Bristol, I want the Bill to proceed, so I have taken everything that has already been said out of my speech and cut it down to a few sentences.

If the Government really want to tackle the housing and homelessness crisis, they should go beyond supporting this Bill and consider the following things. They could tackle land banking by allowing councils to charge council tax on unused land that has planning permission. They could remove the arbitrary borrowing limits on councils when building homes. There is no set limit on borrowing to build a swimming pool, so why is there one for homes? They could release more public land for building. They could follow the suggestions made by Opposition Members and some Government Members today to reform the private rented sector, which so badly and urgently needs reform. They could tackle low-income, insecure employment, which is causing many families who are in work to struggle to meet their rent and put food on the table.

I support the Bill, but as I go home having supported it, I will still be thinking about the people who are left behind. I ask the Government to think of them as well as I mention the young couple I know who cannot afford a deposit on a home, young people leaving care with no family to turn to when things go wrong, older people who are struggling when they are ill or put out of work for other reasons, and every family and individual at risk of homelessness in Bristol West and elsewhere tonight, because while this Bill does so much that is commendable and we support, there is much more the Government can and must do to end this housing crisis.

Kevin Foster: I could not have put it better myself.
bond with a £10 million rough sleeping fund for it, which will allow local partnerships to work with some of the most entrenched rough sleepers, focusing on getting them into accommodation and using personalised support to address their complex needs. This will be open to all areas but we will particularly be interested in hearing from areas with the highest levels of rough sleeping.

Our programme will mean innovation and collaboration to prevent homelessness. Our £20 million grant fund for prevention trailblazer areas will help up to 20 local areas to go further and faster with reform, laying the groundwork for many of the changes we want to see through my hon. Friend’s legislation. They will adopt and develop best practice and data-driven approaches to identify people at risk of homelessness, and will provide them with early support to prevent a crisis. Southwark, Newcastle and Greater Manchester are our early adopters and will be taking forward a range of initiatives. Projects will include collaboration with a wide range of services to identify people who are at risk of homelessness, and to work with them well before they are threatened with eviction. Early adopters will also test innovative approaches to preventing homelessness to help us build our evidence base on what works. Taken together, these three funds make up a strong package of local support that will make an immediate difference to the lives of homeless people in our country.

It is not just local change that is needed. I am also driving action across Government through the ministerial working group on homelessness. The group is focusing on many key initiatives, the first of which is the development of cross-departmental indicators, so that we can track the progress that all Departments are making in tackling homelessness. Homelessness is not just a housing issue, and that is why, through the ministerial working group, we will work closely with health services, such as hospital discharge teams and mental health services, to understand what more they could do to help to prevent homelessness. Finally, the group is looking at how we can ensure that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness receive the help that they need to get into work.

This Government are committed to going even further. That is why last year we said that we were looking at many key initiatives, the first of which is the development of cross-departmental indicators, so that we can track the progress that all Departments are making in tackling homelessness. Homelessness is not just a housing issue, and that is why, through the ministerial working group, we will work closely with health services, such as hospital discharge teams and mental health services, to understand what more they could do to help to prevent homelessness. Finally, the group is looking at how we can ensure that people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness receive the help that they need to get into work.

The Bill requires local authorities to provide new homelessness services to all those affected, not just those who are protected under existing legislation. My hon. Friend provided an excellent description of the effect that the Bill will have. I particularly draw Members’ attention to the extension of the duty on local authorities to provide advisory services. This means that services must be designed with certain vulnerable groups in mind, such as care leavers and victims of domestic abuse. This will mean that people at risk of homelessness will receive more meaningful information earlier, to help them to prevent their own homelessness.

Emma Reynolds: Can the Minister reassure the House that the Bill’s money resolution will provide sufficient resources to allow local authorities to comply with their new duties, in order the make the Bill a reality?

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing up a point that Members across the House have rightly raised today. I shall say more about this later, but I hope that I will be able to reassure her and other Members that the Government are absolutely committed to providing new funding to local authorities to allow them to discharge the new duties in the Bill.

As I was saying, preventing homelessness as early as possible is critical. Importantly, the Bill places a duty on local authorities to start helping applicants 56 days before they are threatened with homelessness. This doubles the current period for help and brings it more into line with the notice period for ending an assured shorthold tenancy, which is currently the lead trigger for statutory homelessness acceptances.

The Bill will place a duty on local authorities to take reasonable steps to prevent homelessness for eligible households threatened with homelessness. It will also ensure that other local services refer those who are either homeless or at risk of being homeless to local authority housing teams, and that care leavers are more easily able to establish a local connection and so are not deterred from seeking support, should they need it.

The Bill will make a real difference; it offers support to a much wider group of people who need it than the existing legislation, which is why I am today pleased to offer the House the Government’s full and unfettered support for the Bill. I can confirm that the Government will fund the additional costs of the Bill, in line with the long-standing new burdens arrangements.

As I said to the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), there will be new funding for local authorities. We will work closely with local authorities and homelessness charities to ensure the successful implementation of the Bill. That includes a commitment to working together on any guidance and codes of practice that will be required to sit alongside the new legislation.

Mr Bettis: I welcome the Minister’s assurance about the codes of practice. His efforts to get Government support for the Bill are greatly appreciated. On the money, aside from the initial work with the LGA to get the new burdens figures agreed, does he accept that it is difficult to predict the precise costs of the legislation? Will he reflect on whether, once the legislation has been in operation for a year, he should sit down with the LGA again to see whether the initial figures are correct or in need of revision?

Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words about my work on this important matter. In view of the changes recently made to the Bill, we are looking very carefully at the costs. We acknowledge that the Government will have to deal with the new burdens that will come with the legislation. We are speaking to the LGA and will continue to do so. We are also speaking
to local authorities about the costs that will be incurred. He makes a good point; in the past few months, I have created a local authority working group. Local authorities came to the Department to discuss issues and good practice that they are promoting. We are certainly listening to what that group is saying and feeding that into the work being done by the cross-Government ministerial working group.

John Healey: Members on both sides of the House will be pleased to hear what the Minister said on the new funding that will go to local government for the new duties. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) may have jumped the gun a little. Speaking to the LGA and listening to the local government working group is one thing, but will the Minister undertake to involve the LGA in assessing and agreeing the additional duties and the likely additional costs that will necessitate the new funding?

Mr Jones: As I said a few moments ago, we are engaging with the LGA, and engaged with it and the Select Committee on the Bill. Like the Select Committee, we are aware that some concerns from the LGA arose from the process of prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill. We are speaking carefully to the LGA about the costs and new burdens on local government, and will continue to undertake to do that, because we want to make sure that the Bill works. As I said, we are determined to put in funding that does not currently go to local authorities to support the Bill.

We know from the experience in Wales that a change in culture, alongside the introduction of new legislation, is critical. I will drive forward work alongside the Bill to ensure that the change becomes a reality. Our funding package, and the work that will take place alongside it, will be important steps in that direction. That work will support the reform of local practice and partnerships through the provision of expert support from a network of specialist providers; improve the quality of services by giving front-line organisations and local authorities easier access to evidence-based best practice through an online hub; and improve data collection and analysis, making it easier for local areas to spot those at risk of homelessness. There are extremely good examples of that type of work going on. In Newcastle upon Tyne, extremely good work is being done on spotting the people who may be at risk of homelessness, but who are not yet at that point.

I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for his admirable work in bringing this legislation to this point. Since publishing his draft Bill in August 2016, he has worked tirelessly with the LGA, Crisis, Shelter and St Mungo’s to address many of the concerns raised in their evidence to the Select Committee. The Government are proud to support this important Bill, and are very grateful to all concerned for their expert work.

Although the measures that set out to provide 56 days’ emergency accommodation for anyone who needs it were not included in the final version of the Bill, the Government are clear that no one should have to sleep rough to get the support that they need. That measure was removed because of concerns that that duty was unworkable and would not achieve the outcomes it sought to secure. I hope that the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) will acknowledge that a lot of work has been done, following the representations made by local authorities and the sector, through the Select Committee, and that changes have been made to overcome the biggest impediment that local authorities saw to delivering the Bill.

The Government are committed to building up evidence and good practice to address this issue in the longer term, which is why our £40 million support package includes a new £10 million rough sleeping prevention fund to help people who are at risk of rough sleeping. That will prevent people from reaching the streets and help new rough sleepers quickly off the streets. Ensuring that people on the edge of homelessness have a safe place to stay while longer-term solutions are found will be a key part of this programme.

I know that concerns have been raised by the National Landlords Association about clause 1. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East, I am committed to working through these concerns with the NLA over the coming weeks. I put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for leading such thorough scrutiny of the draft legislation through the Communities and Local Government Committee. I also thank all other hon. Members who are on that Committee, many of whom are here today, as their scrutiny has resulted in important changes to the Bill, such as: the removal of the clause that changed how local connection was defined; people who have experienced, or are at risk of, domestic violence being specified in the duty to provide advisory services; the increase in safeguards for households considered not to be co-operating with the local authority; and the added flexibility for councils to be able to help to secure a six-month tenancy when working with people to relieve their homelessness.

I also pay tribute to Crisis for all its work. It has been a pleasure to work with it, and when I first met the people on its expert panel, who were promoting the original Bill, which was based on the Welsh legislation, it was extremely revealing to hear what they had to say. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East has been able to take the Bill forward, and that the Government have been able to support it with him. I also pay tribute to Shelter and St Mungo’s, which have also worked together to contribute to this Bill so far. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (David Mackintosh) and the all-party group on ending homelessness for their input into this important work.

A great deal of work has gone into the Bill to get it to this point. As we know all too well, when Members play politics with private Members’ Bills, they often find that their Bills get timed out. As has been said by a number of right hon. and hon. Members today, I urge Members not to take that risk with this Bill, which has enormous potential to improve the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our country. I also thank the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) for his kind words about my work, and for the spirit of co-operation shown today. I hope that that spirit is continued throughout the progress of this Bill.

The Government are confident that the Bill will significantly reform England’s homelessness legislation and work well alongside the package of non-legislative
reform that the Government are also driving forward. This Government will continue to ensure that more people get the help that they need to prevent them from becoming homeless, and the support that they need, should they fall through the safety net. I am honoured and very proud to say that the Government will give their full support to this Bill. I hope that it will receive its Second Reading today, and that it will proceed through the remaining stages in this House.

1.51 pm

Bob Blackman: We have had a passionate and well-informed debate. With the leave of the House, I will briefly sum up the debate. First, may I thank the 32 Members who have taken part and the numerous others who have made interventions?

When we set out on this journey, the informal title of the Bill was the Homelessness Prevention Bill, but, as it was politely pointed out to me, that would mean that it would make it illegal for anyone to be homeless. We rapidly retitled it to the Homelessness Reduction Bill in the hope that we will eliminate homelessness in the long run.

I wish to place on record my thanks to Crisis for all the work that it has done on getting us to this stage, to St Mungo’s, which every day tries to take people who are sleeping rough off the streets, to the Minister and the Communities and Local Government team for all the help and advice they have given to get us to this stage, and to the Residential Landlords Association and the National Landlords Association, which have given their critical input. I wish to put on record my thanks to FirmFoundation in my constituency, which does so much work to get single homeless men off the streets and into appropriate accommodation. Equally, I thank Members on both Front Benches for their support and assistance in getting us to this stage.

Getting a Bill to Second Reading is a long struggle when one is doing something so important. We have taken a lot of time and trouble to get this right. Provided that the Bill receives its Second Reading, I look forward to it going through Committee, Report, Third Reading and the House of Lords. Out there today, people will be looking at this House and saying how proud they are that MPs from all parts of the House are taking the right sort of approach to ending completely the social disease of homelessness.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill

Second Reading

1.54 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It is unfair on the hon. Gentleman that people are making a noise while leaving the Chamber. His Bill is also important and deserves a hearing.

Steve McCabe: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I am very pleased that his Homelessness Reduction Bill has made progress.

Let me be blunt: I have been here a long time, and I know how Fridays work. In fact, in a previous life I was the Government Whip on Fridays, so I have a fair idea of what to expect. I intend to be very brief because I would really like to give this straightforward proposal a chance to make it on to the statute book. If it is not the Government’s intention to give my Bill a chance, I ask the Minister to consider the injustice and wrongs that it seeks to address, and at least to think about how the Government might tackle the issue. I am quite willing to meet him and his colleagues to consider other options. My ego is not such that I need to have a Bill with my name on it; what I want is something to address the problem. The Neighbourhood Planning Bill is currently before the House, and we could amend that. I think there is also a White Paper imminent.

The purpose of the Bill is to offer occupants of family homes some relief and protection against rogue developers and landlords who are exploiting permitted development rules where the shortage of local authority resources and the complexity of existing enforcement arrangements means that there is little prospect of redress. Selly Oak Village and Bournbrook were once particularly attractive parts of my constituency. They consisted of a series of interlocking tree-lined streets full of small terraced and other family homes. Today they consist of “To Let” boards, with streets, pavements and front gardens littered with skips, builders’ rubble, sand and cement. All day and at the weekends, there is the noise of building works as developers knock up extensions of various shapes and sizes in an effort to convert family homes into five, six, eight, 10 and 12-bedroom houses in multiple occupation.

Birmingham City Council seems powerless to address this activity, even where it is clearly in breach of planning guidance, permitted development rules, and building regulations. It says that enforcement action is far too costly for local authorities, that Government guidance is not clear enough, and that it cannot risk a court case against well-heeled developers who are often much better resourced. The problem is not confined to Selly Oak or to Birmingham; it affects towns and cities across the country. The Minister may even have come across it in
Nuneaton. Anywhere with a student population, a transient workforce or a high demand for temporary accommodation is being affected in the same way.

One example is the case of my constituents Mr and Mrs White, a retired couple who have lived for many years, and brought up their children, in the family home. A developer bought the house next door and promptly commenced an extension that has, in effect, changed their detached home into a semi-detached property, as the roof was expanded to sit on top of the roof and guttering of their home. The council failed to take enforcement action, despite the work commencing without any approval, because the developer had claimed the work was within permitted development rights. In reality, he went well beyond any rights he had. A surveyor’s report indicated severe damage to the Whites’ external wall. It has cost them thousands of pounds in court fees, and despite winning their case and being awarded costs, they have not yet received a penny, and the illegal extension is still in place.

Another constituent, Mrs O’Sullivan, complained that work on an extension included digging up the foundations in a shared alleyway. The council concluded that the requirement to take into account whether any breach unacceptably affects public amenity or involves the use of land and buildings that should be protected in the public interest meant that a court case was too costly and too risky.

On Gristhorpe Road, the Britannia Group continues to build extensions designed to convert existing homes into eight-bedroom properties, without planning permission and under the guise of permitted development. Given that it gets away with that, it is not surprising that other developers are doing the same thing in the same street and on adjacent roads. In one development, cowboy builders demolished the chimneys and gas flues of the home of the elderly couple next door, exposing them to the risk of serious carbon monoxide poisoning.

I could go on, but many Members will be familiar with the accounts that I have given. All those cases involve ordinary people who have worked and saved for their family homes, only to find rogue developers and landlords turning their properties and streets into a series of mini-hostels.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): In the hon. Gentleman’s experience, are breaches reported by neighbours to the local authority, which then fails to act, or do the neighbours fail to report them to the local authority?

Steve McCabe: The point is that they are reported, but local authorities will not act because of the cost and complexity of the enforcement apparatus. That is what the Bill seeks to address. As the value of the properties affected plummets, the developers move in to snap them up and the cycle begins again.

I am not arguing against permitted development where someone wants to add a conservatory, extra bedroom, kitchen extension or another modification to their property. Nor am I arguing that conversion to flats of previous commercial properties, such as office blocks, is wrong. I am arguing that the systematic abuse of permitted development by rogue developers converting family homes into five, six, eight and 12-bedroom HMOs is destroying the character of whole neighbourhoods, reducing the number of family homes and damaging existing properties. I also wonder about the safety of those extensions, given the cowboy builders who are so often employed.

We need cheaper, effective enforcement powers, so that cash-strapped local authority planning departments can counter the unintended consequences of permitted development. Birmingham City Council claims that the current guidance is not clear and that many agents and individual owners are not sure about what they can and cannot build. Not surprisingly, however, those who advise them always err on the side of ever-greater expansion.

The Bill calls for four things. First, it calls for monitoring and inspection arrangements to be put in place by local authorities to ensure that developers are complying with the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015, and for an opportunity for those affected by such developments to request an inspection.

Secondly, the Bill calls for a simple complaints procedure to adjudicate on breaches of permitted development rights and an enforcement plan for tackling such abuse. Thirdly, it would allow local authorities to impose a financial penalty on a developer whose alterations are found to have exceeded entitlements under permitted development rights and/or created a structure or conditions with an adverse impact on the property or enjoyment of the property belonging to another person. Those penalties are modelled on those that the Government have already introduced in their recent Housing and Planning Act 2016 to deal with rogue landlords.

Finally, the Bill calls on the Secretary of State to lay a report before each House on compliance of developers with the 2015 order and to comment on the monitoring investigations and complaints process. It also offers the prospect of the Secretary of State issuing clarifying guidance. Given that the current guidance on permitted development runs to about 200 pages, I think that that measure must be coming down the tracks. For the sake of Mr and Mrs White, and the thousands of other innocent homeowners like them, I urge the Minister and Members of the House to support the Bill.

2.5 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, and not least to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). I believe that he secured this Bill by joining us for the sleep-out a few months ago. We had a slightly uncomfortable but very successful evening, in which we spent about eight hours on the floor upstairs outside the Public Bill Office.

I welcome the fact that we are debating what we should do about family homes. In Torbay, Victorian villas that were once fairly substantial properties are now being converted, with mixed success, either into homes explicitly in multiple occupation or, as the hon. Gentleman alluded to, into homes in which a suspiciously large number of people live, which were designed to avoid the HMO regulations. That is especially common in places where the local authority is trying to restrict the number of HMOs.

In Morgan Avenue in my constituency, residents are concerned about one property—it would be unfair to name it on the Floor of the House—which may be
being used as an HMO even though permission to convert it into one has been turned down. Even if that property is not being used as such, a large number of properties in the area have undergone conversions, which have not necessarily been sympathetic. That has put pressure on local services and removed desperately needed three and four-bedroom family accommodation, particularly in areas where the local services nearby are very useful for those who do not have a car.

I am glad that we are having this debate. When I think back to my time as deputy leader of Coventry City Council, when the Minister and I knew each other rather well, we faced a dilemma over how to enforce the rules and how to justify tying up a planning officer for a significant period. That would be fine if we were dealing with a very large enforcement case, but we had to decide which ones came first and how to reach the required evidential standards. I hope that the Bill will give the Government an opportunity to look at the rules. I suspect that the Bill will not make a huge amount of progress beyond today, but it provides a useful chance to look again at how we deal with developers who seek to turn family homes into HMOs.

I was interested to read in the Bill the suggestions around sanctions and creating codes of practice in the next six months. Even though the Bill may not reach the statute book, perhaps the Minister could reflect on those things in his response—[Interruption.] I hear heckling from the shadow Front-Bench team. I am happy to keep going, because I presume that they would like to hear more of my comments. I will not be cruel; however, I will make sure that the Front Benchers have time to respond to the Bill. I can see the clock.

I am keen that future development in Torbay should be appropriate and provide family homes, and that those homes should be protected. In our debate on the previous Bill, we talked about getting people off the streets, and the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) pointed out that we have to ensure that there is good accommodation for those people to go into. If their housing offer is a room at the back end of a Victorian villa with perhaps a bathroom or a very small bedroom off it, they will end up doing their washing, cooking and sleeping all in the same room, and it will be only one step up from a hostel. I find it particularly difficult when families approach me, as so many do, because they are struggling to find accommodation that meets their needs, especially if they have a child or a family member with disabilities. They need a particular type of house—probably a family home with a garden—but if such houses can easily be converted to different uses, the situation is made much harder.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill has evident merits but should be seen within the context of other action by local authorities to regenerate city centres using permitted development rights and the appropriate use of selective licensing schemes, particularly in urban areas?

Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend makes a useful and interesting observation. I agree with him on selective licensing schemes in areas where there have been issues with rogue landlords. The active residents group in Melville Hill, Torbay has been campaigning for a selective licensing scheme for some time, and my view has always been that people renting higher-value properties on the edge of town are able to advocate for themselves, but licensing schemes are welcome in areas where there have been problems. The merit of the Bill has to be seen against the whole range of powers available to local authorities, but I accept that its main thrust is to try to make some of those powers more usable on a practical, day-to-day basis. I welcome what is being done.

Finally, permitted development rights make particular sense where a building has been out of action for some time. I ask the Minister to ponder how we ensure that office blocks in significant locations, such as Roebuck House on Abbey Road in Torquay, that are converted from commercial to residential use do not end up being converted into one-bedroom studio flats with few facilities around them, essentially becoming a large house in multiple occupation, rather than being converted into two or three-bedroom properties that might be more needed in the local housing market?

I am conscious of the time, so I will now conclude my speech. I welcome that this issue has been brought to the Floor of the House. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

2.11 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I too begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on the progress of his Bill.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for introducing this excellent Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill. His constituents have clearly been having problems with permitted development so I applaud him for shining a light on the issue, which he rightly says is not only confined to Birmingham but affects all our constituencies across the UK.

The Opposition fully support my hon. Friend’s Bill. Nothing better characterises the difference between the Government’s approach and Labour’s approach to planning than permitted development. I am sure the Housing Minister and his predecessors can testify to our ongoing objections to the Government’s extension and relaxation of permitted development rights and the system that underpins them. The system takes away the ability of local people and their elected representatives to have a say on development in their area.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I hear what the hon. Lady is saying. Does she not accept that if a local area has such concerns about permitted development rights and their use, the local authority in question can invoke an article 4 direction and take away those permitted development rights?

Dr Blackman-Woods: I do indeed know that a local authority can apply for an article 4 direction, but I also know that the Government have made it extremely difficult for local authorities to get one. Applying for an article 4 direction is a cumbersome process.

To be clear, we are not against change of use, per se. Labour is arguing for a proper system of planning
The private rented sector, including houses in multiple occupation, plays an important role in the housing market. Around 4.3 million households in England live in private rented homes. Single people, students and those embarking on their first job in a new town often want to rent a room. They may only be staying in the area for a fixed period, such as a university term; they may want to get familiar with an area before they find a more permanent home of their own; or it may simply be that they are not in a position where they can afford to live alone. Houses in multiple occupation, including smaller shared houses, can provide flexibility. Where they offer good quality, safe accommodation, managed by responsible landlords, they can provide a much needed service.

Many households live in decent, well-maintained homes in the private rented sector. However, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak is all too aware, that is not always the case.

Mr Jackson: The Minister is making a very good case. Does he believe, as I do, that, given that about a third of local planning authorities do not have robust local plans in place, it is incumbent on those authorities to do their bit in defending the integrity of residential areas as much as it is on the passing of specific legislation such as this Bill?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. It is incumbent on all local authorities to put local plans in place. My hon. Friend and I spent many happy hours on the Housing and Planning Bill Committee. The Bill, which became an Act earlier this year, includes provision to compel local authorities to put local plans in place. He is absolutely right that any local authority that does not do so has an obligation to its residents to protect its area. If it cannot do so because it does not have a substantive local plan, then unless there are any practical reasons why it has not been able to do so, it is failing its local population.

Returning to landlords prepared to exploit their tenants, who are sometimes the most vulnerable members of our society with very little choice of housing, unfortunately a number of rogue landlords do not manage their properties properly. They have no regard for planning legislation or building regulations. They are prepared to rent out substandard accommodation: homes that are dangerous and overcrowded.

The Bill draws attention to the need for measures to tackle the problem of illegal or substandard housing. However, I do not accept that the hon. Gentleman’s proposals are necessary in this context. There is already a range of regulations to tackle the various breaches to which he draws attention. In particular, the private rented sector provisions in the Housing and Planning Act 2016—at least three of us in the Chamber sat on the Bill Committee—show a real determination from the Government to tackle rogue landlords by disrupting their business models and putting them out of business.

Steve McCabe: The central point is the cost and effectiveness of the enforcement measures. If the Minister thinks there are alternative ways of dealing with this, will he accept my earlier offer to meet for talks about how the Government might be able to do that? I am
Mr Jones: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I will come on to talk about some of the things the Government have done to make the enforcement process easier for local authorities. I hear what he says about the spirit in which he introduced the Bill. He will know that the Housing and Planning Minister will consider carefully what is said in this debate and that the Government will publish a housing White Paper in due course. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be able to bring these issues to the fore.

Kevin Foster: On next steps, will the Minister look at how we communicate with local authorities about the powers they already have; for example, talking to Torbay Council about whether a selective licence scheme would help to deal with some of the specific issues around Melville Hill, even if, rightly, it did not want to introduce one across its whole borough area?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is a great champion for the Torbay area and I hear what he says about Melville Hill. He has an encyclopaedic knowledge of his constituency. If he is saying that that is the type of area where his constituents need to be protected by the selective licensing regime, I am sure his local authority should heed his advice. Before introducing new legislation, we should always consider current legislation and ensure it is being enforced effectively.

Certainly in respect of rogue landlords, which I am talking about and my hon. Friend has mentioned, the 2016 Act is relevant. I take on board the comments made by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods). The Government have put in place significant powers to protect local authorities. There is now a regime under which local authorities can keep the money and is able to use it to do more work, and to wait and see what is in the White Paper when it is published.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I would like to take the Minister back to the comments he made a few minutes ago. Was he confirming that the housing White Paper, which we expect in a few weeks’ time, will contain measures to deal with abuses of permitted development?

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady tempts me to move away from the Bill, but it would be unfair to me to tell her exactly what is in the White Paper. I know that she always likes a surprise, so I implore her to be patient, and to wait and see what is in the White Paper when it is published.

The identification of rogue landlords and letting agents has been notoriously difficult to achieve. The new database will help enforcement agencies to identify rogue operators. By their very nature, rogue landlords and letting agents do not wish to reveal their activities, which would put their flawed business model at risk.

This situation has been made worse by rogue landlords and agents seeking to evade attention by moving their operations into a new area.

Rossendale Borough Council’s “Operation CARL”—co-ordination against rogue landlords—noted that when a rogue operator’s business is at risk, they are likely to move across local authority borders and slip into relative obscurity, until they commit a breach of legislation. The database will enable local authorities quickly to identify landlords convicted of housing offences who are operating within their locality.

Landlords and letting agents will be entered on to the database if they have been convicted or sentenced in a Crown court for an offence that involves fraud, violence, drugs or sexual assault, particularly if the offence was committed at a residential premises that the offender had let out; for an offence that was committed against or in conjunction with any person residing at the let by the offender; or if someone is found guilty on two or more occasions of a relevant housing offence, whether it be in the magistrates court or a Crown court. A company may also be included on the database if its director, secretary or officer commits such an offence. In very serious cases, a banning order for rogue landlords, letting agents or property managers would prevent them from letting out or receiving rental income from a property. During the time that the ban is in effect, it will be an offence for them or any one associated with them to be involved in the letting or managing of a property.

As I have said, the 2016 Act also provides a better enforcement regime based on the “polluter pays” principle. The cost of this enforcement will fall primarily on rogue landlords.

Let me move on to the issue of permitted development rights, about which I know the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak is extremely concerned. As he knows, some home extensions may be carried out under permitted development rights. A householder who wants to improve his home can build a modest extension such as a loft extension without planning permission, but must meet the limits and conditions set out in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015. That allows limited development to take place more easily, and frees up local authority resources, but it does not mean that a householder or a developer—

2.30 pm
The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).
Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 25 November.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier today, members of some organisations that have been working on the ground in Calais came to Parliament to express their deep concern about the chaos that is unfolding in the camp at this moment and the complete lack of safeguarding, which is leaving children in a dangerous situation. At least 40 children spent last night under a bridge, and their only security was provided by some volunteers from those grassroots organisations, who were prepared to spend the night alongside them. We were also told that the process of bringing children in under the Dubs amendment had apparently been “paused”.

Clusters of children are now being brought in from Calais, and they are being held in Calais and Dunkirk. This is believed to be happening by choice. This cannot go on. The Home Secretary has said that children are being brought into the UK regardless of age. This is a systematic breach of international law. We deeply regret that the process of negotiating safe and legal routes into the UK for children remains in place. The uncertainty is abysmal, and we urge the Home Secretary to take urgent action.
I wonder whether you, Madam Deputy Speaker, could use your best offices to call on the Home Secretary to come to the Chamber and make a statement now. She could then reassure us that she is doing all that she can to hold the French authorities to the commitments that they made earlier today to remove children safely, and to ensure that British officials who are able to work alongside the volunteers and French authorities in the camps are actually in those camps and making sure that the children are safe.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I understand why the hon. Lady has brought that information to the House immediately. The situation in Calais is, of course, tragic, and we are all concerned for the welfare of the children who are there, especially those who are on their own.

The hon. Lady asked me whether I could use my good offices—the offices of the Chair—to bring the Home Secretary to the House now. She would have had to submit a request for an urgent question earlier this morning to allow Mr Speaker to require the Home Secretary to come to the Chamber today. Clearly, now that the House is on the point of adjourning, I have no offices that I can use to require the Home Secretary to come to the House.

However, I will say two things of importance to the hon. Lady. First, I am sure that the Home Secretary and her Ministers will be aware of the situation that she has described. I expect that they will take action in the way in which they have taken action over several weeks, and I expect that the Home Secretary will take action on these issues regardless of whether the House is sitting. Secondly, when the House next sits, at 2.30 pm on Monday—three days from now—the Home Secretary will be here to answer questions. I am sure that the hon. Lady and other Members will be able to raise this matter with her then, and that she will be fully able to respond.

Chronic Urinary Tract Infections

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Chris Heaton-Harris.)

2.33 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to open this debate on the inadequacies of the current testing regime for people suffering from chronic urinary tract infections. I am happy to have been joined by other Members, and in particular by my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), my neighbouring Member of Parliament, who has a long track record in defending services for patients with those conditions, and has worked closely with the Whittington hospital in that regard.

This subject has been neglected for too long, although it affects far too many people. Some 33% of women are expected to suffer from a urinary tract infection before the age of 24, and one in 10 girls and one in 30 boys have a UTI by the age of 16. The issue first came to my attention through the work of Professor Malone-Lee in his lower urinary tract symptoms clinic, which is run from the Hornsey central health centre in my constituency. Many of his patients are my constituents, but many others travel from all over the country and even from abroad to seek his expert help with complex, chronic bladder conditions that have made their lives a misery for many years. Some of them are in the Public Gallery today, including some who have travelled across the country to be here, so this is an important debate for all of us.

The devastation of those patients when Professor Malone-Lee’s clinic was closed temporarily last year and the ongoing concern that I and many others have over the clinic’s future have brought his unique methods into the spotlight. One patient told me that before she saw Professor Malone-Lee, she suffered every single day in pain, leaving her unable to function. Another told me that her life had not been worth living after 32 years of terrible pain and invasive treatments that failed to solve her bladder problems.

I am aware that the long-term future of Professor Malone-Lee’s clinic is the subject of a review by the Royal College of Physicians, so I do not intend to focus specifically on his work today. Instead, I will talk about the wider issue, which my contact with the professor and, more importantly, with so many of his current and past patients has highlighted: the inadequacies of the current testing regime to diagnose urinary tract infections.

The gold standard for diagnosing urinary tract infections over the past 60 years has been to culture a mid-stream urine specimen and identify a pure growth of a known urinary pathogen within a range. However, such dipstick tests have been known to be deficient for many years, with data as far back as 1983 casting considerable doubt on the veracity of their findings due to the lack of sensitivity. Such tests cannot exclude acute or chronic urinary tract infections and do not take into account differences in bacterial strain virulence, host genetic variability, intracellular bacterial reservoirs or even the dilution of the urine specimen due to high liquid intake before the test. The standard laboratory culture will miss 50% of infections. That matters, because these are real people with real symptoms.
Too many people have told me that they have spent years reporting horrendous symptoms and suffering terrible pain, but that they have been dismissed and told that they do not have an infection because the culture was negative. That is to confuse the absence of evidence of disease with evidence of the absence of disease, when those are two wholly different things. What happens to the poor people whose symptoms are dismissed based on a test that experts know to be inadequate? Some will recover and others will find that a short course of antibiotics cures their symptoms, but far too many others will enter a cycle of repeated acute infections, exacerbated by sex, exercise, alcohol, certain foods, stress and many other of life’s normal occurrences, causing devastation to their lives.

As many as 20% to 30% of patients fail to respond to the current recommended antibiotic treatment, whether it is prescribed for three or 14 days. That is not an insignificant number of people when one considers that the Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation estimates that the condition affects about 400,000 people in the UK. Despite that, doctors are not being given the basic tools to inform them how to treat these symptoms differently, and they will not be until the health service revises the inadequate guidelines for testing and treatment. Professor Malone-Lee’s clinic has clearly shown that there are different and more effective ways of testing. Many patients who have not responded to conventional treatment have seen their lives transformed by antibiotic treatment over a prolonged period.

I am well aware of the understandable anxiety among many clinicians and inspectors about antibiotic resistance and the evolution of superbugs. That is clearly something that cannot and should not be ignored, but it is not a reason to fail to question the current guidelines for the treatment of chronic urinary tract infection or to ignore their clear inadequacies. Neither is it a reason to fail to manage the care of those who do not respond to so-called conventional treatment options and to leave them in distress for months and, all too often, years. What evidence is there about the consequences of partially treated urinary infection in the long term? Safe strategies should be developed for helping people who present with particular problems that do not respond to the so-called guidelines. Data show that the NHS spent £434 million on treating 184,000 patients in 2013-14 in unplanned admissions associated with urinary tract infections. Failing to adequately treat these patients is expensive for our NHS and devastating for the patients themselves. The testing and treatment methods employed through the lower urinary tract symptoms pathway under Professor Malone-Lee are estimated to cost approximately £409,000 for 1,000 patients compared with a cost of approximately £5.3 million for 1,000 patients using conventional methods.

I urge the Minister to give this neglected subject the attention it deserves, and I would be grateful for answers to the following questions. Why are people with symptoms and signs being told that they have no infection on the basis of discredited tests? Why are the existing guidelines and policies so didactic when the published evidence implies that there is considerable uncertainty about our knowledge of the condition? Why do these guidelines base their conclusions on the results of quantitative culture which has been so discredited? What is the NHS provision for adults and children with long-term chronic urinary infections? Finally, why is there no tertiary care facility for recalcitrant cystitis in the NHS?

I ask the Minister to meet me and other MPs with constituents who have been affected by the inadequacies of the existing guidelines so that we can discuss this issue in more detail. This is a health and social care issue for many people across the country who struggle to be heard and to be taken seriously. I know that I also speak on behalf of MP colleagues who cannot be here today—many have sent apologies—when I say that many of those affected would be very keen to meet the Minister in person to share their experiences. Will she today agree to have a meeting with representatives from patient groups?

2.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I thank the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for securing this important debate and for all the hard work she, alongside the Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation, or COB, does in campaigning on behalf of people with urinary tract infections. I know that this issue concerns colleagues from across the House and I am pleased to see a number of them here, and welcome the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to the debate. It demonstrates the importance of this subject for so many of our constituents.

Interstitial cystitis, often referred to as painful bladder syndrome, or PBS, is a debilitating and lifelong condition which affects over 400,000 people in this country. Its effects not only cause great and often frequent physical pain, but, as those affected often have to urinate up to eight times an hour, it can also threaten their ability to sleep, work, attend school and maintain a social life. This in turn can, of course, have an adverse effect on the quality of life and even the mental wellbeing of those with the condition. It is therefore clearly crucial that those presenting with symptoms consistent with PBS are diagnosed as quickly and accurately as possible in order to receive the most effective treatment to minimise the devastating effects of the condition. We are alive to that.

I understand that PBS can be a challenging condition to diagnose and that both the hon. Lady and COB have concerns over the effectiveness of the NHS tests for diagnosing urinary tract infection using dipsticks in the urine and mid-stream urine specimens. I am also aware of the work of Professor Malone-Lee and the research that he and his team of researchers at University College London have carried out in this area. I know that she recently invited Professor Malone-Lee to speak to MPs on this matter and I am grateful to her for raising awareness of his findings, as this is one of the most effective ways of sharing best practice and changing behaviours.

I am the first Minister for public health and innovation, and I am always interested to hear of any new developments that could lead to more effective diagnosis and better outcomes for NHS patients. Enhancing the quality of life for people with long-term conditions is hugely important to this Government and an overarching indicator in the NHS outcomes framework. The earlier a condition...
such as PBS can be identified and receive the appropriate treatment, the more the patient will be able to manage their condition and maximise their quality of life.

Our National Institute for Health Research invests around £1 billion each year, and finding innovative solutions to help patients better manage chronic conditions is a vital part of this investment. The NIHR recently awarded about £1 million to the University of Newcastle to run a trial looking at alternatives to prophylactic antibiotic treatment for recurrent UTIs. Another study is looking at the effectiveness and acceptability of urine collection devices to reduce contaminated urine samples in women presenting with symptoms of UTI. That is designed to improve accuracy of diagnosis.

We know that UTIs can be a serious burden for individuals and for the healthcare system, and we believe that clinician-led NHS commissioning should be responsible for making decisions about individual treatments on the basis of the available evidence, taking into account the relevant guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence as appropriate. NICE publishes quality standards to define clinical best practice for the diagnosis and treatment of conditions. These standards are designed to help those commissioning and providing services to understand what a good-quality service looks like and to identify where improvements can be made. NICE published a quality standard on urinary tract infections in adults in June 2015. The quality standard comprises quality statements concerning the diagnosis, treatment and management of urinary tract infections. Quality statements 1 and 2 offer specific guidance on ensuring more accurate diagnoses of UTIs in adults. However, I understand that NICE has not yet addressed the specific issues relating to detecting UTIs raised by Professor Malone-Lee and his team of researchers.

As hon. Members will no doubt be aware, NICE guidance is kept up to date through periodic assessments of new evidence. The evidence surveillance team at NICE has been asked to take into account any publications emerging from Professor Malone-Lee’s work when it next considers the relevant guidance for review. I would encourage Professor Malone-Lee, the Cystitis and Overactive Bladder Foundation and the hon. Lady to take this opportunity to ensure that NICE is kept updated with the latest research, whether it is existing work or research that is produced in future, as I have no doubt that it will be helpful in improving guidance in this area. Furthermore, NICE is an independent body—fiercely independent—and if there are any concerns about an existing NICE quality standard or other guidance, I would encourage those concerns to be taken up with NICE directly.

In more general terms on continence care, NHS England published new guidance in November 2015 to help to improve the care and experience of people with continence issues. This includes the most up-to-date evidence to support commissioners and providers. Once again, I am grateful that this important matter has been brought to my attention, and I hope that any further research will be considered by NICE in any future guidance so that we can continue to make improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of people with such a painful and debilitating condition. I will of course be happy to meet the hon. Lady and patient representatives to ensure that we can make the necessary progress in this area.

I know from personal experience the impact that a chronic, difficult-to-diagnose and hard-to-manage condition can have on a patient’s quality of life. An early and clear diagnosis and a clear treatment pathway can truly be the light at the end of a very dark tunnel for many who are suffering with PBS. I hope that, as a result of the dogged championing of this cause by the hon. Lady and many others, and of the more robust evidence of innovative treatment options that NICE can evaluate, we will be able to offer the genuine hope and certainty that is clearly so urgently needed.

Question put and agreed to.

2.49 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 31 October 2016

Oral Answers to Questions

The Secretary of State was asked—

International Students

1. Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the contribution made by international students to the UK.

Amber Rudd: The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I am in regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Education on all aspects of policy relating to international students. We will shortly be launching a consultation on changes to the non-EU work and study migration routes. I encourage all interested parties to participate.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Government have previously suggested that tens of thousands of international students break the terms of their visa by overstaying. We also know, however, that international students contribute almost £1 billion to the UK economy and that about 30% of university revenues come from non-EU international students. Analysis conducted by the Home Secretary’s own Department shows that only 1% of international students break the terms of their visa arrangements. Will she confirm that the figure is 1% and, if so, what steps will she take to encourage more international students who are a benefit to our economy and our universities, particularly in places such as the north-east of England?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is right. Student immigration plays an important role in supporting our world-class university system, which is a great part of the British economy in terms of exports. He refers to some very encouraging work from my Department about getting a more precise hold on the number of those who overstay. That work is at an early stage, so I would not put too much weight on it yet. We are, however, watching it carefully and hope it will be able to give us more confidence in the numbers of students who leave as well as arrive.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it not the case that post-Brexit we can design a student visa system that will attract the best and brightest from around the world, both within and outside the EU, while at the same time regularising the treatment of English students and EU students in Scotland, which is presently different?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure my hon. Friend that our policy will remain as it is, both post-Brexit and pre-Brexit. It is to encourage the brightest and the best to come to this country, where they contribute to our economy and cultural life.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Barely a fortnight ago, the Chancellor told the Treasury Committee that policy should be guided by public opinion in regards to the treatment of international students and the visa system. Does the Home Secretary agree with the Chancellor? If so, will she finally let common sense and public opinion prevail by removing international students from the net migration cap, which is what the Chancellor seemed to suggest?

Amber Rudd: I certainly agree with the Chancellor that international students make an incredibly important contribution to our economy and our cultural life. On whether international students should be a part of the immigration statistics, they are part of the Office for National Statistics’ stated statistics and it is not for me to change that arrangement.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): In my experience, some time ago when I was doing another job, I found that when I was setting up broadcasting stations, whether in New York city or Gaberone, Botswana, it often helped if I was dealing with people who had been educated in Britain. I therefore certainly agree with the thrust of the question from the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns). Is not the point that we, the United Kingdom, should decide who should come here, not Brussels? That will be the case after Brexit.

Amber Rudd: I agree with my hon. Friend. That every student who has studied here can become an important ambassador for this country internationally. That is an incredibly important part of the soft power of this country, extending our influence. I would say to my hon. Friend, however, that international students are welcome now and we want to continue to attract the best and the brightest. We will continue to do so after we leave the European Union.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Scottish business, the trade unions, the education sector and every political party in the Scottish Parliament, including the Conservative and Unionist party, agree that Scotland needs a return of the post-study route to allow talented students to remain and contribute to the Scottish economy. Similar views are shared by the all-party group on migration, the Home Affairs Committee, the Scottish Affairs Committee, the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee and the Cole Commission on UK exports. Can the Home Secretary explain which organisations advised against the return of the scheme? Indeed, were there any at all who gave such advice?

Amber Rudd: We think we have the right balance on welcoming the brightest and the best students to this country, and allowing them to stay where they can get a
graduate-level job. We have to ensure that the system is fair in attracting people to our best universities and does not allow people to overstay where they do not have graduate-level jobs. If the hon. and learned Lady will indulge me, I will write to her regarding the particular question on what advice we have received.

Joanna Cherry: I would be interested to know what advice was received, but the truth of the matter is that, when compared with countries such as Canada and New Zealand, what the UK Government are offering students in Scotland is pathetic. Is not the real reason why the Home Office is picking on our universities in Scotland a result of the Prime Minister’s blinkered pursuit of her unrealistic net migration target? Is it not time to remove students from that target and recognise that one-size-fits-all immigration policies are neither necessary nor desirable for Scotland, nor indeed for the rest of the UK?

Amber Rudd: I do not share the hon. Lady’s view. I think our figures are pretty clear. When we talk about net immigration figures, we know that they take account of students coming in and students going out. We have the right way of measuring the number of students who come in, and I do not think it inhibits our appeal to international students, because the fact is that they do want to study here in the UK. We have two of the top 10 universities in the world—and long may that continue.

Ben Howlett: I am always delighted to meet my hon. Friend. There has been a lot of airing of this particular issue. I think the Home Secretary is aware that international students contribute over £7 billion to the UK economy and receive 60% approval ratings in the polls, too. Given those figures, is it not clear that in a post-Brexit world, we should shield the immigration figures better to communicate with the public what UK immigration looks like? Will she agree to meet me and colleagues to discuss this issue?

Amber Rudd: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady’s proposal. I have said that international students contribute £7 billion to export earnings, support 137,000 jobs across all regions of the UK and help to make us a world leader in the international knowledge economy, so does the right hon. Lady accept that we are not persuaded by her arguments not to remove international students from migrant totals, and will she undertake to look at the issue again?

Amber Rudd: I think that the hon. Lady and I are in danger of violently agreeing on the benefit of international students to the economy and to this country in general. However, I think she is tilting at the wrong windmill here by focusing on whether international students are part of the immigration figures or not. As I explained earlier, this is a net figure, so it takes account of the people who come and the people who go. The hon. Lady may be exaggerating the impact that she would expect from the removal of international students from the figures.

Orgreave

2. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): When she plans to announce the establishment of a public inquiry into events at Orgreave in 1984.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department

Amber Rudd: Following the request of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign for an inquiry or independent review into the events that occurred at the Orgreave coking plant on 18 June 1984, I have today issued a written statement, setting out my decision. I have concluded that there is no case for either a statutory inquiry or an independent review.

Christian Matheson: This is an astonishing and, frankly, shameful decision by the Government. They have led those families up the garden path for the last two years. Does the Home Secretary not understand that the disinfecting light of a public inquiry is the only thing that will give those communities and those families the confidence they need in the South Yorkshire police force?

Amber Rudd: I urge the hon. Gentleman not to leap to anger quite so quickly. This Government have taken the time and looked at the documents. I have been in post for three months, and I have met the families and the campaigning MPs. The fact that I have reached a different decision from the one that the hon. Gentleman wanted does not mean that it is in any way dishonourable. This was a difficult decision to make. I have made it in consideration of all the facts, and I believe that it is the right one.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Once again, the name “South Yorkshire police” besmirches the brave officers on the front line. I have raised this issue in the House on several occasions, and I raise it again now. Will my right hon. Friend, along with my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister, meet me to have a serious discussion about whether South Yorkshire police and West Yorkshire police can be merged to become Yorkshire police, so that the name “South Yorkshire police” does not do an injustice to the officers who are bravely putting their lives on the line every day?
Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend has raised this matter with me before, and I can tell him that my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister will indeed meet him to discuss it. South Yorkshire police is under new leadership, and I am hopeful that it can make good progress. My right hon. Friend spoke to the police and crime commissioner today to explain the decision that the Government have reached.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Is the Home Secretary aware that her predecessor made it clear to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) some months ago that there would be an inquiry into Orgreave? This decision is not really any different from the one that we suspected beforehand. Why have the Government—and it appears to be the Government—now made a decision that is contrary to the one that the previous Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, announced in response to a question the one that the previous Home Secretary, now the right hon. Prime Minister, announced in response to a question from my right hon. Friend several months ago?

Amber Rudd: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I have taken this matter very seriously. I have spoken to the former Home Secretary about the decision, and I have ensured that all matters and papers have been carefully considered. We have taken our time to arrive at this decision. No commitment was made before; there was only a willingness to look at all the evidence—and perhaps the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that there was no such willingness on the part of the Labour Government—in order to ensure that the right decision was made after all the information had been absorbed.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s decision. While public inquiries can be successful in some instances, too often they cost huge amounts of money, take many years to complete, and do not even answer the question that has been asked.

Amber Rudd: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. In a way, the easier political decision would have been for the Government to agree to an inquiry, but I cannot see that that would be in the public interest, given the substantial policing changes that have taken place since 1984.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): Given that the Independent Police Complaints Commission found evidence of perjury and perversion of the course of justice, and given that in the last month new evidence of orchestrated violence and the mass manufacture of police statements has emerged from former police officers who were at Orgreave, are we not right to conclude that the establishment stitch-up that the Home Secretary has announced today is nothing more than a nakedly political act?

Amber Rudd: No. The right hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong. He chooses to politicise the issue when there are no politics here. As he knows, I had a meeting with the campaign group, and we had a frank exchange of information. The fact that he disagrees with the decision I have made does not mean that it is the wrong decision. I have made it honestly, and it is based on the evidence.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): If the Government have decided against a public inquiry, I wonder whether the House will have the courage to establish a Select Committee inquiry. I understand why the Government are dubious about setting up another public inquiry, involving wall-to-wall lawyers, costing tens of millions of pounds, and taking years. However, if the Government could free up an ad hoc Select Committee, as can be done under the Osmotherly rules when there is a head of steam behind an issue—a proper Select Committee, led by a senior Member of Parliament and able to interview all witnesses about matters including advice to Ministers—we could deal with issues of this kind much more cheaply than a public inquiry.

Amber Rudd: That is a very interesting suggestion. I believe that such a set-up would be a matter for the House, but I am sure that other Select Committees have heard my hon. Friend’s suggestion, and they may indeed take up the opportunity themselves.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): There will be huge concern across south Yorkshire and further afield at the Home Secretary’s decision. May I therefore ask her specifically if she will meet with the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign to discuss this matter further?

Amber Rudd: I spoke to the head of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign this morning, and I am not surprised that she was very disappointed. I set out my reasons and I have written her and the campaign group a six-page letter. I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that they be given a chance to digest its contents before we set up any meeting.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I do not think the Home Secretary fully understands how disappointed and let down the Orgreave families and campaigners will be by her decision. A six-page letter does not compensate for the violence and injustice that occurred at Orgreave so many years ago. We know the South Yorkshire police lied about what happened at Hillsborough, yet only five years earlier the same South Yorkshire police, including many of the same officers, behaved in a very similar way at Orgreave. The Orgreave families and campaigners need the same justice as Hillsborough had; they need the same type of independent inquiry to establish the truth.

Amber Rudd: I respectfully say to the hon. Lady that the Hillsborough situation was quite different from Orgreave; 96 people died at Hillsborough and it was right that we had an inquiry that analysed exactly what happened on the day. In this situation at Orgreave there were no miscarriages of justice, there were no deaths—[Interruption.] There were no convictions, the hon. Lady should be aware. Therefore Orgreave does not merit the same status as that needed for a public inquiry, which was required for Hillsborough.

Europol/European Arrest Warrant

3. Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the potential merits of the UK remaining a member of (a) Europol and (b) the European Arrest Warrant mechanism after the UK leaves the EU. [906879]
The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): As the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have made clear, law enforcement co-operation with our European partners will continue after the UK leaves the EU. We will do what is necessary to keep our people safe. At the Home Office we are exploring all options for co-operation once the UK has left the EU, but it is currently too early to speculate on what future arrangements may look like.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the Minister for that answer, but may I press him? Have the Government decided whether they will seek to retain the European arrest warrant after we leave the EU, and has the Home Secretary had some stern words with the Brexit Secretary, who voted against it only two years ago? Also, have the Government decided to sign up to the new Europol regulations, and if not, when are they going to do so? If they miss the January deadline for that, there could be some severe implications for our membership; what would they be?

Brandon Lewis: The decision on whether we opt into the further Europol regulations will be announced to Parliament shortly. We will take that decision very soon; we are giving good consideration to where we are on that and will make an announcement to Parliament in due course.

The hon. Lady is right that the European arrest warrant provides a basis for a swift, and indeed cost-effective, extradition process across member states, but I will not presume what may or may not be in an agreement. We are in the early days of negotiations and will be going through that over the Brexit period.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Our co-operation and membership of Europol will obviously continue in full with us as a full and strong contributing member of Europol, which of course predates the European institutions. We have been very clear that our co-operation with member states, and our determination to ensure the security and protection of the people of this country, will continue when we are no longer a member of the EU.

Brandon Lewis: I thank the hon. Lady for trying to tempt me into pre-judging what other EU member states may decide to agree to as part of the negotiations. We will be negotiating and I can guarantee that we will continue to put the security and protection of the people of this country absolutely first and foremost.

Fraud

4. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps she is taking to protect people from fraud and its effect on families and communities.

7. Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): What steps she is taking to protect people from fraud and its effect on families and communities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): This Government are going further than any before to protect individuals and communities from fraud. We have established a new programme through the Joint Fraud Taskforce to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are protected. Individuals should also be supported to protect themselves. Many cyber-attacks could be defeated by simple best practice.

Huw Merriman: As the Home Secretary will be well aware, economic crime in Sussex disproportionately targets the elderly. My constituency has one of the highest dementia rates in the UK. If the number of pubs and bars influence the police funding formula, could Ministers consider using dementia rates in the same way?

Amber Rudd: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that suggestion. In fact, our constituencies share the same county of East Sussex—the county with the third highest number of over-80s—so I am familiar with the problem that he highlights. We are redoing the police funding formula and I will take his suggestion as part of the consultation.

Craig Williams: My right hon. Friend will be aware of the concerns raised by my constituents in Cardiff about criminal activity within the financial system. With the Criminal Finances Bill going through the House, will he update us on how we are cracking down on these criminals?

Amber Rudd: The UK is indeed one of the best places to do business, but the proceeds of organised crime and overseas corruption have for too long been able to move through the UK with considerable impunity. Significantly, the Bill will introduce new offences and measures to allow us to go after the money, the middlemen and the crime barons themselves.
Online Child Sexual Exploitation

5. Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): What steps does the Government and UK law enforcement agencies are taking to tackle online child sexual exploitation domestically and internationally.

Sarah Newton: The Government’s response includes law enforcement agencies taking action against online offenders, developing new capabilities to find and safeguard victims and working with the internet industry to remove illegal images. We have led the global response to online child sexual exploitation through the WePROTECT Global Alliance, working with countries, companies and civil society organisations to develop a co-ordinated response.

Lucy Frazer: I thank the Minister for that answer. How are the Government supporting a multi-agency approach to assist local authorities in tackling child exploitation issues?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The child sexual exploitation response unit will ensure that local authorities with concerns about CSE can draw upon the support of specialist professionals. The unit will be supported by a soon to be launched centre of expertise run by Barnardo’s, which will bring together best practice. Finally, a new system of multi-agency inspections is being delivered, the first of which focused on children at risk of CSE.

Online Radicalisation

6. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps she is taking to safeguard vulnerable people from online radicalisation.

Sarah Newton: The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The Government’s response includes law enforcement agencies taking action against online offenders, developing new capabilities to find and safeguard victims and working with the internet industry to remove illegal images. We have led the global response to online child sexual exploitation through the WePROTECT Global Alliance, working with countries, companies and civil society organisations to develop a co-ordinated response.

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James Berry: The Select Committee on Home Affairs has issued two reports calling on Twitter and Facebook to take much tougher action on extremist material, much of which breaches their own terms of use. Does the Minister agree that social media companies should do much more to prevent and remove this material voluntarily, without the need for a request from police officers, which is at the taxpayer’s expense?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. Although the industry has taken some positive steps to address the issue, the internet is still being used to recruit, radicalise, incite and inspire. The CTRU’s relationship with the industry continues to be successful, but we would like internet companies to be more proactive and take more of a lead in tackling the global threat.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Some 12 months ago, Zack Davies was sentenced to life imprisonment following his attempt to behead an Asian citizen in a random attack in a Tesco supermarket in Mold, in my constituency. He was radicalised on the internet by neo-Nazi and Hitler-worshipping material. Will the Minister focus on that issue as well as on Islamist terrorism?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman is right; interestingly, the Prevent strategy is seeing a growth in far-right referrals. In some areas of the country, these Prevent referrals outnumber those about the other parts we are worried out.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): In what many see as a blow to the Government’s Prevent scheme, the Muslim Council of Britain has announced that it will be setting up its own anti-radicalisation programme. The Home Secretary appears to be losing the confidence of Muslims, so what does she intend to do to reverse that loss of trust?

Mr Wallace: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but she is, of course, wrong. The Prevent programme set up by her Government in 2003 has had considerable successes throughout the communities. We should reflect on the fact that Prevent is about safeguarding vulnerable people from being exploited and saving many people’s lives, across the country and abroad. Repeating the echo chamber of people saying that this is about targeting one group or the other is a fallacy.

Immigration

8. Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce levels of immigration into the UK.

Mr Wallace: The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The latest figures show that our reforms to cut abuse across non-EU visa routes and our toughened welfare provisions are working, but there is no doubt that there is more to do. As we conduct our negotiations to leave the EU, it will be a priority to retain more control of the numbers of people who come here from Europe.

Mr Nuttall: Given that there is still some way to go, how confident is the Minister that the measures taken by the Government will result in our meeting the target of reducing net migration to the tens of thousands?
Does he agree that ending the free movement of people principle imposed on us by the EU is essential if we are to stand any chance of meeting that target?

Mr Goodwill: There is no doubt that this is a challenging target, but I love a challenge. We are committed to bringing net migration down to the tens of thousands, and we have already taken significant steps to control immigration. The UK’s departure from the EU will give us control over EU migration, and we will shortly be publishing a consultation document on further changes to the non-EU work and study routes.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): A constituent of mine is awaiting an appeal in respect of a spouse visa application. Correspondence from the tribunals service stated that the process would take 15 weeks, but we have now been informed that it could take up to 18 months. Why are appeals taking so long? Why does the information given to applicants not reflect these delays? The lack of clarity is causing undue stress to applicants and their loved ones.

Mr Goodwill: Although I cannot comment on an individual case, I hope that the hon. Lady will give me the details. It is, however, absolutely right that we took measures to stamp out sham marriages and other routes whereby people can use marriage as a way of getting fraudulent entry to the UK. That does mean that some of the hoops people have to jump through can be slightly smaller than before.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Many of my constituents would like illegal immigration stamped out, as well as there to be monitoring of how much migration there is. I was pleased to hear on the weekend reports of a Jetstream 41 turboprop plane being brought in to help control our borders. Will the Minister tell the House a little more about what he is hoping to achieve with that?

Mr Goodwill: We are determined to prevent illegal migration, from whatever route it comes. That can be through people getting on vehicles coming through the channel crossings, or through general aviation or general maritime routes. We are determined to clamp down on all of those.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The policy to limit migration is at odds with the promise that we heard in the referendum campaign from the Secretary of State for International Development. She said that if we voted to leave, chefs from the sub-continent could have their visa restrictions relaxed to avoid a curry crisis. Was that pledge of the same value as the one that we saw on the side of a bus promising money for the NHS—meaning that it will never happen—or will the Government address the skills shortage in our economy rather than aping the UK Independence party?

Mr Goodwill: I will certainly take no lessons from Labour, as it was the party that allowed people to come in from outside the EU with no skills at all. Indeed, search parties were sent out to encourage mass migration. I lay down a challenge to the restaurateurs in our country to train our own people, because we have tremendously talented people in the UK who would love to train and work in that environment. We do not always need to bring people across from the sub-continent.

Domestic Abuse

9. Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that all forms of domestic abuse are recognised and investigated. [906885]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): The Government have introduced a range of new offences, including the offence of coercive or controlling behaviour. Victims who experience behaviour that stops short of serious physical violence but that amounts to extreme psychological and emotional abuse can now bring their perpetrators to justice. Every police force has published domestic abuse action plans, and new guidance and training has been introduced by the College of Policing.

Mike Freer: I thank the Minister for her answer, but in same-sex relationships and in orthodox religious communities domestic violence is often under-reported. What more can be done to train police officers to support victims and encourage them to come forward?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is quite right that domestic abuse can take many forms and affect all groups in society. New police domestic abuse guidance explicitly captures the fact that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people may be abused by their partners in specific ways that are connected to their sexual orientation or gender identity. The Home Office is also funding the charity Galop to run a dedicated national helpline to provide emotional and practical support for LGBT people experiencing domestic abuse.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): New reports suggest that nurses are three times more likely to be victims of domestic abuse than the general population. Will the Minister undertake to speak to colleagues in the Department of Health about what the NHS, as an employer, may need to do to support this group?

Sarah Newton: The Government have an absolute zero-tolerance policy for any sort of domestic abuse or violence. I will certainly take up the hon. Lady’s recommendation of speaking to my colleagues in the Department of Health to see what more we can do to prevent this awful crime from happening to our much-appreciated nurses.

Indefinite Leave to Remain

10. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the number of non-UK EU nationals currently residing in the UK who will be entitled to apply for indefinite leave to remain after the UK leaves the EU. [906886]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have been clear that they want to protect the status of EU nationals already living here. The only circumstances in which that would not be possible are if British citizens’ rights in European member states were not protected in return.
Steve McCabe: My question was what estimate the Secretary of State had made of the numbers, because on 10 October her colleague the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said that by the time we leave, five out of six migrants will have, or be entitled to, indefinite leave to remain. That is 2.5 million people. Is that the policy of the Government?

Amber Rudd: I saw those reports. They were based on existing public research, which estimates that around 80% of EU migrants already here will have been resident in the UK for up to five years by the start of 2019. However, it is too simplistic and too early to reach definitive conclusions about what the outcome will be when we do leave.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): There are EU nationals who are working, contributing and paying tax and who have children at school in every parliamentary constituency in the UK. If it is not cynical using them as a bargaining chip, why on earth will she not finally do the right thing and announce that they will be allowed to stay in this country?

Amber Rudd: In answer to an earlier question, the Prime Minister has already said that that is the intention. It is only to ensure that there is a reciprocal arrangement that we have held back from giving that final commitment, which we sincerely hope will be made.

Refugees: Age Identification

11. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps has she taken to ensure that young adult refugees are not entering the UK as children; and what checks she plans to put in place to improve age identification of such refugees.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): Where clear and credible documentary evidence of age is not available, criteria including physical appearance and demeanour are used as part of the interview process to assess whether a person is under 18. That can be followed, where necessary, by a local authority assessment in line with case law and approved by two social workers.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Minister agree that this country has always been very compassionate and understanding towards children fleeing persecution? Does he also agree, however, that every young adult over 18 whom we admit means one fewer child in desperate need being allowed in, and that we could extend checks to social media and university records, for example, to ensure that our generosity is not abused?

Mr Speaker: Or that my generosity is not abused by a Member asking two questions, rather than one. It seems a bit rum.

Mr Goodwill: It is essential that a safe, lawful and efficient process to transfer eligible children is in place, but we must also ensure that the right safeguarding and security checks are carried out. Our focus remains to ensure that the minors who are eligible to come here arrive safely. This must be done through a proper process, with the agreement of the French in the case of the Calais children. The French have agreed to support the children in safe places in France while we carry out essential checks.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The charities working with the children in Calais are reporting, first, that the UK assessment and transfer process has paused and, secondly, that there are 1,500 children and teenagers being held in the container camp, without proper water or food and without enough adults, social workers or youth workers to look after them and to prevent tensions and violence from rising. Will the Minister look into this urgently and make sure that the UK transfer system is restarted very quickly, and that the French urgently provide proper protection and support for these very vulnerable young people?

Mr Goodwill: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that we are working hard to identify children who would qualify under Dubs and Dublin. It is very important indeed that we ensure that the most vulnerable, particularly the children under 13 and those who may be vulnerable to sexual exploitation, are prioritised under the Dubs amendment procedure.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Bashir Naderi, who is 19, was trafficked to the UK at the age of 10 from Afghanistan after his father was murdered by the Taliban. I understand that this afternoon he was on his way to Gatwick to be removed from the country but that that has now been stopped. Will the Home Secretary accept my plea and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), whose constituent Bashir is, to intervene urgently to stop this removal?

Mr Goodwill: Although it would be inappropriate for me to comment on individual cases, I am aware of this case. It is on my desk at present.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary and the Minister for their dedication to the issue in recent weeks. I understand that children are now being moved from the containers to resettlement camps around France. When might we see all the Dublin and Dubs children being extracted from there and brought here?
Mr Goodwill: We are assisting with that transfer process, and once those children are in a place of safety away from the people traffickers who would seek to exploit them, we will be able to carry out that work in a more methodical way. We hope to have the process completed within weeks.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), we know that there are currently 30 young girls, some as young as under 12, in the container camp in Calais. Can the Minister confirm that the Home Office staff left the site on Saturday? If so, when will they go back and restart the rescue of those children and their transfer to the UK?

Mr Goodwill: We must remember at all times that the camp is in France. We must work closely with our colleagues in the French authorities to ensure that children are removed from the container camp and taken to a place of safety where they can be processed in a more orderly way.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Although the House is raising so many genuinely felt concerns about the children in Calais, may I remind the Minister that by far and away the largest crisis involving children in the world at present is that in and around Syria?

Mr Goodwill: Which is precisely why the Government are determined to relocate 20,000 of the most vulnerable people from the camps in Syria and 3,000 vulnerable children from the region, which removes the pull factor that, of course, has meant that so many people have taken that hazardous journey across the Mediterranean or the Aegean.

Mr Speaker: With unlawyer-like brevity, Mr Alistair Carmichael.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Instead of treating refugees as if they were broken-mouthed ewes, surely we should be working with the authorities and the Government in France to ensure that we never again see the shambolic and shameful treatment that we saw last week.

Mr Goodwill: With equal brevity, I agree.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I reassure the Minister that the Opposition do know that the camp is in France, but we are weary of French and British officials trying to pass the buck, even at this late stage, when desperate children’s lives are at stake. We know that there are more than 1,000 young people in the container compound at Calais without proper supervision and the help that they need. The Minister says that the assessment and transfer process has paused. Can he share with the House when it will begin again?

Mr Goodwill: The transfer process has been paused at the request of the French so that the relocation can take place and the children are not in the container camp, which so many people are critical of. We continue to work closely with our French colleagues to actually resolve this situation.

Heroin Addiction


Sarah Newton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question—[Laughter.] Decisions about services and how they are commissioned are made locally, as he well knows. The figures are far from fake: they are independently reported. I would think that he, as a local MP, would actually be praising his local services, because the latest data I have show that people have quick referrals to their service—96% of people who need access to treatment are receiving it within three days. In fact, his local area has a really good track record of engaging with people, and making sure they do not drop out of treatment and get good results from treatment programmes.

Mr Speaker: I must say to the Minister, who is a very forgiving soul, that gratitude to the hon. Member for Bassetlaw is not always a commodity in plentiful supply.

Extradition Orders: Vulnerable People

14. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps is taking to ensure that vulnerable people are given adequate protection when facing extradition orders.

Brandon Lewis: A judge must consider various statutory bars to extradition. It must be refused if a judge finds that it would be incompatible with a person’s human rights or an individual’s physical or mental condition, meaning that it would be unjust or oppressive to extradite.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister knows that the law has changed and the Home Secretary can no longer intervene in these cases. When young people are on the autism spectrum or suffering from mental health challenges,
can we make sure that court officials, especially judges, understand their circumstances and challenges better? I am referring particularly to the case of Lauri Love.

Brandon Lewis: Without commenting on that particular case, which is before me at the moment—I will be making a decision by mid-November—the hon. Gentleman is right that there are the kinds of things that judges need to look at. They are the things that the judicial system does look at, and that is one of things that has come out of the change that was made when Parliament voted on this not that long ago.

Topical Questions

T1. [906867] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershires) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Modern Slavery Act 2015 gave law enforcement agencies new powers, which must now lead to results. Progress is being made, but there is still much more to do. That was why on Anti-slavery Day last week, I announced an £8.5 million fund to transform our domestic police response. That will include funding for more than 30 additional analysts, specialists and investigators. Last week at the Vatican, I announced the £11 million modern slavery innovation fund, which forms part of the £33 million that we have dedicated to overseas aid. The fund will support, trial and test innovative ways of tackling modern slavery. These funds reflect the Government’s commitment to apprehend the perpetrators and protect the victims of these terrible crimes. I look forward to the first meeting of the prime ministerial modern slavery taskforce this week.

Alberto Costa: Leicestershire County Council is looking at how it can support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. What assurances can my right hon. Friend give to Leicestershire County Council about providing full reimbursements of costs incurred under the national transfer scheme?

Amber Rudd: I pay tribute to Leicestershire County Council and all the local authorities that have stepped up and accepted unaccompanied children under the national transfer scheme. I assure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to funding local authorities for the care of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In July we significantly increased the rates by up to 33%. We will keep these arrangements under review.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): We are experiencing a cut of over 30% to fire and rescue services funding, with 10,000 jobs lost. Rescues are at an all-time high, with firefighters carrying out, on average, more than 100 rescues per day. Speed is essential when responding, but with fewer firefighters and fewer fire stations, the possibility of a slow response could mean the loss of life. Will the Minister acknowledge that now is the time to invest in the fire and rescue services and stop the reckless cuts—to prioritise saving lives, not saving money?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): First, I welcome the hon. Lady to her new position. I also take this opportunity to express my sympathy to all those affected by the recent devastating fires in Exeter, Birmingham, Doncaster and Cheshire, and to thank the firefighters for their efforts. They do save lives every day, as she outlined.

The hon. Lady should bear in mind that authorities still have more that they can do to reduce costs, as they say themselves. Over the past few weeks I have been talking at many conferences at which people have recognised the need to improve procurement and work collaboratively. She should also bear in mind that, since 2010, fire authorities’ non-ring-fenced reserves have managed to rise by 150%. There is still money so that we can ensure that authorities find future efficiencies.

T2. [906868] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): One area that we have not covered today is rural crime. Many farmers in my constituency are greatly concerned about the prospect of becoming a victim of rural crime. What more can the Department do to help to reassure farmers that we will keep them and their businesses safe?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this really important subject. It is absolutely crucial that we support our farmers to ensure that the UK maintains a thriving farming industry. I welcome the Dyfed-Powys rural policing strategy, which sets out the force’s commitment to work with the wider rural community and other agencies to prevent crime and enforce the law. The modern crime prevention strategy published by the Government in March supports this approach.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Last Thursday, “Newsnight” reported serious allegations of sexual assault by the most senior lawyer on the child abuse inquiry, Ben Emmerson, QC. The disclosure was made in early September, but no action was taken until 29 September. The Home Secretary’s predecessor hand-picked Mr Emmerson for the inquiry. Can she therefore tell us why it took so long for action to be taken, why the investigation into his conduct was dropped, and why he is still reportedly being paid £1,700 a day even though he no longer works on the inquiry?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have set out what we knew at the time and its relevance. It is really important that this inquiry continues. The hon. Lady asks questions that are for the head of the independent inquiry. It is essential for the authenticity of this inquiry that it is held independently. It is not run by the Home Office, and that is an essential part of its integrity. I urge her to stop knocking the inquiry and start getting behind it.

T3. [906869] James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Essex constabulary and Essex county fire and rescue service have a long track record of working closely together and are seeking to do more of that in the future. What can my right hon. Friend’s Department do to support police and fire services and encourage them to work more collaboratively?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend is right that we are delivering on our manifesto pledge by allowing, through the Policing and Crime Bill, police and crime commissioners
to take on the governance of fire authorities. There is also a statutory duty to collaborate, which applies to all the services that work together. It is important that our police and fire services work closely together, and I know that those in Essex are keen to be at the forefront of that work.

Brandon Lewis: [The hon. Lady raises a point that is an aspect of our annual funding formula. This year’s decision will take place after the autumn statement and the House will vote on it in February. We have also delivered our manifesto pledge by announcing that we will review the police funding formula. I have written to, and am engaging with, all chief constables and, indeed, police and crime commissioners across the country.]

Brandon Lewis: [My hon. Friend makes a very important point, about which both the Home Secretary and I feel very strongly. We had an Adjournment debate about the issue the week before last. It is important that people acknowledge that police officers should be respected. They police by consent, which is unique to our country; we should be proud of that. My hon. Friend is right that sentencing should reflect the crime. I am in discussions with colleagues in other Departments, including on whether we prosecute for a criminal offence or under police Acts. There are some issues that we need to look at, but it is right that police officers should feel that they are respected and safe in their job.]

Mr Goodwill: [As the Prime Minister has said, we wish to protect the status of EU citizens working here. At the same time, of course, we expect the status of British citizens living and working elsewhere to be respected as well.]

Liam Byrne: [Ten days ago, Allan Richards was convicted in Birmingham of the most horrific catalogue of offences against children, some as young as eight. I congratulate West Midlands police on the forensic investigation that brought him to justice, but he was a serving police officer for more than 30 years. Will the Home Secretary assure the House that the inquiry into what happened will be independent, that whistleblowers will be given protection and that, if other agencies, including the Crown Prosecution Service, made mistakes, they will form part of the investigation?]

Brandon Lewis: [The Independent Police Complaints Commission will take on this hugely important case which, by definition, will be an independent investigation. I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the Policing and Crime Bill will go further by giving even more protection to whistleblowers and more powers to the IPCC to take on and lead such cases without the need for the involvement of, or a recommendation from, the police in the first place. I am happy to write to the right hon. Gentleman with more detail.]

Mr Goodwill: [It is certainly important that with Eritrea, as with other countries, we act on the best possible information. Although Home Office officials have been in country and we consider reports produced by other EU countries, we are looking at the results of the tribunal with interest.]

Amanda Milling: [I am, like many of my Staffordshire colleagues and the Staffordshire police and crime commissioner, incredibly concerned about the business case for Staffordshire fire and rescue service’s proposed life skills centre. Will my hon. Friend the Fire
Minister meet me and my Staffordshire colleagues to discuss and review the business case to assess whether it offers value for money?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has raised this case with me. I know that she feels strongly about it, as do colleagues around Staffordshire. I will happily meet her and Staffordshire colleagues to look at the matter. I have also asked the police and crime commissioner, and indeed the chief fire officer and representatives from the fire authority, to talk to us about this process and exactly how they are delivering on it.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary said earlier that the lack of any miscarriages of justice was one of the reasons why she would not instigate an inquiry into Orgreave. She will be aware, of course, that 95 miners were charged, and that many were remanded in custody and went through difficult trials based on charges and evidence that later collapsed. Will she reconsider what she has said about injustice and, given her predecessor’s record of a whole series of inquiries and reviews in cases where injustice was suspected, will the Home Secretary think again about her decision?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. This Government’s record on inquiries is strong. We have not been shy about setting them up when they are needed. This was not an easy decision, and the fact that I made a decision that she and her colleagues do not approve of does not mean that I did not take incredibly seriously the matter or the meeting that I had with the families. When I weighed this up using a true public interest test, it did not meet that test. I urge the right hon. Lady and her colleagues to read the written ministerial statement that I have made today.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Two of my constituents have been defrauded of in excess of £60,000, and their cases are not helped by the lack of co-ordination between Action Fraud and the local force. They are unable to get updates on the investigation. What can be done to improve that co-ordination?

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): Following my hon. Friend’s contribution at the previous Home Office questions, I will be visiting Action Fraud to take up his specific case, and more generally to discuss how Action Fraud deals with constituents and inquiries from Members, to make sure that the service is improved.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The Home Secretary’s decision is a slap in the face of the campaigners, their families, and also to Clyst St George, the home of Devon and Somerset fire and rescue service, to thank them for their quite extraordinary work over the weekend in Cathedral Close in Exeter at an incident that saw the loss of England’s oldest hotel, the Royal Clarence?

Amber Rudd: We all saw over the weekend the dreadful scenes in Exeter. I would be delighted to come with my right hon. Friend to thank the police and fire and rescue teams who did fantastic work dealing with such a difficult situation.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Just recently, two very brilliant human rights campaigners in Zimbabwe were refused visas to come to this country to speak not just in this House but elsewhere, despite the support of our ambassador in Harare. Will the Minister for Immigration please look into what is going on there? Quite honestly, we are letting in people who have done dreadful things, yet two decent, law-abiding, respectable, hard-working people—one of them has been given asylum in America—have been refused entry.

Mr Goodwill: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Lady in person to discuss this issue. I am aware of a number of cases involving Zimbabwe that we have under review.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): As part of a comprehensive strategy to improve the resilience of our fire and rescue services, it is necessary to take all reasonable steps to stop fires from starting in the first place. Will my right hon. Friend therefore liaise with the Department for Communities and Local Government to ensure that the long-awaited review of building regulations takes place, and that our strategy on the installation of fire sprinklers is brought into line with those of other countries?

Brandon Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his question. I will make sure that my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government hear what he says. There are suppression products other than sprinklers that builders can use, but we are keen to make sure that homes continue to be safe. That is one reason why the number of fires is now, fortunately, pretty much at a historically low level.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): May I take the Home Secretary back to her answer to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)? She said that people should not “leap to anger”, but I can tell her that people have been angry about Orgreave for 30 years. Specifically, Margaret Aspinall has said:

“We will never have the full truth about Hillsborough until we have the full truth about Orgreave.”
Will the Home Secretary agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who asked for full disclosure, and will she please, because this is never going away, just think again?

**Amber Rudd:** I do not agree that there is an equality of seriousness between Hillsborough and Orgreave. Ninety-six people died at Hillsborough: it is a different situation. Two Hillsborough criminal investigations are going on now, and they have access to the Orgreave material. There will be no change in that respect.

*Several hon. Members rose—*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry to disappoint colleagues, but we must move on.
3.36 pm  

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State if he will make a statement on NHS funding.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): 

Compared with five years ago, the NHS is responsible for 1 million more over-75s. In five years’ time, there will be another 1 million over-75s. Our determination is to look after each and every NHS patient with the highest standards of safety and care, but there is no question but that the pressures of an ageing population make this uniquely challenging.

I welcome the chance to remind the House of this Government’s repeated commitment to supporting our NHS. The NHS budget has increased in real terms every year since 2010. NHS spending has increased as a proportion of total Government spending every year since 2010, and is 10.1% higher per head in real terms than when we came to office. The OECD says that our spending is 10% higher than the OECD average for developed countries. At 9.9% of GDP, it is about the same as that in other western European countries, for which the average is 9.8%.

Given the particularly challenging current circumstances, in 2014 the NHS stepped back and for the first time put together its own plan for the future. It was an excellent plan, based on the principle that because prevention is better than cure, we need to be much better at looking after people closer to or in their homes, instead of waiting until they need expensive hospital treatment. The plan asked for a minimum increase of £8 billion in NHS funding over five years. It asked for this to be front-loaded to allow the NHS to invest in new models of care up front.

Following last year’s spending review, I can confirm to the House that the NHS will in fact receive an increase of £10 billion in real terms over the six years since the “Five Year Forward View” was published. In cash terms, that will see the NHS budget increase from £98.1 billion in 2014-15 to £119.9 billion in 2020-21. That rise is highly significant at a time when public finances are severely constrained by the deficit that this Government regrettably inherited. Because the NHS’s particular priority was to front-load the settlement, £6 billion of the £10 billion increase comes before the end of the first two years of the spending review, including a £3.8 billion real-terms increase this year alone. That £3.8 billion represents a 52% larger increase in just one year than the Labour party was promising over the lifetime of this Parliament.

Jonathan Ashworth: This morning the Chair of the Health Committee and her colleagues on that Committee said that the Government’s NHS spending claims were “inaccurate” and “false”. The Opposition agree with that analysis. Ministers—and the Secretary of State has just done this again—tell us that they are investing £10 billion more in the NHS, but it has now been confirmed that that figure is “not only incorrect but risks giving a false impression that the NHS is awash with cash.” Is not the reality that the Government have cut adult social care, the public health budget and the NHS capital budget? Now we learn that the average amount we spend on healthcare for each person in this country will fall in 2018-19. Does that not raise serious questions about the claims that Ministers, and, indeed, Prime Ministers, have been making from that Dispatch Box? In fact, the only way the Government’s figures could be further discredited is if the Secretary of State slapped them on the side of a bus and got the Foreign Secretary to drive it.

Will the Secretary of State admit that the Government have not actually given the NHS the money it needed? Will he give us an accurate account of spending plans for the NHS? Will he tell us when the Chancellor is going to respond to the Health Committee’s letter, and what representations he himself is making to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement?

We have also learned today from Health Service Journal that one in three local areas intend to close or downgrade A&E departments within 18 months, one in five expect to close consultant-led maternity services, and more than half plan to close or downgrade community hospitals. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether those reports are accurate? How many A&E departments, maternity units and community hospitals does the Secretary of State expect to close or be downgraded within the next year and a half? Our constituents want those answers.

Before the last election, the Secretary of State told us he was “confident” about delivering the money the NHS needed. Today that confidence has been exposed as utterly misplaced. Tory promises are completely in tatters. Rather than defending the Prime Minister’s spin on the £10 billion figure, why does the Secretary of State not stand up for patients and staff, and deliver the funding that the NHS and our social care sector desperately need?

Mr Hunt: I start by welcoming the hon. Gentleman to his first urgent question in his new role. As I am a relative old timer in my role, I hope he will not mind me reminding him of some of the facts about health spending.

First, the hon. Gentleman said that the Government did not give the NHS what it asked for. Let me remind him that Simon Stevens, a former Labour special adviser—I know for new Labour, but he was none the less a Labour special adviser—said at the time of the spending review settlement last year that “our case for the NHS has been heard and actively supported” and that the settlement “is a clear and highly welcome acceptance of our argument for frontloaded NHS investment. It will...kick start the NHS Five Year Forward View’s fundamental redesign of care.”

I will tell the hon. Gentleman who did not give the NHS what it asked for: the Labour party. At the last election, it refused to support the NHS—[Interruption.] I know this is uncomfortable for the new shadow Health Secretary, but the reality is that the party on whose platform he stood refused to support the NHS’s own plan for the future. As his question was about money, I will add that the Labour party also refused to fund it. The NHS wanted £8 billion; Labour’s promise was for additional funding of £2.5 billion—not £6 billion or £4 billion, but £2.5 billion, or less than one third of
what the NHS said it needed. Even if we accept the numbers of the Chair of the Select Committee—and, as I will go on to explain, I do not—Labour was pledging over the course of the Parliament only around half of what this Government have delivered in the first year of the spending review.

The hon. Gentleman used other choice words, one of which was “spin”. I will tell him what creates the most misleading impression: a Labour party claiming to want more funding for the NHS when, in the areas where they run it, the opposite has happened. Indeed, in the first four years of the last Parliament, Labour cut NHS funding in Wales when it went up in England—[Interruption.] Yes, it did. Those are the official figures. That is in a context in which the Barnett formula gives the Government in Wales more than £700 per head to spend on public services, so there is more money in the pot.

The hon. Gentleman talked about social care. May I remind him of what the shadow Chancellor at the time of the last election—Ed Balls, who is now sadly no longer of this parish—said? During the election campaign, he said of funding for local councils “not a penny more”. We are giving local councils £3.5 billion more during the course of this Parliament.

The hon. Gentleman talked about other cuts that he alleges will happen in A&E departments and other hospital services. I simply say to him that we have to make efficiency savings. I do not believe they will be on the scale he talked about, but how much worse would they have to be if the NHS got a third of the money it currently gets?

If the hon. Gentleman and his party think the NHS is underfunded, they need to accept that the policies that they advocated in the past two elections were wrong—they advocated spending less than the Conservatives. Until they are serious about changing their policy, no one will be serious about listening to their criticisms.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I agree with the Secretary of State that prevention is better than cure, but he will know that achieving the aims of the five year forward view was dependent on a radical upgrade in public health and prevention. He will know that it was also dependent on adequate funding for adult social care. In addition, there are continuing raids on the NHS capital budget, and we need to put in place the kind of transformation that he and our sustainability and transformation partnerships wish to achieve.

Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm that he recognises the serious crisis in social care and the effect it is having on the NHS, and the effect that taking money from public health budgets is having? Although I accept that he does not agree with the Health Committee’s appraisal of the £10 billion figure, I am afraid I stick by those figures.

Mr Hunt: I have enormous respect for my hon. Friend. I respect her passion for the NHS, her knowledge of it and her background in it, so I will always listen carefully to anything she says. I hope she will understand that just as she speaks plainly today, I need to speak plainly back and say that I do not agree with the letter she wrote today, and I am afraid I do think that her calculations are wrong.

The use of the £10 billion figure was not, as she said in her letter, incorrect. The Government have never claimed that there was an extra £10 billion increase in the Department of Health budget. Indeed, the basis of that number has not even come from the Government; it has come from NHS England and its calculations as to what it needs to implement the forward view. As I told the Select Committee, I have always accepted that painful and difficult economies in central budgets will be needed to fund that plan. What NHS England asked for was money to implement the forward view. It asked for £8 billion over five years; in fact, it got £10 billion over six years, or £9 billion over five years—whichever one we take, it is either £1 billion or £2 billion more than the minimum it said it needed.

I think my hon. Friend quoted Simon Stevens as saying that NHS England had not got what it asked for. He was talking not about the request in the forward view, but in terms of the negotiations over the profile of the funding we have with the Treasury. The reason that the funding increases are so small in the second and third year of the Parliament is precisely that we listened to him when he said that he wanted the amount to be front-loaded. That is why we put £6 billion of the £10 billion up front in the first two years of the programme.

I fully accept that what happens in the social care system and in public health have a big impact on the NHS, but on social care we have introduced a precept for local authorities combined with an increase in the better care fund—[Interruption.] This is a precept, which 144 of 152 local authorities are taking advantage of. That means that a great number of them are increasing spending on social care. It will come on top of the deeper, faster integration of the health and social care systems that we know needs to happen.

On public health, I accept that difficult economies need to be made, but it is not just about public spending. This Government have a proud record of banning the display sale of tobacco, introducing standardised packaging for tobacco, introducing a sugary drinks tax and putting more money into school sports. There are lots of things that we can do on public health that make a big difference.

On capital, I agree with my hon. Friend about the pressure on the capital budget, but hospitals have a big opportunity to make use of the land they sit on, which they often do not use to its fullest extent, as a way to bridge that difficult gap.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): With some 80% of trusts in deficit and only 4% meeting accident and emergency targets, I am grateful to the Health Committee for flagging up the dire financial state of the NHS in England, as evidenced by its letter to the Chancellor. We learn from that document that the £10 billion figure is a bit of a fallacy. In Scotland, the SNP Government are committed to investing an additional £2 billion by 2021, but any reduction in new money for the NHS from the UK Government would have an impact on Barnett consequentials. Given that the UK Government have already slashed Scotland’s budget by 10% between 2010 and 2020, they need to be honest and transparent about what that reduction will mean for Scotland’s funding. With the Department of
Mr Hunt: Many people in Scotland will be somewhat surprised by the hon. Gentleman’s comments, because in the last Parliament spending on the NHS in England went up by 4%, whereas in Scotland it fell by 1%. The IFS confirmed that at the time of the independence referendum, saying:

“It seems that historically, at least, Scottish Governments in Holyrood have placed less priority on funding the NHS in Scotland... than governments in Westminster have for England”.

In this Parliament, the hon. Gentleman’s party has already lost a vote on NHS cuts in the Scottish Parliament and been criticised by Audit Scotland for its performance. When the SNP has the courage to increase NHS spending in Scotland by the amount we are increasing it in England, we will listen, but until then it should concentrate on looking after Scottish NHS patients in Scotland.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Understandably, there is extensive interest in this subject. Accommodating anywhere near the number of would-be contributors will require brevity; to be exemplified—I hope and if he is true to form—by Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): People in Kettering appreciate plain speaking. Can the Health Secretary tell the House what the NHS budget was in 2014-15, what it will be in 2020-21 and what the difference is between the two numbers?

Mr Hunt: I want to get the exact figures in order to live up to my hon. Friend’s reputation for plain speaking, which is second to none. The NHS budget in 2014-15 will be £98.1 billion and in 2021 it will go up to £119.9 billion. In real terms, that is a £10 billion increase.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Is there not an urgent need to be straight with the British public about the resources we will need to maintain both the NHS and the care system, and to confront the fact that we will all have to pay a bit more to ensure that our loved ones get care when they need it?

Mr Hunt: When the right hon. Gentleman and I worked in government, we both campaigned hard on many occasions for more funding for the NHS, including mental health—a particular priority for both of us. The answer to his question is yes, and that is why we are putting in more money in this Parliament. My own view is that in future Parliaments we will need to continue to increase the amount of funding going in to the NHS. The only point I would make is that what funds the NHS is a strong economy, so we have to make sure that increases in NHS funding are sustainable and compatible with a strong economy. That is something that this Conservative Government have a very good track record of delivering.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The plans to achieve savings from community pharmacies are causing a great deal of concern in my constituency. The patients group at the John Hampden surgery and residents in and around Prestwood believe that the plans may result in the closure of our excellent rural pharmacy in Prestwood. What reassurances can the Secretary of State give to my constituents today that no pharmacies will close that are more than a mile from any other pharmacy? Will he make sure that he takes into account the implications for GPs’ workloads when looking at pharmacies?

Mr Hunt: First, the people of Prestwood are lucky to have such an assiduous MP to campaign for their interests in Parliament today; indeed, my right hon. Friend always does so. I can give her that reassurance, because in the package of efficiencies we set out—it is right that we ask pharmacies to make efficiencies in the way they are run, just as we are asking the rest of the NHS to make efficiencies in the way it is run—we are protecting all pharmacies that are a mile or more from any other pharmacy. In that sense, we are absolutely determined to protect provision for her constituents and all our constituents who depend on rural pharmacies.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): If the Government had stood by their word and invested the promised £10 billion in the NHS, does the Secretary of State agree that the downgrade of Dewsbury A&E might not have been necessary?

Mr Hunt: First, may I welcome the hon. Lady to her place in this House? I am sure that she will make an extremely important contribution. Yes, she is filling very big boots, but, if I may say so, she has made a very good start.

On what happens with A&E departments, changes in the pattern of the services we provide have been a feature, both when the hon. Lady’s party has been in power and when my party has been in power; because the needs of the people who use the NHS also change. We therefore need to strike the right balance between reassuring people that services are provided near where they live, while ensuring that they receive the right care when they get there. For strokes, that does not always mean going to the nearest hospital, but somewhere with 24/7 stroke care and the greatest chance of saving the patient’s life. If the hon. Lady has concerns about Dewsbury hospital, I am very happy to talk to her further.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): At a time when every Department, with the exception of the Department for International Development, has to reduce public expenditure, it seems a remarkable feat of political skill to have secured an increase for the NHS bigger than either the Home Office budget or that of the Ministry of Justice. Will the Secretary of State tell me whether there are parts of the United Kingdom where health expenditure is not rising as fast as in England? If there are, which political parties are in charge there?

Mr Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend, whose passion and commitment to higher standards for the constituents he serves have inspired me in this job, just as I know they have inspired many others in the education field. There are indeed parts of the United Kingdom that allow us to make a very good comparison of the commitment to and funding of the NHS. In Wales, funding went down in the first four years of the previous Parliament. In Scotland, funding went down over the
course of that Parliament. Both the Scottish National party and the Labour party like to talk about the NHS, but when it comes to writing the cheques, they are nowhere to be seen.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State guarantee that every A&E department in north-east London, with a rapidly rising population, will remain open for the rest of this Parliament? If he cannot guarantee that, how many will close and which ones? What is his hit list?

**Mr Hunt:** What I can guarantee is that the decisions about the future of A&E departments will be taken locally by clinicians who have the best interests of their patients at heart. I think that the hon. Gentleman and I would be able to agree that these decisions are not best taken by Secretaries of State. It is much better that they are taken by people who do not have any party political axe to grind. Any decision to change service provision at an A&E has the opportunity, if it is so wished, to be reviewed by the Secretary of State when it goes through an independent process. That is exactly what would happen in north-east London, were the local community to wish it.

**Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): Under the previous Labour Government, Burnley general hospital lost its A&E department and a number of key services. Under the coalition Government, a new £9 million urgent care centre opened and just last week the trust submitted plans for a £15 million development of the hospital. Does that not perfectly demonstrate the unprecedented investment in the NHS since Labour left government?

**Mr Hunt:** It absolutely does. I much enjoyed visiting my hon. Friend some health facilities in his constituency during the general election campaign. The difference between Conservative Members and Labour Members is that we recognise that every penny of the NHS budget has to come from a strong economy. We know that if we take that for granted, we end up having a NHS budget that is what has happened in Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal and many other countries.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): The Government have been well and truly found out on this issue. Rather than quote selectively from Simon Stevens, the head of the NHS, will the Secretary of State confirm that among the conditions that Mr Stevens put down to the Government as part of the five-year review was an increase in public health spending, not a 20% cut, and a policy of maintaining spend every single year. I just ask Members who are aware of our attempts to unwind that very difficult problem.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): We all want a well-funded NHS. I congratulate the Secretary of State on making sure that we now have record spending in England. Last night, the A&E department of the Queen’s medical centre was tweeting that it effectively could not cope. We all of course congratulate and thank the hard-working staff in A&E, but the problem was demand. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the NHS can do much more to improve the way it signposts people? It was using people to go to the urgent care centre, which does stitching and mends broken bones, all of which was news for many people in Greater Nottingham.

**Mr Hunt:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That, of course, is why all parts of the NHS in England are embarking on the sustainability and transformation programme, which is designed to do precisely what my right hon. Friend says—to find smart ways to reduce demand. That will include, for example, better use of pharmacies, better use of GPs, more mental health provision—[Interruption.] Opposition Members are shouting, but why were they not prepared to put the money into the NHS to help us implement these plans? There would be no sustainability and transformation plans on the thin grey that they promised for the NHS at the last election.

**Rob Marris** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I was always against the private finance initiative. This Government have set up a £1.5 billion bail-out fund for PFI. I put it to the Secretary of State that that is to rewarding past profligacy and penalising frugal trusts such as the Royal Wolverhampton NHS Trust. When will the Secretary of State redress this imbalance, stop rewarding profligacy and reward frugality?

**Mr Hunt:** I am getting more and more impressed with the hon. Gentleman’s questions. Last time, he accused me of being a Corbynist, and today he is criticising me for profligacy, when the general tone of most Members seems to be that we are being rather too parsimonious with the NHS. I completely agree with him that private finance initiatives were an utter disgrace, leaving the NHS with over £70 billion-worth of debt by 2010. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a strong correlation between shiny new buildings and good care for patients, as can be seen in a number of Care Quality Commission reports. We are doing everything we can to unwind that very difficult problem.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. We require pithiness personified. I think that calls for Sir Desmond Swayne.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): How much more would the Secretary of State have had to spend per year by 2021 if the Chancellor had taken the Labour party’s advice?

**Mr Hunt:** If the Chancellor had taken the Labour party’s advice, the NHS would have had £5.5 billion less to spend every single year. I just ask Members who are
worried about their A&E departments, worried about mental health and worried about GP provision on which of those services the axe would have had to fall if we had followed Labour’s spending plans?

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Since the 2010 general election, we have lost over 1,500 mental health beds, there are 5,000 fewer mental health nurses and over 400 fewer doctors working in mental health. The pledge that the Secretary of State made at that Dispatch Box on 9 December—that every clinical commissioning group would increase its spend on mental health—lies in tatters. When will this Government’s rhetoric on equality for mental health be matched with adequate resources?

**Mr Hunt:** I will tell the hon. Lady when that rhetoric became reality. We now have the highest dementia diagnosis rates in the world, according to some estimates. We are treating three quarters of a million more people with talking therapies every year than we were in 2010. Every single day, we are treating 1,400 more mental health patients. By the end of this Parliament, because of our spending plans, we will be spending £1 billion more on mental health every single year, treating 1 million more people. I think that that is pretty good.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Is not one way to help the NHS to deal with its financial pressures by focusing on improving quality and using proper data? Professor Tim Briggs’s report, “Getting it Right First Time” is already improving patient outcomes and saving the NHS money.

**Mr Hunt:** I thank my hon. Friend for bringing Professor Briggs to meet me. He is an extremely inspiring man. He has established that every time someone has an infection during an orthopaedic operation, it costs the NHS £100,000 to put it right, but that is happening 0.5% of the time in the case of some surgeons and 4% of the time in the case of others. Dealing with variation of that kind is a way not just to reduce costs, but to avoid enormous human heartache.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): NHS managers in Greater Manchester have made it clear that the pressures on the NHS are a function of pressures on the social care system and that costs are rising because of increases in the national living wage and the need to fund overnight cover. What is the Secretary of State doing to address those financial pressures on social care, given that the precept does no more than scratch the surface?

**Mr Hunt:** I agree that there are real pressures, although I should add that many Members were worried about some of the poor working conditions of people in the social care system and that 900,000 people on low pay in the system will benefit from the introduction of the national living wage. However, I agree that leaving people parked in hospitals when they should be being treated three quarters of a million more people is pretty good.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): I am very proud of the Government’s funding record, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is also crucial to make the right strategic decisions? For example, it was a Conservative-led Government with a Conservative Health Secretary who delivered the urgent care centre in Corby, which has transformed health opportunities in our area and taken pressure off our A&E.

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Although I was not personally responsible for the decision in Corby, I am very happy to take credit for it.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): Representatives of the Department of Health and NHS England have appeared before the Public Accounts Committee eight times so far this year. We have taken a detailed look at the Department’s accounts, following the Comptroller and Auditor General’s unprecedented explanatory note, and I am glad that the Health Committee has said that it will examine the issue further.

The Secretary of State said that prevention was better than cure. The “General Practice Forward View” refers to a £2.4 billion increase in investment by 2020. Can the Secretary of State assure us that that crucial investment in primary care will be protected and not used to plug hospital deficits?

**Mr Hunt:** It is a vitally important investment. The first speech that I made as Health Secretary after the last election was made to GPs, and I said then that we wanted to deliver an extra 5,000 doctors working in general practice. It is vital that we eliminate hospital deficits, but we are making good progress in doing so.

**John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when it comes to funding the forward view, the treatment of patients in their homes is not principally about cost-cutting but is part of a radical change in health provision for the future on which clinicians agree?

**Mr Hunt:** Absolutely. The simple principle for those of us who are not doctors is that it is much cheaper to nip illnesses in the bud than to wait until they progress. Treating someone at stage 1 or 2 of cancer is not only cheaper for the NHS, but much more likely to lead to a full cure. That is the whole foundation of the strategic change that we are making in the NHS.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): My constituents who are watching these exchanges will think that the Secretary of State is living in a parallel universe. The sustainability and transformation programme in Merseyside is reputed to be tackling a £1 billion deficit. The way in which it has decided to tackle it in Wirral, in my area, is to draw up plans to close Clatterbridge, our cancer hospital, to close Arrowe Park, our acute hospital, to close the Countess of Chester hospital, and to create some new hospital in Ellesmere Port at some time in the future. No one believes the blather from this Secretary of State.

**Mr Hunt:** I do not recognise the plans the hon. Lady is talking about, but I say to her that we do need to change our service provision; we are dealing with many more older people, and her constituents need better
[Mr Jeremy Hunt]
care at home and in the community than they are currently getting. Any big changes will be subject to a proper consultation, and would indeed go before the Independent Reconfiguration Panel and if necessary end up on my desk. I also say to the hon. Lady that setting her face against all changes may be—

Ms Eagle: I didn’t say that.

Mr Hunt: Well, that was the tone of the hon. Lady’s question, and setting her face against all changes may not be the right thing for her constituents.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that patients get better in a cosy building.

Ms Eagle: I didn’t say that.

Mr Hunt: I am sure that no one could do a better job of loving and maintaining community hospitals than my hon. Friend. Community hospitals have an important role to play. I have three excellent ones in my constituency. At best, they represent the change we need to see in the NHS, which is personalised care closer to home, but that does also mean that they sometimes need to change the way they deliver services within a building even if the NHS logo remains firmly on the outside of that building.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I was proud to sign the cross-party letter to the Chancellor on NHS funding, in which we quote the Care Quality Commission saying that “adult social care...is approaching a tipping point” and that is having an impact on those who rely on it and on “the performance” of the NHS. Does the Secretary of State recognise that this Government’s cutting social care funding by over a third was a false economy, that there will still be a gap in social care funding even if all councils took up the precept and that, for as long as we have that, we will have hospital deficits and delays?

Mr Hunt: I do recognise the pressures in the social care system, but, in an era of very constrained national finances, funding for the social care system is going up by £3.5 billion a year by the end of this Parliament, which is a significant and important rise. I say to the hon. Lady that it is this Government who have set the CQC free to tell us the honest truth about the quality of care in our hospitals, GP surgeries and social care system, and it is because of that that we are able to have the kinds of questions and answers we are having today.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): This Government have shown their commitment to the NHS, promising and delivering increases in funding, unlike the Opposition parties. My right hon. Friend recognises the connections between health and social care and is driving the integration of those two areas. May I urge him to continue looking at both the funding and performance of health and social care in the round?

Mr Hunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her excellent question. I absolutely agree with her, as someone who worked in healthcare before she came to this House, that it is vital to nurture the links between the health and social care systems if we are to deal with some of the issues that concern Members on both sides of the House. There are some very good examples of where this is working well, but it is not happening in as many places as it needs to, and we all must focus on that.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State was in Cambridge on Friday. Did he have an opportunity to notice that at Addenbrooke’s, the hospital that serves Cambridge, the number of over-85s coming into A&E has risen by almost 12% year on year, and on Friday there were 100 over-85s in that hospital who should have been out in the community? Does he agree that that is proof perfect of the failure of this Government’s policies on social care, which are the root cause of the problems in our NHS?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is looking at the record of this Government: we have 1,200 more doctors in A&E departments, who are treating within four hours, 2,500 more people every single day. We are also putting more money into the NHS and into the social care system. Addenbrooke’s is a hospital under great pressure, but it is determined to come out of special measures and do its best for patients, and I salute all the staff, whom I much enjoyed meeting there on Friday. The one thing they would not want is the NHS budget to be cut from current levels.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that over 50% of the deficit at my local trust, Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, and 25% of all its annual revenue goes on paying off its PFI premium. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to look again at my trust and others? Will he also remind the House which party left that toxic legacy for my constituents?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to remind the House, as my hon. Friend requests, that we inherited this situation from the Labour party in 2010. Despite that toxic legacy, the people working in the Sherwood Forest hospitals have done an incredible job of turning the trust around since it was put into special measures a few years ago. I applaud their progress, which I hope will bear fruit and allow the trust to come out of special measures soon.

Mr Speaker: I would like to conclude these exchanges by 4.30 pm because there is other pressing business. If people take a long time, they are preventing their colleagues from contributing. I am sorry, but it is as simple as that.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State believe that there is a need for additional funding for adult social care over and above that which has been already allocated?

Mr Hunt: We are putting extra money into adult social care, and local authorities have the ability to increase their funding to adult social care through the new precept. In an ideal world, everyone would like more money to go into the NHS and social care system, but Government Members know that those systems are
powered by a strong economy and that we can increase our budget only at a rate that the economy can afford.
The past six years show that if we take care of the economy, we can increase the NHS and social care budget, and that is what we are doing.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not the case that there will never be enough money to go into the NHS? Does the Secretary of State, like me, find the sanctimonious finger-wagging from the Opposition Front-Bench team utterly nauseating given that Carwyn Jones in Wales said that the Labour Government there would make an 8% cut to the NHS in Wales? That is the legacy of Labour.

Mr Hunt: That is absolutely the point. In Wales, people wait twice as long to have a hip replaced and the figure on A&E is about 10% lower than in England. The consequences for patients in Wales are horrific. That is why everyone watching today’s exchanges will take them with a big pinch of salt.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Health Committee has been quite clear that of the actual £4.5 billion being spent by the Government on increased funds—not the £8 billion or the £10 billion mentioned by the Secretary of State—£3.5 billion comes from cuts to public health and to education and training. The Secretary of State can come to the Dispatch Box and twist it all he likes, but he has been found out. Every health sector worker in this country has his number and knows him to a tee—we know exactly what he is doing.

Mr Hunt: I just do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. I stand by the numbers. I am afraid that, on this occasion, the Health Committee got its numbers wrong. The figure of £10 billion did not come from the Government; it was a figure that the NHS said that it needed. In fact, it needed less than £10 billion and we are delivering more than was asked for—something that the Labour party was not prepared to do.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The Secretary of State has taken an interest in the rurality and sparsity that hospitals in Lincolnshire wrestle with. Will he confirm that it is because this Government are finding solutions to those problems that patients in rural areas in my constituency and across the country can be confident about their health and well-being in their homes? That is why not every community hospital, but GP surgeries and all the places upon which rural communities depend are a vital part of the NHS’s future.

Mr Hunt: All NHS facilities in my hon. Friend’s constituency and across the country can be confident that the NHS has a bright future. In fact, if we are to deliver the NHS plan, more rural and remote places are precisely where we must pay most attention to keeping people healthy and well in their homes. That is why not only community hospitals, but GP surgeries and all the places upon which rural communities depend are a vital part of the NHS’s future.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I wrote to the Secretary of State over the summer because trolleys were bumper to bumper in the corridors of Royal Stoke University hospital. This was not mid-winter but high summer. Since then, there have been more hospital bed closures in cottage hospitals, so I repeat my invitation and ask the Secretary of State to come to Stoke-on-Trent and see for himself the crisis in the funding settlement, which is hitting some of those with the most chronic health conditions.

Mr Hunt: I am happy to visit the hon. Gentleman’s local hospital, as I have been concerned about it for some time. I know that things have been particularly challenging there in the wake of what happened in neighbouring Mid Staffs, which has created its own pressures on the hospital. I also know that its staff work extremely hard in very challenging circumstances, so, yes, I will visit that hospital.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that achieving improvements in public health comes down not simply to the amount of money spent by the Government on it, but to a range of factors, including how it is spent, regulation, education and individuals’ choices?

Mr Hunt: I absolutely agree with that. This House should be very proud of the fact that, according to the UN, when it comes to public health this is the fifth healthiest country on the planet—after Iceland, Andorra, Singapore and Sweden, if my memory serves me correctly. That is a record we want to continue.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): A lot of figures have been bandied about today. For the record, when Labour inherited office in 1997 the amount spent on the NHS was £33 billion, whereas by the time we left office in 2010, 13 years later, the figure had gone up to £100 billion. It is an easy figure to calculate: three times more in real terms. We can contrast that with this Secretary of State for Health, who is coming here today fiddling figures and shutting Bolsover hospital.

Mr Hunt: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that if he thinks his party was so right to increase funding during Labour’s time in office—and I think it was right—he should support the Conservative party when it is increasing NHS funding by three times more than his party is promising.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): It is clear to me that the NHS cannot rely solely on the Government to achieve financial sustainability; nor should it be used by some as a political football. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a responsibility on all NHS stakeholders to work together to cut waste where it exists, and towards a long-term sustainable social care programme?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about that, which is why we need to make difficult efficiency savings—around £22 billion during this Parliament. We made about £18 billion to £19 billion-worth of savings in the previous Parliament, so I think it is doable. It will not be easy, but she is right in what she says.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): If things are as rosy as the Secretary of State is making out, why is the London Borough of Redbridge, where I am an elected Member, suffering from public health cuts and, even while charging the social care precept, is still barely able to cover the costs of wage increases, let alone improve the
[Wes Streeting]

service? He should have been lobbying the Chief Secretary this afternoon, not painting this ridiculously unjustifiable rosy picture.

Mr Hunt: I do not think the hon. Gentleman was listening to my statement, which said clearly that the NHS is under unbelievable pressure. It does not really work for the Labour party to campaign for increases in the minimum wage, which we read about today, and then to criticise the increasing costs in the adult social care system caused by the national living wage that was introduced by this Government.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look at splitting the Calderdale and Huddersfield NHS Foundation Trust, so that the disastrous PFI deal at Halifax, where we will pay £700 million for a hospital that cost £64 million, will stop dictating the closure and downgrading of services at Huddersfield?

Mr Hunt: I salute my hon. Friend for the campaign he is leading at the moment, standing up for his constituents. He is right to point to PFI as one of the principal causes, and we now have to find a way to deal with that issue in a way that improves and does not detract from the quality of care offered to the people he represents.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): According to Sir Richard Sykes, the chair of Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, “the problem is funding”, we are “killing” NHS staff by making them work 18 hours a day, and it is not in a position to close any more accident and emergency facilities in north-west London because there is not the capacity to do so. How is the NHS in north-west London supposed to save £1.3 billion over the next four years, as its sustainability and transformation plan proposes?

Mr Hunt: The best way it could do that is by ignoring all the leaflets that the hon. Gentleman puts out, totally misleading his own constituents about the plans the NHS has.

Andy Slaughter: Give a serious answer to a serious question—you’re a buffoon! [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”]

Mr Speaker: Order. I did not hear the offending term, but if it has been reported to me accurately, and the Clerks are invariably accurate in these matters, it seems to me to be a matter of taste, rather than of order.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is regrettable that the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), has led this attack on a Government who are doing so much. Will my right hon. Friend tell me what more is being done to recoup the money that should have been clawed back from those who had health insurance and who should not have used our system?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to point out that problem. For years, under the previous Government, there was a total resistance anywhere in the NHS to ensuring that the only people who received care free at the point of use were people paying for the NHS through the taxes that they or their families pay. That is something to which we will put a stop. There is much more work to be done. We have the second biggest aid budget in the world. That is the way that we help developing countries, but we cannot have an international health service.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): NHS trusts’ deficits are now the worst that they have ever been, with 85% of acute hospitals unable to balance their books. That situation will be made even worse as the falling value of the pound raises the cost of imported medicines and equipment. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the extra funding needed to protect the NHS from the devaluation of sterling following the Brexit vote? What will he do to support trusts, such as Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, which are already in deficit?

Mr Hunt: There are indeed a number of cost pressures in the NHS, but the NHS also has the advantage of being the single largest purchaser of healthcare products—equipment and medicine—in the world, and therefore we have huge scope to get better prices for those things than we currently get. We are supporting hospitals such as the one in the hon. Lady’s constituency by centralising procurement and bearing down on the cost of agency staff and locum staff. Given that pay accounts for more than 70% of the typical hospital trust, that will help.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Labour in my home area of Wales has cut the NHS by 8%. Can my right hon. Friend confirm to this House that he will never follow its example?

Mr Hunt: It is not just the money that Labour has cut. It has refused to set up an independent inspectorate of hospitals such as we did in England, which is the sure way of knowing that we never have a repeat of what happened at Mid Staffs. I urge the Welsh Government to think again about their approach to that.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Darlington’s A&E is among the one in three earmarked for closure or downgrading. In his opening response to what is an urgent question, not a statement, the Secretary of State said that he did not accept that figure of one in three. How many A&Es will be downgraded, or does he not know?

Mr Hunt: Those plans come up from local areas. The NHS is not projecting that we will have significant reductions in the need for emergency care over the next few years. What matters is that we make sure that, yes, people can get to an A&E near them, but that when they get there, they get the right expert care, and that is what local areas are working on.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In my constituency, a nurse-led practitioner service has been closed because of a lack of resources. Similarly, stroke rehab has been cut because of a lack of resources. Our A&Es are not meeting waiting times, and are now under threat because their orthopaedic services have been privatised and handed out to Circle, which may not contract back to their local healthcare trust, thereby undermining the
capacity to maintain those A&Es. Does the Secretary of State accept responsibility for any of that?

Mr Hunt: I accept responsibility for the fact that in the hon. Gentleman’s part of the country, as in every part of the country, we have more doctors, more nurses and more operations than there were when his party left office.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I am particularly concerned that the Government are cutting supply in public health to create demand for a private healthcare market, which means that, like the United States, we will have a two-tier system. I was very concerned by the vague response that the Secretary of State gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). Will he guarantee this afternoon that there will be no closures of Arrowe Park hospital, Clatterbridge hospital or the Countess of Chester?

Mr Hunt: With respect to local service provision, these things are decided locally. If the hon. Lady wants to dig up the old chestnut about the privatisation of the NHS, let me say that the outsourcing of services to the private sector increased much faster under her Government than under this Government. If we did have those malign motives for the NHS, increasing its budget by £10 billion over the course of this Parliament and increasing doctor training by one of the biggest increases in its history would be a strange way of going about it.

Improving Lives: Work, Health and Disability Green Paper

4.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Green Paper being published today by my Department, together with the Department of Health.

This Government are determined to build a country that works for everyone. That means an economy that serves the interests of ordinary, working people; it means a society where everyone has an opportunity to go as far as their talents can take them, regardless of their background. As part of that, it means creating a country where a disability does not dictate the path that a person is able to take in life.

Under successive Governments, we have made good progress in improving the lives of disabled people. Laws have been changed, old attitudes have been challenged, and understanding has improved. More disabled people are in work—half a million more than just three years ago. That is encouraging, but we need to build on that progress and do more to help disabled people reach their full potential.

It is clear that for many disabled people, the barriers to entering work are still too high, and that people in work who get ill too often fall out of work, lose contact, lose confidence and do not return to work. The impact extends far beyond the individual. Families suffer, the health service faces extra strain, and employers lose valuable skills, but most of all, it is a human tragedy. Potential is left unfulfilled. Lives are lessened. Of course, the health and welfare systems must support those who will never be able to work. It should offer the opportunity of work to all those who can, provide help for those who could, and care for those who cannot. It is the help for those who could that, through this Green Paper, we will transform—first, within the welfare system.

In 2010, we inherited a broken system, where there were too few incentives to move from welfare to work, and one where too many of our fellow citizens were simply taken off the books and forgotten about. Since then, we have brought control and the right values back to the system. I want to recognise my predecessors, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) for his passion and conviction over the past six years, to make that a reality. Through reforms such as universal credit, we have ensured that work always pays, while ensuring a strong safety net for those who cannot work.

Spending on disabled people will be higher every year of this Parliament than it was in 2010, but we need to continue to review and reform the system based on what we know works. One of those areas is the level of personalised and tailored support that someone gets when they fall out of work. In the past 12 months, half of the people who attended a work capability assessment were deemed too ill to work, or even prepare for work, at that time. They then routinely receive no employment support at all. It is not surprising, then, that each month only 1% of people eligible for employment and support allowance after an assessment leave. For a benefit that was meant to help people back into work, the statistics show that it is not living up to that original
[Damian Green]

aim, so we will build on the success of universal credit and provide more personalised employment support by consulting on further reform of the work capability assessment.

We will also introduce a new personal support package for disabled people, providing better tailored support, including a new health and work conversation between someone on ESA and their work coach, focusing on what they can do, rather than on what they cannot do. We will recruit around 200 community partners into jobcentres, to bring in expertise from the voluntary sector, and we will give young people with limited capability for work the opportunity to get valuable work experience with employers. These are practical steps and support that the welfare system will provide for disabled people.

This Green Paper marks a new era in joint working between the welfare and health systems—between the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health. Recognising that work and meaningful activity can promote good health, we will work with Health Education England, Public Health England and others to make the benefits of work an ingrained part of the training and health workforce approach. We will review statutory sick pay and GP fit notes to support workers back into their jobs faster and for longer. It is also about transforming the way services join up. We will be consulting on how best to do this, as well as boosting existing joint services—for example, we are more than doubling the number of employment advisers placed in talking therapies. It is right that we focus on such services, as mental health conditions, together with musculoskeletal conditions, are behind many people falling out of work.

This is not a challenge for Government alone so, finally, I want to turn to the role of employers. Employers have so much potential power to bring about change, not just in their recruitment strategies, but in how they support their employees. We need all businesses—small or large; local, national or global—to use that power to deliver change. The fact is that, as well as being good for health, it makes good business sense; sick pay for workers who get ill costs business £9 billion a year.

Businesses are leaders in innovation and transformation. We need to harness that positive power of business to promote disability awareness, so we will create a “Disability Confident” business leaders group to increase employer engagement in looking after the health and wellbeing of their employees, and opening up opportunities to them. Now is the moment for every business to take a proper look at the relationship between work and health, and what that means for their business and productivity.

Over the coming months, we will be talking to disabled people and those who have health conditions. We will be talking to carers, families, professionals and a range of organisations that are so important to getting this right and, like us, want further change. Together, through this Green Paper, and building on our work since 2010, we intend to deliver just that—to improve the way the welfare system responds to real people with health conditions; to see employers stepping up and play their part; to see work as a health outcome; and to see a culture of high ambition and high expectations for the disabled people of this country, because they deserve it.

4.36 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and advance notice of it. This is again kicking into the long grass the issue of support for disabled people and halving the disability employment gap. He is the third Secretary of State who has promised a plan, yet we have just talk, no action.

During his announcement today, the Secretary of State claimed he was confronting negative “attitudes, prejudices and misunderstandings”. The audacity of the statement is offensive. The Government have been more responsible than anyone for the negative attitude towards disabled people, with their shirkers grand narrative. Only this morning, the Secretary of State himself described disabled people as “sitting at home living on benefits”.

The consultation itself demonstrates that the Government fail to understand the reality of many disabled people’s lives and the real anxiety those people feel about the coded messages in the consultation, yet further cuts are on the way.

I must challenge the Secretary of State for suggesting that the so-called reforms to social security have helped to make work pay. These claims are disreputable. All the evidence shows not only that the introduction of universal credit has been an unmitigated disaster—with seven delays to date, the Major Projects Authority and the National Audit Office expressing concerns regarding the scheme’s governance, and the additional £3 billion the taxpayer is having to pay—but that cuts to work allowances signal fail to make UC help to make work pay. The Resolution Foundation has shown that, on average, 2.5 million working families will be over £2,000 a year worse off, so will the Secretary of State commit to reversing cuts to work allowances and universal credit?

On the Green Paper, if the Secretary of State is committed to helping disabled people into work, why has he cut employment support for disabled people from £700 million to £130 million? Will he commit to providing Access to Work support to more than the 36,500 disabled people who received it last year? Given that 1.3 million disabled people are fit and able to work, that is obviously a tiny proportion.

The Secretary of State referred to a review of statutory sick pay. Can he confirm that it is not a vehicle for further cuts to sick pay? Will he commit to maintaining levels of statutory sick pay, both now and in the future? On the plans to broaden the number of professionals who can provide a fit note—notes currently can be provided only by a general practitioner—will these people be appropriately trained clinicians? Given the Government’s use of so-called healthcare professionals under the work capability assessment, we know that weakening the role of the medical profession in assessment processes is an underhand tactic to force people into work before they are ready.

On changes to the WCA itself, why will the Secretary of State not commit to scrapping this discredited process completely, as I have? As it stands, this dehumanising system does great harm and is nothing more than a vehicle for getting people off flow. Will the Secretary of State explain why only employment and support allowance is included in the statement? What are his intentions for
the personal independence payment? How much funding is meant to underpin the health and work programme? Will he commit to reversing the cuts in support for the ESA work-related activity group, as those cuts will do untold harm? Does he accept his own data showing that people on ESA are more likely to die than the population at large, and that some sick and disabled people will never be able to work? As a civilised society, we must ensure that these people are adequately supported and not plunged into poverty, left destitute, or worse.

Damian Green: I am disappointed by the hon. Lady’s tone because she seems to be completely out of touch with those who represent disabled people. Let me read her the words of the chief executive of Scope, Mark Atkinson, who said today:

“Disabled people are twice as likely as the general public to be unemployed. It is right that the Government has recognised this is an injustice that needs to be tackled. We welcome the Green Paper’s “publication, which recognises the need for real change and sets out some bold ideas for reform.”

Dr Liam O’Toole of Arthritis Research UK said:

“Today’s Green Paper offers a vital opportunity to better understand and then meet the needs of people with arthritis.”

The Work Foundation said:

“We have consistently advocated that good work and the benefits it brings to individuals, employers and society at large should be recognised as a positive outcome from a health perspective.”

I am afraid that her carping is out of touch with the sector comprising those who most represent disabled people.

Let me deal with some of the detail. The hon. Lady repeated her promise to scrap any kind of assessment system at all for people getting benefits. Let me quote one of my predecessors who, when the work capability assessment was introduced, said, “We want to have a system where virtually everyone who is getting benefits is doing something to prepare for a return to work. The benefits system is not there for people to stay on benefits but to help them get back to work.” I completely agree with that. It was said by Labour Work and Pensions Secretary James Purnell in 2008 when introducing the WCA. I am afraid that, again, the hon. Lady is out of touch with the sector comprising those who most represent disabled people.

The hon. Lady said a lot about universal credit and described it as a failure. Let me give her the facts about universal credit. Under universal credit, people spend about 50% more time looking for work and move into work faster. For every 100 people who found work under the old jobseeker’s allowance system, 113 universal credit claimants have moved into a job. They are more likely to be looking to increase their hours—86% on universal credit compared with 38% on jobseeker’s allowance. They are more likely to be looking to increase their earnings—77% on universal credit compared with 51% on JSA. Interuption. I am afraid that despite all the shouting from a sedentary position, the hon. Lady is simply wrong about the effect of universal credit.

The hon. Lady asked me to make some commitments about Access to Work. Real-terms increases in funding under Access to Work will support an additional 25,000 people each year by 2021. Last year, more than 350,000 people were helped to take up or remain in employment, including 2,800 young people. Access to Work is doing very well for tens of thousands of people with disabilities.
Government’s commitment to reform, to more personalised support, and to consulting widely with disabled people, carers and those who represent them.

We will work constructively with all parties to deliver real progress for disabled people, but we need actions, not just words. The truth is that the burden of austerity that has fallen on sick and disabled people in recent years has caused severe hardship and pushed many people further away from the workplace. Sick and disabled people have been disproportionately sanctioned in the benefits system and disproportionately hit by the bedroom tax. The raising of the bar on personal independence payments has resulted in thousands of sick and disabled people losing their Motability vehicles, which in many cases are their only means of getting to and from work. From next April, sick and disabled people with long-term conditions will be deterred from going back to work, because if they do, but then have a relapse and need to go back on ESA, they will find their income cut by £30 a week. Far too many people who are manifestly too sick to work are still being found fit for work.

Earlier this year, the Government cut the budget for their Work programme from £2 billion to £130 million. Given its performance, I understand why they did that, but we know from more successful schemes to support disabled people into work such as Access to Work, and from voluntary sector initiatives such as the Moving On programme of Action on Hearing Loss, that tailored, personalised support does not come cheap. What additional budget does the Secretary of State envisage will be attached to the Government’s proposals? What discussions has he had with the Treasury ahead of the autumn statement, and will there be Barnett consequentials for Scotland?

I also want to ask the Secretary of State about support for employers. To date, efforts have focused on improving employers’ confidence, which is fine as far as it goes, but that can be fairly nebulous if there are no practical resources to back it up. Employers need concrete support to make this work. Will resources be attached to the rhetoric this time around? Finally, may I plead with the Secretary of State to hold off the impending cuts to the ESA WRAG until such time as the Government have got this right?

Damian Green: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her welcome for the appearance of the Green Paper and her commitment to work constructively on it. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work was in Scotland last week discussing with counterparts what needs to be done. As the hon. Lady might know, I will be there later this week to talk to the Social Security Committee.

The hon. Lady makes a point about resources, and I am able to tell her that there will be additional support for new claimants with limited capability for work. That will be £60 million next year, with the figure rising to £100 million a year by 2020. There will be new money for the third sector—something like £15 million by Christmas this year.

The hon. Lady made a very good point about employers. I agree that we need more than rhetoric, which is why we will be rolling out a small employer offer to support the creation of more job opportunities for disabled people. It will provide support for employers and enable them to apply for a payment of £500 after three months’ employment so that they can provide ongoing support. That kind of practical help, particularly for small businesses, will transform the situation for many people. We know that small businesses are the biggest creators of jobs in this country. We absolutely want them to use the great talent pool of people with disabilities, whose levels of employment are much less than those of people without disabilities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Given extensive interest and the pressure on time, I am looking for single, short supplementary questions without preamble, and, of course, for pithy replies from the Secretary of State.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is exactly right to take on this challenge. Does he agree that one of the keys to success in ending the enormous waste of human potential is, for the very first time, to get health services and his Department working together effectively at a community level to ensure that people on long-term sickness benefits get meaningful employment support and effective health intervention? At the moment, the system too often provides neither.

Damian Green: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. Friend, who did good work on the subject during his time in this job. He will see from the Green Paper that we will be carrying out large-scale consultations on precisely the issue that he raises. In specific areas, it is important that we get right the way in which the health system and the welfare system work together. The situation might well be different in various parts of the country, so we will be holding geographically based large-scale trials.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): As a former Minister for disabled people, I welcome the Secretary of State’s intention as stated in the Green Paper. Does he agree that the extra-costs benefits are tremendously important in helping people to work? Under PIP, hundreds of people a week are losing their access to Motability cars. Does he realise how important it is for those people to have their car to get to work, and what is he going to do to stop people losing their right to mobility?

Damian Green: Of course, PIP is not a work-related benefit, as the hon. Lady knows. It is a benefit that is designed to meet the extra costs of those who have a disability, and it is sensible that people go through the appropriate assessment for it. As I have said, I completely agree that it is important to ensure that people have access to work, and that is why we are so keen on the Access to Work programme. There will be different ways for people to access work. As I have explained, the real-terms funding for the programme will increase through to 2021. I agree with her that this is an important issue, and we are doing something about it.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Will the revised system ensure that if somebody is found fit for work on the basis of receiving a particular level of support, the need for that support will be passed on through the system and that support will be made available?
Damian Green: Yes, that is exactly at the heart of what we are trying to do, because there have been too many gaps in the system. Health Ministers and I agree that we must get the systems working together much better so that individuals find the journey much more seamless than they ever have.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Could the Secretary of State consider more carefully the role of GPs? With the work capability assessment, untrained people are sometimes overriding the advice of GPs. We do not want to see that with ESA regarding fit notes.

Damian Green: The hon. Lady makes a reasonable point. GPs will play a significant role in the system, and we want the role they play to be as constructive as possible. We have looked at ways of changing the system so that GPs can be involved earlier. The reason for the consultation on the changes to the fit note is precisely to find a way of making the fit note help the person concerned back into work without adding to the burden on GPs. We want everyone involved in the system to feel they are playing a part in helping someone to get back into work.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I too extend a warm welcome to the Green Paper. Within the next hour, we will launch, with the National Autistic Society, a report entitled “The autism employment gap”, which shows that only 16% of people on the autism spectrum are in full-time employment. That gap is bigger than the disability employment gap. I welcome the personalised support to which my right hon. Friend has referred. Will he say more about how he will tailor it to meet the individual needs of autistic people in particular?

Damian Green: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her kind remarks. I congratulate her on all the work she has done over many years in Parliament for those on the autism spectrum. I am pleased to tell her that we will have 1,100 specialists in autism services in Jobcentre Plus premises. She is quite right that we should never assume that disabled people are in any way homogenous: people have different needs and different requirements. She will know better than anyone that the needs of those on the autism spectrum are specific, and that they therefore need to be dealt with in a personal and specific way.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On the disabled, may I tell the Secretary of State that at my surgery on Saturday I saw a man—he will be 59 in two weeks’ time, and walks with tremendous difficulty on two crutches—who has had his employment and support allowance removed and who, during the time I was speaking to him, broke down in great distress? What sort of situation are we in when a law-abiding person of his age and suffering from disablement goes to his Member of Parliament in such a state of distress that he starts crying? I consider that a shameful situation. The Secretary of State should be aware that it is just one of many, many cases throughout the country. I will certainly write to his Department. With what result, we shall see.

Damian Green: Obviously, if the hon. Gentleman wants to write to us about his constituent he should please do so, because we do not want any wrong decisions to be taken. I will happily look at the individual case, although he will recognise that I cannot possibly comment on it at the moment. The one point on which I would take issue with him is when he says that this is the tip of an iceberg. Actually, the number of successful appeals against ESA judgments has fallen very significantly, from 14% to 5% in recent months, so the figures suggest that the system is getting better at making such judgments.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Those with mental health conditions often require specialist support. What will the Green Paper do for people who suffer from mental health conditions?

Damian Green: It is particularly those with mental health conditions who will be helped by the Green Paper, with the more tailored and personalised support. Very often, people with mental health conditions have conditions that come and go, so they may work full time some of the time, part time some of the time and not at all at other times. The changes to benefits—particularly, perhaps, to statutory sick pay—will make it much easier for such people to stay in touch with work, perhaps working part time for a period. All the evidence suggests that people with mental health conditions are disadvantaged if they are completely detached from the world of work, because their depression may get worse.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I really welcome the Green Paper’s suggestion about the personal support package. It should be a significant improvement on the disastrous Work programme, which was a total failure for disabled people. Will the Secretary of State confirm that providers of such support will be adequately rewarded and incentivised to provide good enough support, because that was the difficulty with the Work programme?

Damian Green: Yes. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her supportive words. I hope she will see the personal support package make a difference. I have already mentioned the 200 community partners that will come in, so we will engage the third sector very actively in this process. We will also extend the journey to employment job clubs to 71 Jobcentre Plus areas—those with the highest number of people receiving ESA—so we are trying new ideas in the areas where we think they will particularly make a difference.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that in order to utilise the talent and enrich the lives of those with disabilities and ongoing health issues, including mental health issues, we need to make further improvements to reduce bureaucracy and personalise employment support for individual needs?

Damian Green: I do. On a day-to-day basis in our constituency work we will all have seen people who are frustrated by the bureaucracy. When my hon. Friend and other Members read the Green Paper they will see an emphasis on making the systems more human and more personal, so that people do not feel that they are being ground down by a very difficult bureaucracy. Bureaucracy always takes a long time to change, but we absolutely want to change it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): It is true that the Work programme has been hopeless for people claiming employment and support allowance, with a pitifully
small number of people getting into jobs, as the Secretary of State acknowledged in his statement. By how much does he expect the proposals to increase the proportion of ESA claimants getting into work, and how long will it take to halve the disability employment gap?

**Damian Green:** It would be premature of me to try to set targets on either of those. The sensible thing is to take practical steps. For example, we are more than doubling the number of disability employment advisers to help with specialist and local expertise for disabled people. Along with everything else I have announced, that will be a significant step forward in halving the disability employment gap. Of course, doing so depends on both ends of it, as the halving of the gap will depend on what the total employment level is, and we are in good shape on that, as 80% of working-age people who do not have a disability are in work. But as the right hon. Gentleman knows, only 48% of those with a disability are in work. I want to make steady progress towards halving the gap, but it may take some time.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with business to help people who can only work flexibly and at variable times but do not want to let their employers down?

**Damian Green:** Very many—I have spoken to a number of private sector employers who are leading the way in providing the equipment needed. But what happens in the public sector is to some extent more under the Government’s control, so I hope that by the end of this year every Whitehall Department will be signed up as a Disability Confident employer and that in the course of 2017 the rest of the public sector will have followed. The public sector is a very large-scale employer so that will be very helpful.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): I broadly welcome the thrust of the Green Paper, but I suggest that there are two things the Secretary of State could do for people with mental health conditions now. One is to ensure that assessors undertaking work capability tests are properly qualified. Secondly, can we stop the small number of people with long-term, enduring mental health conditions, who are never going to work, going round this merry-go-round, which is not good for them or for the taxpayer?

**Damian Green:** I am grateful for the expertise the hon. Gentleman brings to this. I will take both his points on board. In fact, on his second point, he may have seen that I have already announced that we are going to stop retesting those with a condition that already means that they cannot work and that will only stay the same or get worse. That seems to me a piece of pointless and fundamentally heartless bureaucracy that we can happily get rid of.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I encourage the Secretary of State to apply his very human and welcome fresh pair of eyes to the whole system. Damage will be done to his very good intentions if he proceeds with the cuts to universal credit work allowances and the ESA WRAG. I urge him to personally understand the risks in proceeding with both of those cuts.

**Damian Green:** As my hon. Friend knows, we have had private discussions on this point, and I have heard her discuss it on a number of public platforms as well. I can only repeat what I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith): although we are not looking for new cuts in the welfare budget or welfare benefits, we have no plans to reverse anything that has already been legislated for.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I welcome the Green Paper in the broadest sense if we can have a dialogue about improving the lives of disabled people, but the point has just been made that we need to ensure that the funding is on the table to protect people going back into work and those who need support. Perhaps two words are missing from the document and the Minister’s statement: “compassion” and “dignity”. Let us hope we get them in the Government’s response.

**Damian Green:** I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman and am grateful for his general support. I absolutely agree that the system should show compassion at all times, and that those who deal with the system should feel that they are being dealt with with dignity, and that it is being preserved. We are at one on that.

**Justin Tomlinson** (North Swindon) (Con): I very much welcome today’s announcement. The chief executive of Scope, Mark Atkinson, rightly highlights that the assessment should be the first step for support. Therefore, will the Secretary of State set out how stakeholders and charities can not only shape future policy but help to deliver the expert tailored employment support so needed?

**Damian Green:** I am grateful for the support from my hon. Friend, who did excellent work when he was the Minister for Disabled People. I am happy to reassure him that there will be localised services, with facilitated pacts done at a local level so that in each individual jobcentre and area the appropriate type of support will be available after an assessment has been made.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I welcome the assurances given by the Secretary of State on statutory sick pay, but does he realise that millions of people in this country are in work but do not qualify for it because they are classed as self-employed? As part of this process, will he agree to consider implementing the relevant recommendations of the Deane review of self-employment?

**Damian Green:** The hon. Gentleman is right that there are increasing numbers of self-employed people, and we want to ensure that they are treated as fairly as everyone else. Indeed, one of the successes of recent years is the new enterprise allowance, which has allowed nearly 20,000 disabled people to start up businesses. That is about one in five of business start-ups, so it is a significant part of the system, and it means that we are very alive to the needs of self-employed people.

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement and the announcement of the Green Paper, but will he reassure me that he will also look at making further improvements to the work capability assessment to make it as smooth as possible for claimants, because that will make a big difference?
Damian Green: We have had five different reviews of the work capability assessment in the past six years, and the idea I am bringing forward today are the latest response. There is no system so good that it cannot be improved, and I would welcome my hon. Friend’s input to make the system even better in future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering want to know whether the Secretary of State believes that the film “I, Daniel Blake” is an accurate portrayal of the benefits system. If it is, do the changes that the Secretary of State thinks that the film “I, Daniel Blake” is an accurate portrayal of the benefits system. If it is, do the changes agree with the needs of those who are helping people with a disability back into work than we have for the general population. The Green Paper is intended to address that problem.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents want to know whether the Secretary of State is the latest review are the latest review of the work capability assessment. Is it a system that people can rely on? If it is not, what are the inaccuracies?

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): If the Secretary of State believes that the disability appeals system is improving, will he explain why he is investing a further £22 million in recruiting more staff to assist the Department for Work and Pensions in making the system better? What steps does he plan to take to ensure that we engage properly with people with mental health conditions. What steps does he plan to take to make sure that help will flow through in the coming months to many people who have a disability but also have the burning desire to get back into work.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The manifesto of the Secretary of State’s party set out an aim of halving the disability employment gap, and the Government now appear to have watered down that commitment to merely making progress. In his response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, the Secretary of State rejected targets, but without setting out milestones and monitoring progress towards them, how will he judge the success of his Government’s actions?

Damian Green: I did not water down the commitment. The original commitment in the manifesto did not have an end date, so I am merely repeating the manifesto commitment. We will publicise all the relevant information so that the House and the public will know the progress we are making. There has been progress in the past few years. The percentage of disabled people employed has gone up in recent years, but I intend to improve on that progress in future.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I very much welcome what the Secretary of State has had to say this afternoon, especially in relation to greater support for those with mental health conditions. What steps does he plan to take to make sure that we engage properly with people affected by such conditions and the organisations that represent them to ensure that we get this right?

Damian Green: I know that my hon. Friend has a deep interest in this area. The Green Paper offers £115 million in funding for a new model of employment support. Will the Secretary of State confirm that that figure represents less than 5% of the total cut that disabled people have experienced in disability living allowance and employment and support allowance?

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I welcome the Green Paper’s direction of travel. Will its additional, personalised and tailored support for disabled people reach them by April, when they will lose the WRAG payments—which was a condition of support for the ESA cuts for many of my hon. Friends?

Damian Green: I know that my hon. Friend has a deep interest in this area, and, when he reads the Green Paper in full, he will find that there are many measures we can take immediately so that help will flow through in the coming months to many people who have a disability but also have the burning desire to get back into work.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Despite some changes, the work capability assessment system is fundamentally flawed. Surely reform must ensure that, as well as the system judging whether people are fit for a job, the jobs are available for them. Will the Secretary of State look at whether a new assessment can include the jobs available in a local area as well as the claimant’s condition?

Damian Green: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will recognise that more jobs are available and being taken in our economy than ever before. General levels of unemployment are very low—4.9% is a rate that would have been unimaginable in previous eras, so we should be proud of that. The key is to make sure that those jobs—I agree with him on this point—can be matched to those who may have a disability or long-term health condition so that they can take advantage of the vibrant jobs market we currently have.
Nissan: Sunderland

5.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about Nissan in Sunderland. Last Thursday, 27 October, the Nissan Motor Company Ltd announced that, following a meeting of its executive committee, both the next Qashqai and X-Trail models will be produced at its Sunderland plant. The plant will be expanded through new investment to be a super-plant, manufacturing more than 600,000 cars a year. Some 80% of the plant’s output is exported to more than 130 international markets.

The decision is a massive win for the 7,000 direct employees and 35,000 total British employees in the plant and the supply chain. It is a stunning tribute to the local workforce, which has made the Sunderland plant, in the words of the chief executive of Nissan, “a globally competitive powerhouse”. We are immensely proud of it and proud of them. Of course, the decision is great news for the people of the north-east more widely, for our world-class automotive sector and for the whole British economy. This is but the latest in a series of exciting investments in the United Kingdom, which is proving to the world that we are open for business. Indeed, it is hard to think of more unambiguously good news.

My colleagues in the Government and I have been vigorous in ensuring that the Nissan board had no doubts about the importance of this plant and this industry to the British people. Through the many conversations I and my colleagues had both here and in Japan, it became clear that four reassurances were important to securing the investment for Britain. Three were about the automotive sector generally and one was about Brexit.

The first was that we would continue our successful and long-standing programme of support for the competitiveness of the automotive sector, including Nissan. This support is available to firms for skills and training the local workforce, research and development, and innovation, in line with EU and UK Government rules. Since 2010, the Government have invested £400 million in the UK automotive sector in this way. We will continue to invest hundreds of millions more over the coming years. All proposals from any company must be underpinned by strong business cases and tested against published eligibility criteria. All proposals are also subject to rigorous external scrutiny by the independent Industrial Development Advisory Board and are reported on to Parliament.

The second was that we would continue our work with the automotive sector, including Nissan at Sunderland, to ensure that more of the supply chain can locate in the UK and in close proximity to major manufacturing sites. In a previous post, I established the local growth deals and city deals, which, working with local enterprise partnerships, have provided a way in which local councils, businesses and the Government can upgrade sites, especially those brought into use from dereliction, and provide the infrastructure for the small and medium-sized businesses that can supply these major companies. I can confirm that this programme will continue, and with vigour.

The third was that we would maintain a strong commitment to research and development, in particular the take-up of ultra-low emission vehicles. The opportunities presented by bringing the Department of Energy and Climate Change together with the Business Department make us ideally placed to build on Britain’s strengths in low-carbon energy, the automotive sector, science, research and many other areas.

The fourth was that in our negotiations to leave the EU, we will emphasise the very strong common ground, especially in the automotive sector, that exists between ourselves and other EU member states in ensuring that trade between us can be free and unencumbered by impediments. A good deal for the UK can also be a good deal for other member states, and that is how we will approach the negotiations. Whatever the outcome, we are determined to ensure that the UK continues to be one of the most competitive locations in the world for automotive and other advanced manufacturing.

Last Thursday was a great day for Sunderland and for Britain, but the best is yet to come. Over 30 years, Nissan has invested more than £3.7 billion in our country and has created excellent jobs for a whole generation of world-beating British workers. Last week’s announcement means that a new generation of apprentices, technicians, engineers, managers and many other working men and women can look forward to careers filled with opportunity and success. This Government will always back them to the hilt. I commend this statement and Nissan’s welcome decision to this House.

5.18 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for responding to our repeated requests for clarification on the events of the past few days. I join him in warmly welcoming Nissan’s decision to keep production in the UK. It is fantastic news for Nissan’s 7,000 employees and the 38,000-plus employees who rely on its supply chain. It is fantastic news for Sunderland, and it is fantastic news for the whole country. It is a testament to the skill, productivity and ability of the workforce and management that Nissan has such confidence in its Sunderland operation.

Without detracting from that, we still have some concerns. The right hon. Gentleman has denied giving Nissan special treatment, but he has refused to be transparent about what he has offered to it. As our most productive car factory, Nissan’s Sunderland plant epitomises the strengths of the UK’s automotive industry. He knows that we simply could not afford to lose it. That is why, despite the assurances that he has given now and in his tantalising television appearances over the weekend, the nagging question remains: are we really to believe that Nissan is risking millions of pounds of investment and the success of its newest models on the basis of the Government’s good intentions alone? If that is the case, why have they kept their good intentions to themselves?

The overwhelming impression until now has been that the Government have no strategy for Brexit. Are we expected to believe that the Government now have not only a strategy, but a strategy so convincing that they have persuaded Nissan to stay without the need for any special guarantees? If so, why will they not tell us what it is? We are told in the media—the media is where most of last week’s revelations transpired—that the Government gave a commitment to Nissan that Britain would be as attractive after Brexit as it is today.
It would seem that the Secretary of State has discovered the Brexit equivalent of the Philosopher’s stone: tariff-free market access with no concessions, readily agreed by all 27 EU countries, including Wallonia. Surely, that is a feat worth sharing. So can he tell us whether he is committing to full single market access or to a customs union or to something else entirely—or do the Government simply not know? We all want all car manufacturers to keep their production in the UK—[Interjection.] Yes, we do. So why are they not privy to the same assurances as Nissan, and what about the many other businesses up and down the country—businesses that, like Nissan, are currently deciding whether to continue investing in the UK? Surely, they, too, should be told.

I have acknowledged that the automotive sector is hugely important to our economy, but it is not our only strategically important industry. Where were the Government during the crisis in the steel industry? They were blocking the EU from taking action against Chinese steel dumping—that is where they were. What are the Government doing for the aerospace industry, or for pharmaceuticals, and what about the service sector, which accounts for more than three-quarters of our economy?

It seems that the Government are giving private reassurances to particular companies, while leaving the majority of businesses, the public and their elected representatives in the dark about their intentions. Piecemeal, back-room deals will not provide the active industrial strategy that Labour has long advocated and to which the Government now claim to be signed up. We Labour Members want the economy firing on all cylinders, not spluttering along on one or two.

As we embark on Brexit, Britain needs a Government who are visionary, not reactive, and strategic, not shambolic. As a start, we need a Government who are transparent and accountable, instead of secretive. Why not start now? If the right hon. Gentleman did not offer Nissan a sweetener, what has he got to hide? Show us the letter. If the assurances he gave to Nissan apply to all the automotive sector, surely all that sector should be given them? Show us the letter. If, contrary to appearances, the Government do have a strategy for Brexit, why will they not tell us what it is? Show us the letter!

Greg Clark: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box, but if that is the kind of spluttering old banger of an approach to these issues, I think he should upgrade to a new model. I would recommend a Qashqai; they are very good cars. I find it surprising that, in this country that exists between us. I said that whatever happened, we were determined to keep Britain’s world-beating motor industry competitive. Do Labour Members share those intentions? If they do, why on earth do they think that I would play games with the livelihoods of 35,000 working people in this country, the pride of the world in their industry, by not stating them clearly and transparently to Nissan? I welcome the decision that Nissan has made.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether I would publish the correspondence. I have set out the information that I gave to Nissan. My responsibility, on behalf of the Government, is to encourage and attract investment in this country. When companies of all types and in all sectors share with me investment plans that would be of interest to their prospective competitors, it is important for them to be assured that those plans will not be disclosed to their competitors to their disadvantage. My objective is to obtain the investment, but I shall be happy to answer questions about every aspect of it, today and when I appear before the Select Committee—which I intend to do, at the Committee’s invitation.

The hon. Gentleman is a relatively new Member, and I hope that he will have a distinguished tenure here, but Members in all parts of the House—from Newcastle to Newquay, from Liverpool to Lowestoft—will know that whenever I work to attract success to our regions, towns, cities and counties, I do so on a cross-party basis. Party politics never feature in the way I work. I hope that, in future, we shall be able to work together on such common interests.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is much interest in this subject, and I want to accommodate it. Single, short supplementary questions—preferably a single sentence without preamble—and the Secretary of State’s customarily pithy replies are required.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Secretary of State is to be congratulated on his announcement, which is clearly very good news for Sunderland, but I think that he will understand Parliament’s desire to understand the terms on which these and other negotiations are conducted. May I ask whether he has discussed this matter with the International Trade Secretary, and whether he will be in the driving seat of future trade negotiations? We all think that he is rather good at it.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s compliments. As she knows, we have a Cabinet Committee on Brexit, on which I serve alongside my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Trade.
Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I, too, thank the Secretary of State for his statement, although I think he may have said a little bit more to the BBC yesterday than he has to the House today. I hope that he is not joining the ever-growing list of Secretaries of State who have been slapped down by the Prime Minister for expressing their personal opinions.

I think it important that action has been taken to protect parts of the economy from the potential negative impacts of Brexit. It may constitute more than just a quarter of the issues that were on Nissan’s agenda, but that is for the Secretary of State to answer. He said to the BBC yesterday that “our objective would be to…have continued access…without tariffs and without bureaucratic impediments”.

That has not been said today, but I think that it is correct. If that objective is not realised, however, what will be the cost to the taxpayer of a deal with Nissan? How much will it cost to make good those tariffs should they be imposed? That is the key question.

SNP Members will welcome the fact that an area of the country that voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union has been given a special deal, and we look forward with gusto to the deal that will be given to Scotland in recognition of the fact that we voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU. The Government are giving a flexible Brexit to the City of London and the north-east of England; I hope the Secretary of State will bring forward a flexible Brexit to protect Scotland’s economy and the 80,000 jobs that rely on our access to the single market.

The Secretary of State must recognise that the game here is a bit of a bogey: “Brexit means Brexit” will not cut it while he is going behind closed doors cutting deals with others without making this House or the public aware of what they are. While Nissan received a letter of comfort, the devolved Administrations got a hotline—a hotline that is so hot to handle that it does not get answered for 36 hours.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must press on.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman started well. Mr Speaker, although I certainly have not been slapped down, up, sideways or any other way by the Prime Minister, I am pleased to say.

The approach I have set out to the House and stated previously simply reflects what I would have thought is common sense: in an area—we have been talking about the automotive sector—in which there are substantial exports that come from Britain to the EU and from the EU to this country and components go backwards and forwards, there is a clear common interest in having arrangements that are free of tariffs and the bureaucratic impediments I mentioned. So it seems to me that when we embark on any negotiation, it is about finding the common ground and having a positive volution so to do. That is what I set out and that is what I described to Nissan, and indeed would do to any other manufacturer. It is on that basis, along with the other points I have made, that Nissan felt able to make this fantastic investment not only in the north-east, but in the United Kingdom.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The Prime Minister surely has not slapped down my right hon. Friend, but has slapped him on the back as a gesture of congratulations on a remarkable deal. I ask my right hon. Friend to come clean on one other issue he left off his list, which I am sure he mentioned to Nissan, however. He will have reminded Nissan that the UK outside the EU will be able to set its own new trade deals—and guess which car manufacturers will benefit from free trade deals with the rest of world.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s endorsement. As the Prime Minister said, we are going to make a success of Brexit, and we want every sector of our economy, including the automotive sector, not to be disadvantaged by Brexit, but to reap the benefits and be more competitive in the future.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): I commend the Government and the Secretary of State on this piece of great news; it is a welcome example of targeted Government commitment to a successful company in a strategically vital sector in the most important region on earth. However, will the same sort of targeted investment be available to other firms and sectors? If so, how will these be selected in the context of a proper industrial strategy, and will such companies and sectors be given similar reassurance and support to that provided to Nissan?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the generous compliment the Chairman of the Select Committee pays me. I am certainly not going to disagree with him on what he said about the north-east, but I should say that Kent ranks equally. I am looking forward to coming before his Select Committee, not only to answer questions but to talk about the industrial strategy. The approach I not just intend to take but am already taking is to take time to meet the firms in our economy and understand the different needs of different sectors, so that we can be informed by them as we form our negotiating mandate. Those needs will obviously be different from sector to sector, and my commitment, which we will share when we meet in his Committee, is through our industrial strategy to make sure that we have confidence both for individual sectors and for individual places, because there is a very interesting confluence there. Investment in Nissan is good for the sector and good for Sunderland and the north-east.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): I should declare an interest as a driver—albeit not a very good one—of a Nissan Qashqai. For years, we have had calls from across the House for an activist, interventionist Business Secretary who is prepared to do everything possible in order to secure jobs for working-class people in disadvantaged parts of the country. Now we have one, can my right hon. Friend explain why Opposition Members will not take yes for an answer? Was Oscar Wilde not right that there is only one thing worse than not getting one’s heart’s desire and that is getting it?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State has no responsibility either for Opposition policy or for Oscar Wilde—although we always enjoy the poetic licence of the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove).

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I welcome the announcement, but I want to ask the Secretary of State about the duties and rights of this House. Last Monday, the Prime Minister told the House that “the Government must not show their hand in detail”—[Official Report, 24 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 27.]
to Parliament in advance of the Brexit negotiations. At
the very same time, however, we now know that the
Secretary of State was telling Nissan the Government’s
details of its negotiating stance for the automotive sector,
including that there would be tariff-free trade and no
bureaucratic impediments. Will the Secretary of State
explain how those two positions are consistent?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman, for whom I
have a high personal regard, exemplifies what my right
hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael
Gove) was saying: he looks so glum at this news. What I
set out to the House, to Nissan and to any firm that is
in this country is what my colleagues have said repeatedly:
there is a great common interest among other European
Union nations and ourselves in having a deal following
the negotiations that maximises the benefit to both
sides. That seems so obvious that it is hardly worthy
emphasising. That is the demeanour with which we will
approach the negotiations. It is the approach that I have
always taken in negotiations, and it seems as though
that is something that people are glad to hear.

**Mr Andrew Tyrie** (Chichester) (Con): I congratulate
the Secretary of State on providing a great deal for the
north-east. His clarification that the Government wanted
continued access to the single market without bureaucratic
impediments is a significant extension and exposure of
the Government’s negotiating position. Does the Secretary
of State agree that the rules of origin that the UK
would face outside the customs union would certainly
constitute bureaucratic impediments?

**Greg Clark:** This goes beyond any discussions that I
have had with any company here. Why would we not
aim to avoid bureaucratic impediments as a matter of
negotiation? That seems to be common sense and that is
what I set out.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all welcome
the Nissan announcement, but Nissan is only one company
that is making decisions now about its future investment
in the United Kingdom. Given the persuasive reassurance
that the right hon. Gentleman was able to offer, can he
tell the House whether his offer of
tariff-free access to the European market will be available
to all other parts of our manufacturing sector? If I
heard him right, he indicated a moment ago that the
Government might take a different approach for different
sectors. If that means that some might not benefit from
tariff-free access, they would like to know pretty quickly.

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman is wise enough
to know that it is not in my gift to offer tariff-free access
to the single market. I was describing what would be a
positive outcome from the negotiations, which therefore
relates to the demeanour that we should take in those
negotiations. My right hon. Friend the Member for
Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) paid me a personal
compliment, but my team shares my vigour in talking
to companies up and down the land to ensure that we
understand what is important to them and to inform
our negotiations. That seems an eminently sensible thing
to do.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): I warmly congratulate
my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister on securing
this fantastic new deal with Nissan, which will benefit
not only the good people of the north-east. Thanks to
the supply chain, the benefits will extend throughout
the whole country, helping many tens of thousands of
people and their families.

I met a constituent on Saturday who runs a small IT
business employing 14 people and he, too, wants certainty
on tariffs. He told me that if tariffs are imposed on his
business, he will have to get rid of it, meaning that 14
people will lose their jobs. Big companies, small companies
and huge companies from all sectors need certainty.
Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right that this
House has a debate and a vote on the underlying
principles of our negotiations as we leave the EU in
order to give the Government a true mandate?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for
what she said. When she was a Minister in my Department
—or its predecessor—she was vigorous in engaging
with businesses and understanding what they need. I
regularly meet small businesses and their representative
organisations, having done so many times since my
appointment. She rightly says that it is important that
their views help shape our negotiating mandate. On the
debates in this House, the Prime Minister and my
Cabinet colleagues have said repeatedly that there will
be many occasions to debate and have these things
scrutinised in this House.

**Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I warmly
welcome the Minister’s statement and the kind words about
my home city of Sunderland from somebody from
Middlesbrough. There was palpable relief in Sunderland
on Thursday at the announcement, but concerns remain
about the supply chain, because if there is an automotive
sectoral deal, these firms will not necessarily be included,
as they supply other types of industry. There are also
concerns about the wider manufacturing base in the
north-east as we move forward with the Brexit negotiations.

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what
she says. Middlesbrough has been doing a bit better in
football terms than Sunderland this season, so it deserves
a break when it comes to Nissan. The supply chain is
incredibly important, and across the automotive sector,
whether in the north-east or the west midlands or other
parts of the country, there are businesses that are currently
overseas that could locate close to the main plants. If
sites can be remediated where, for example, they require
better road access, it is in everyone’s interest if we work
on that together. That was part of the discussions, and
will particularly benefit the supply chain.

**Jeremy Quin** (Horsham) (Con): I warmly congratulate
the Secretary of State on the announcement. Will he
assure the House that he will not jeopardise future
fantastic announcements by revealing too much confidential
information from discussions between him and the other
parties?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his
question. I am happy to answer any questions that the
House has, and I am looking forward to appearing
before the Select Committee. I have been pretty candid,
describing each of the four aspects of the reassurances
that I was able to give, but if companies that are
considering an investment here describe commercial
plans that they may not want to fall into the hands of
their competitors, it is reasonable that they should have
that confidence when dealing with the UK Government.
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): As a fellow north-easterner, I am sure the Secretary of State will know that Thursday’s news buoyed not only Sunderland, but the wider north-east. Even I got a little teary-eyed at the plant on Thursday evening, knowing that the announcement had secured the livelihoods and future aspirations of so many families, who were all that night breathing a sigh of relief. The details of the letter are important, but may I, as the local MP for the plant, and on behalf of the workforce of almost 46,000 people across the UK, whose jobs are now more secure, just say thank you?

Greg Clark: I am touched by the hon. Lady’s statement; it is very kind and very good of her. When we were having these discussions, I always had in mind the fact that this is not a theoretical investment, and that we are talking about real people who work hard and do brilliant work. They are the best regarded in the world and go to Japan to help train some of the auto workers there. I am proud of that, as is she; the whole House should be proud of the workforce there.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. How can his reassurance to Nissan that there will be continued access to the European market without bureaucratic impediment be assured if Britain is outside the customs union?

Greg Clark: As I have said to other hon. Members, what I was able to say is how we would go into a negotiation, which seems to me to be to find common ground. We certainly did not get into any discussions of particular models, as my right hon. Friend would expect. One can overcomplicate these things; to be clear about one’s intention to find common ground and to pursue discussions in a rational and civilised way is not a bad thing to be able to convey.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome Nissan’s decision, which will protect thousands of jobs and many of the people whom I represent. May I press the Secretary of State again on the issue of the supply chain? He has talked about the supply chain of the future, but what more can he say by way of reassurance both to the existing supply chain and to the wider manufacturing sector in the region that he will do everything in his power to protect their interests and the medium-sized businesses that serve it?

Greg Clark: I certainly will do everything in my power. I look forward when I next visit Sunderland to meeting the existing supply chain. The hon. Lady will know that we have already done quite a lot in that regard. I helped to negotiate the Sunderland city deal and to establish the advanced manufacturing park near the Nissan site, precisely to provide better facilities. She will know about the new bridge for which we secured funding to assist with that. I know very well the importance of not just the major sites, vital though they are, but of the whole ecology of business around them. That is one reason why this investment is so important. Important though Nissan is, the investment gives another big boost to the existing supply chain and to those competitors that will join it in the future.

Mark P赛vey (Rugby) (Con): This great news continues the work of this Government to rebalance our economy. It also provides an incentive to continue to improve skills and to encourage innovation. Does the Secretary of State agree that our catapult centres, including the Manufacturing Technology Centre in my constituency, have a big part to play in that role?

Greg Clark: I do indeed. One of the enticing things that we can offer companies looking to locate here is the excellence of our research and our science, whether it is universities or, increasingly, in institutions such as catapults that help translate those skills into the wider market. Through our industrial strategy, we want to increase the focus on this very important area of strength, so that other firms can invest and see Britain as the go-to place for advanced manufacturing and for other sectors, too.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): The news about Nissan in the north-east is brilliant, but there are other strategic industries in the north-east of England. I include Hitachi Rail Europe in my constituency, which opened a £90 million factory last year, employing almost 1,000 people and hundreds more in the supply chain. Hitachi Rail Europe is here for the long term to have access to the European market. At the moment, it is building the Intercity Express Programme. Building the machines will take about three years, so it is here for the long term. In the spirit of this cross-party approach that the Secretary of State say he wants to take, will he meet me to see what we can do to ensure that the Japanese company will continue to invest in the north-east?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. In fact, I am meeting Hitachi tomorrow, and have the privilege of presenting an award at Asia House in commemoration of the very long and positive association that we have had with it. One of my previous visits to Japan in this role, I had the great pleasure of meeting many of the Hitachi directors and seeing their innovation and their continued commitment to this country—very important.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The desperate search for a commercial bung in this announcement by some Members of the Opposition is, frankly, insulting to Britain, Japan, Nissan and Sunderland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, rather than talking the country down, we should be celebrating the recent inward investment successes, not least from the far east, which demonstrate that the Government are living up to their commitment to making a success of Brexit?

Greg Clark: As I said earlier, it is unambiguously good news, and I hope that the whole House will welcome it.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Many people in my North Durham constituency work at Nissan, so I warmly welcome the news and thank the Minister for his involvement. If he has done a special deal for Nissan, good. I just look forward to many more for the north-east companies that rely on exports.

Greg Clark: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words. I do believe in being active and vigorous and in meeting companies and understanding the challenges
that they face; I make no apology for that. My whole ministerial team will be active in securing investments for this country.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): This fantastic news makes us proud of British industry. Does my right hon. Friend agree that many factors make this country attractive to companies such as Nissan? A key one is our competitive rate of corporation tax. Will he ensure that in the coming autumn statement, our rate not only stays competitive, but perhaps gets even more competitive?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend needs to direct that request to the Chancellor—I will pass it on when I see my right hon. Friend in Cabinet tomorrow—but he is right to remind the House that there is a range of attributes and strengths that makes this country attractive to overseas and domestic investors. It is important that, across the whole range, we get them right.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. The news is extremely important to the north-east economy, including companies such as Nifco and Teesport in the Teesside area. Nissan is a massive buyer of strip steel in the United Kingdom. Earlier this year after the steel crisis, Nissan was hunting around for new suppliers, usually in the European Union, for that chain. We have had a disastrous experience in the north-east prior to this announcement, which stands in contrast to the SSI Redcar situation that has happened on this Government’s watch. Although it has taken six years for the Government to understand what new Labour-style industrial activism is, I very much welcome that and the statement today.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the backhanded compliment. I am not sure that I would agree that this is new Labour-style industrial activism. The hon. Gentleman will know that it was a Conservative Government 30 years ago who secured Nissan for the UK, and I am proud that it is a Conservative Government who have secured its future in Britain.

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on the announcement. Does he agree that the commitment from Nissan is significant and substantive, but special deals for the UK in Doncaster, with Brexit being cited as one of the reasons, does it not point to why it is so important for the Government to conduct regional impact assessments of Brexit, and to publish them to demonstrate that there is a clearly thought out strategy that will reflect the needs of regions, as well as sectors?

Greg Clark: It is nice to hear the right hon. Lady being able to speak from the Back Benches; she does so compellingly. As colleagues who know my interests in these matters would expect me to say, I believe that our regions, towns, cities and counties have an important role to play in our industrial strategy. I do not know whether she has been elected to the new Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, but I am sure she will be able to attend its sittings, because I hope that we will be discussing precisely this during the next few weeks.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): It is Offshore Wind Week, so will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming this fantastic news for Nissan and confirm that it will play a key role in a low-carbon future for British industry?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has mentioned that. One of the great opportunities in industrial strategy is to combine our world leadership in offshore wind renewable energy with our commanding position in the automotive sector, and to bring them together so that when it comes to electrical vehicles and battery storage, we can lead the world, which is what we intend to do.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Secretary of State deserves credit for a significant and substantial achievement, but special deals for the car industry or the financial services sector offer little comfort to the thousands of small businesses the length and breadth of this country—which, incidentally, goes north of Newcastle—that depend on exports for their livelihood. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that these small businesses, which are the lifeblood of so many of our communities, get the same access to him and his Department as has clearly been given to the big boys in the multinationals?

Greg Clark: I am delighted that the right hon. Gentleman asks that question because one of my first visits as Secretary of State was to Aberdeen, where I had a very successful and important meeting with its chamber of commerce. Small businesses in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire were talking about what they wanted to achieve from the Brexit negotiations. I think that I am the first Secretary of State in the Department to have appointed Ministers with regional and national responsibilities in relation to the devolved Administrations, which reflects the importance of building small businesses and every part of the United Kingdom into the industrial strategy.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I welcome this positive and proactive approach. Has the Secretary of State had a chance to meet Honda to discuss future opportunities?

Greg Clark: Yes, indeed. I met Honda when I was in Japan 10 days or so ago.
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I am glad that Nissan is continuing to invest in the north-east. Can the Minister give me in Liverpool some comfort—I would accept a letter—that I can pass on to Jaguar Land Rover, Getrag and the other automotive supply chain industries in my constituency to assure them that they will be treated in exactly the same way?

Greg Clark: I have been clear about maintaining the competitiveness of the automotive sector. The hon. Lady mentions some companies, and I am meeting Jaguar Land Rover again shortly—I meet it regularly. It is part of the development of our industrial strategy, and it is important that it should be. These are the companies, with their supply chain, that are succeeding and have contributed to our national success. We will work with them to build on that success and achieve even greater success in future.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on what is undoubtedly a huge personal achievement, and the people of the north-east on creating in the Sunderland plant a globally competitive powerhouse. I send this deal a signal to those remainers who have become remoaners that they should recalibrate their doom and gloom and become far more optimistic about the future of this country outside the European Union?

Greg Clark: This is a day for celebration rather than debating such issues. We should all celebrate this big success, which shows that Britain is and can be competitive, and that some of the world’s biggest companies are backing us very vigorously.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State obviously said the right thing to Nissan. He knows that there are many manufacturing industries with international supply chains, such as Glaxo in my constituency, so when he is sitting in the Brexit Cabinet Sub-Committee, will he impress on his colleagues the value of staying in the customs union?

Greg Clark: The approach that I have set out across our economy is to meet those businesses that are part of my responsibility and to have sensible discussions so that I understand from them what they need. That informs our negotiating mandate. That is my commitment to all the businesses—large and small—that I meet.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): This announcement clearly shows the world that Britain is open for business. I hope that our supply chains will get a boost from this too, particularly UK steel. Will my right hon. Friend say a little about the wider involvement of the UK automobile sector in the forthcoming industrial strategy and how the announcement fits into that?

Greg Clark: I certainly will. With any industrial strategy, we should build on our strengths and not be complacent, but recognise that in order to continue to be strong, we need to look at the underlying conditions for promoting that. The presence of a vigorous supply chain is important for the automotive sector. It is important to be at the cutting edge of research and development, and to have skills in the workforce on which expanding companies can count in order to fulfil their order books. Those are all important enabling conditions, and the Government have a role to play by working with companies to make sure that they are all met.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State confirm whether the arrangement with Nissan is a one-off or part of a wider strategy to protect the economy from the impact of Brexit? If it is part of a wider strategy, what other businesses and organisations has he spoken to over the past few months on similar terms?

Greg Clark: It is certainly part of a strategy: it is part of our industrial strategy to make sure that Britain is competitive in the future, as it is now and it has been in the past. We are taking a strategic approach. As the hon. Lady might imagine, I meet businesses large and small almost every day of the week, and in all the conversations I have, we discuss what is important, what challenges they face and what their strategic ambition is, so that I can be informed about that.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Nissan decision and congratulate the Secretary of State on his role in securing it. I especially welcome his comments about research and development, and innovation. Given that the developing industry-university collaboration is crucial to that, as is the role of foreign students and researchers, what assurances did he give the industry that the Government will reverse the drop we have seen in the numbers applying?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman seems to think that my discussions went broader than they did, but with everything I have said about research and development, our universities are key to that. As a former universities Minister, and now once again with responsibility for science, I will do everything I can to promote our research excellence and make sure it continues.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Universities in Scotland have warned of an exodus of talent if we do not have a long-term plan for EU nationals. What confirmation can the Secretary of State give that EU nationals will have a long-term future in this country?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there will be lots of opportunities to discuss other aspects of the negotiations we will have—I think there is even a debate next week on these matters.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I also welcome the announcement by Nissan and acknowledge the work of the Government, Unite the union, and others who were involved in this decision. One of the reassurances the Secretary of State mentioned related to support for the skills and training of the local workforce and for research. Does he expect any cuts in research and development and skills support from the EU to UK regions and businesses? What reassurances has he given that could also be applied to other sectors and regions to assure them that they will not lose out?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Lady knows, the Chancellor has already made a commitment to continue that European funding that has already been committed to but, of course, much of the support that we have given to training and
skills development in the automotive sector is from our own resources, and one of the things that I was able to say was that we regard that as important and continuing.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): We know that there are attempts to do a deal for the City of London and we now know there is a deal for Nissan. At the same time, however, the Fraser of Allander Institute tells us there is a threat to 80,000 jobs in Scotland. Why is it that, when our First Minister comes down here, she is shown the door? There is a deal for Nissan, but there is no deal for Scotland from this Government.

**Greg Clark**: I have had the pleasure of meeting the First Minister at least twice since I took up this job. What I have said to her, personally and directly, is that, as we develop our industrial strategy, Scotland will have a big place in that. Of course it is important that all parts of the United Kingdom need to benefit from our industrial success in the future. The hon. Gentleman may know that, in terms of the city deals that have been negotiated between the UK Government, the Scottish Government and the various councils, we have, and I personally have—I think he would acknowledge this—a track record in making those discussions work.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I certainly welcome the news, and I am sure that the thousands of people who work at the Vauxhall car plant in my constituency would be equally delighted if a similar announcement could be made in due course. When the Secretary of State addressed the Chamber, he referred to different strategies for different industries, but does he also accept that, within the UK automotive sector, there are different challenges from plant to plant, and that a more specific approach may be needed from time to time? Will he agree to engage in an intimate dialogue with General Motors, as he has with Nissan?

**Greg Clark**: I am not sure I would describe the dialogue as intimate, but it was constructive at any rate. Of course I make that commitment to the hon. Gentleman. I have already met the Economy Minister in Northern Ireland and had a very constructive discussion with him. I had that discussion to invite him to help us as we develop our industrial strategy so that it includes an appreciation of the different needs of different places which we approach the economy. However, it is true that there are many contributors to the competitiveness of the economy. What I need to do, and what I will do, is to approach the economy in a way to make them work for Britain.

**Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): Nissan’s decision is brilliant news not only for the north-east, but for the whole UK. May I suggest to the Secretary of State that the exchange rate is a major and crucial factor in Britain’s competitiveness, and that maintaining an appropriate exchange rate is fundamental to future manufacturing success and investment? Will the Government be taking steps to make sure that the welcome depreciation of sterling since 23 June is maintained?

**Greg Clark**: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have not targeted an exchange rate for some time. That policy is, first, not my remit and, secondly, not the way we approach the economy. However, it is true that there are many contributors to the competitiveness of the economy. What I need to do, and what I will do, is to take those things over which I do have influence and make them work for Britain.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The Nissan announcement is not, of course, the only announcement of a good investment decision in the UK since the referendum. From GlaxoSmithKline to McDonald’s, thousands of jobs have been created, despite the predictions of the doom-mongers on the referendum deniers’ side. The Minister has indicated that he will take a sector-by-sector approach. Does he also reckon that there needs to be a region-by-region approach, and what plans does he have to meet the Economy Minister in Northern Ireland to discuss the problems there?

**Greg Clark**: I have already met the Economy Minister in Northern Ireland and had a very constructive discussion with him. I had that discussion to invite him to help us as we develop our industrial strategy so that it includes an appreciation of the different needs of different places to which the hon. Gentleman refers.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I welcome the news that so many jobs in Sunderland will be protected from the consequences of Brexit but, as an Edinburgh MP, it is Edinburgh jobs that I have to think about. Many thousands of my constituents are employed directly or indirectly in Edinburgh’s financial sector, and Edinburgh’s economy is more reliant on financial services than that of any other city in the UK, including London. These people are worried about the consequences of losing their EU passport. Will the Minister give me a guarantee that he will advocate a special deal for Edinburgh in Cabinet?
Greg Clark: Of course financial services are of huge importance to our economy—to the UK economy and to the economy in Edinburgh. We need to make sure that, in all areas, we get the best possible deal by finding areas of common ground and negotiating constructively, through relationships that we have built up with our counterparts in the European Union, during the months and years ahead. That is the approach that we will take, and it is the approach that is most likely to succeed.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): On Friday, I am due to visit the Ford engine plant in my constituency, along with my local Assembly Member, Carwyn Jones, the First Minister of Wales. Can we be assured that we will be talking to Ford on the same lines as have been very successfully negotiated in relation to Nissan, and that the 2,000 jobs at the Ford plant and in the wider economy will also be secure following today’s statement?

Greg Clark: I do not know what the hon. Lady is going to say to Ford, but I hope that she will reinforce the messages that I have given in saying that the Government want to maintain the competitiveness of the whole automotive sector. We want to build on the strengths that it has in every part of the United Kingdom, including in her constituency, so that it can prosper in the future. I hope that that will be welcomed.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): As a former Labour Minister with responsibility for the automotive sector, I welcomed the investment by Nissan for the manufacture of the electric Leaf vehicle in Sunderland, although I did not give a statement from the Dispatch Box at the time because that was probably less of a surprise. How will the Secretary of State secure attendance in the emissions regulation discussions that are so vital to the low-carbon future of the UK automotive sector?

Greg Clark: They are indeed vital, and I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman makes that point. One of the advantages of having responsibilities for energy and climate change within the business and industrial strategy set of responsibilities is that these conversations can be joined up. The Minister for Climate Change and Industry and I share an interest in making sure that we maintain our leadership in green technology to the great advantage of our industrial future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): How many of these unique, one-off, special, individual deals will have to be negotiated before the Brexit process is complete, and how many will it take before the Government realise that the better option for everyone would be to live up to their manifesto promise and keep us in the single market?

Greg Clark: It was not clear from the hon. Gentleman’s remarks whether he welcomes this deal, which has been a good conclusion to our discussions with Nissan. I would say to hon. Members on both sides of the House that if we all approach the prospect of investment—either by domestic companies or overseas investors—positively, try to understand what companies need, and make sure that the economy provides the backdrop, whether in skills, infrastructure or research and development, to keep us competitive, we can all prosper together.
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill
[Lords]

Second Reading

6.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a pleasure to introduce this Bill to the House. We have waited a long time to be able to ratify the 1954 Hague convention and accede to its two protocols. The need for this Bill is paramount. In recent months, we have seen the wanton destruction of cultural heritage in the middle east and north Africa. These tragic events are a reminder of how vital it is that the UK ratifies this convention and makes a strong statement about the importance we place on protecting cultural heritage. We fully endorse the steps taken at the International Criminal Court to prosecute war crimes relating to cultural destruction in Mali.

Heritage, monuments and cultural artefacts are part of what makes a country great, educating and inspiring people, and bringing them together as a nation. Sir Peter Luff, chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund, was once told, “History is what you learn about in schools; heritage is about who you are and where you come from”. We are lucky to have a highly professional and dedicated heritage and museum sector that works extremely hard to preserve our heritage and bring the story of our history to life. This work helps attract visitors to our shores too. We also have a duty to help protect the culture and heritage of other countries, for they are part of our shared inheritance as human beings.

Many in this House have called on successive Governments to pass this legislation since a commitment to do so was first made in 2004. I would like to make special mention of my hon. Friend the Members for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) for their passionate advocacy. This Bill has already been subject to comprehensive pre-legislative scrutiny. The draft Bill published in 2008 was expertly scrutinised by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Karen Bradley: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am delighted that the Secretary of State is introducing this Bill today. Her points about destruction will have been brought home to everybody when Palmyra was destroyed very recently. Can she assure the House that after the 62 years we have waited since we signed the treaty, there will not be another 62 years until the Government bring it into effect?

Karen Bradley: I hope that we will get through this evening’s proceedings and the Committee stage with great speed, and that we will therefore have Royal Assent very shortly.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee heard evidence from a variety of experts and stakeholders. The Committee warmly welcomed the Bill, and we carefully considered the recommendations made in its report.

The Bill is part of a wide package of measures that this Government have brought in to protect cultural heritage and become an international leader in this field. Earlier this year, we launched a cultural protection fund that is being administered by the British Council. Over the next four years, organisations will be encouraged to apply to this £30 million fund to support projects that will foster, safeguard and protect cultural heritage, particularly in global conflict zones.

In early 2014, the Army established a joint military cultural property protection working group that has been examining all issues concerning military cultural property protection. Earlier this year, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence confirmed that the armed forces would establish a military cultural property protection unit. The Ministry of Defence is considering what this unit might look like, taking into account international best practice. As the convention is likely to become an international treaty obligation by early 2017, the MOD anticipates that the recruitment of specialist Army reserves will start in the near future.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend. Six years has been a long wait, but it has been well worth it, and we have now got there. Is it not ironic that part of the topicality of this Bill, and the reason for people’s enthusiasm for it, comes from seeing the horrors of Daesh in Syria and elsewhere, yet it does not fully cover the activities of Daesh because it covers only unlawfully exported cultural property from occupied territories? Without being too greedy, are the Government supportive of looking at future conventions to try to make sure that Daesh comes within the provisions, although the Iraqi and Syrian sanction orders cover the gap?

Karen Bradley: I again pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work in campaigning on this issue. He rightly identifies the fact that sanctions regimes are in place regarding the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts, and touches on the question of Daesh’s standing in international legal circles. We must take great care that we do not deal with one wrong by creating more wrongs elsewhere, but I am happy to write to him about the specifics of the issue.

The convention was prompted by the widespread destruction and looting of cultural property in the second world war. It defines cultural property as movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments, works of art, or buildings whose main purpose is to contain such cultural property. The definition is broad and the list of examples is not exhaustive. As well as traditional works of art, the definition could also include, as was made clear during discussions in the other place, modern or digital types of cultural property such as very rare or unique film or recorded music.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): On cultural property, I know that the Bill does not cover this issue, but does my right hon. Friend agree that we should have a discussion about religious and ethnic culture, including languages, poetry and other forms of art and heritage that have for so long been ignored but that are now being destroyed in Iraq? The Mandaeans in northern Iraq and the Yazidis in eastern Syria are struggling to keep any form of culture at all.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes an important point, but he will accept that it is beyond the convention and, therefore, the Bill.
The first protocol requires parties to seize cultural property that has been illegally exported from an occupied territory and to return it at the end of hostilities. The second protocol sets out violations that are to be made criminal offences and provides an enhanced protection regime for cultural property.

The UK signed the convention in 1954, but decided not to ratify because its terminology was considered to be insufficiently clear and it did not provide an effective regime for the protection of cultural property. The 1999 second protocol removed those concerns, and in 2004 the Government of the day announced their intention to ratify.

The ways in which we will implement the specific obligations of the convention and its protocols generated a great deal of interest in the other place. We have been looking carefully at implementation, particularly considering what categories of cultural property should be afforded general protection under the convention in the UK.

A previous Administration undertook a consultation on implementation of the convention and its protocols in 2005. Although the majority of the findings set out in the 2006 response to the consultation remain relevant, we will also hold discussions with key stakeholders, including from the devolved Administrations and from agencies, to ensure that those conclusions are up to date.

The Bill will introduce the domestic legislation necessary for the UK to meet the obligations contained in the convention and its two protocols. Part 2 makes it an offence to commit a serious violation of the second protocol to the convention either in the UK or abroad. The Bill also makes provision to ensure that ancillary offences committed abroad can be prosecuted and that commanders and superiors can be held responsible in appropriate circumstances.

Following debate in the other place, we made a minor and technical change to ensure that the Bill’s provisions relating to ancillary offences have the intended effect in Scotland. That amendment was tabled by the Government following consultation with the Crown Office and the Scottish Government.

We have also changed the headings of part 2 and clause 3 by replacing the word “breach” with “violation”. Concern was expressed in the other place that there was a lack of consistency between the language of the Bill and the second protocol, and we made that change to address that. I am grateful to Professor Roger O’Keefe of University College London for his work on that particular point and on the Bill as a whole. I appreciate all the advice and feedback that we have received from experts in the field, which has been invaluable in shaping the Bill.

The maximum penalty for those offences is 30 years. It is important to emphasise that that is a maximum penalty, and it will be for the courts to decide the appropriate penalty in any particular case. It is critical that the penalty reflects the seriousness of the violations of the second protocol and that it is consistent with other penalties for related offences.

Part 3 recognises in UK law the blue shield—the distinctive blue and white emblem created by the convention, which is viewed by many as the cultural equivalent of the Red Cross. The emblem will be used to identify cultural property that is protected under the convention, as well as the people tasked with protecting it. The blue shield will be protected from misuse by making its unauthorised use an offence.

Part 4 implements measures to deal with cultural property that has been unlawfully exported from occupied territory.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Clause 17 states: “It is an offence for a person to deal in unlawfully exported cultural property, knowing or having reason to suspect that it has been unlawfully exported.”

There could be an unreasonable reason. Will the Government be open to suggestions to improve the Bill so that people are not unwittingly caught by the law?

Karen Bradley: That concern has been raised with me outside this place by a number of right hon. and hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the previous Secretary of State, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier). The issue was not raised substantively in the other place but I understand that there are concerns, so the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), and I will meet concerned parliamentarians, with officials, to make sure that we have comfort in this regard. It is important that we are clear that the Bill will not hamper the way in which the art market operates.

It is important to note that part 4 applies only to cultural property that has been unlawfully exported from an occupied territory after 1956, when the convention and first protocol came into force. Clause 17, which the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has mentioned, creates a new offence of dealing in unlawfully exported cultural property. That offence applies only to unlawfully exported cultural property that is imported into the UK after the commencement of the Bill, which ensures that the Bill will have no retrospective application.

Scrupulous dealers have no reason to fear prosecution or increased business costs under the Bill.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept, though, that, regardless of whether an item is legal or not, if a country falls into a war situation, suspicion will fall on every item of property that would previously have been dealt with perfectly legally?

Karen Bradley: I do not think that that will happen, and it is certainly not the Bill’s intention, but I am happy, together with my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary, to speak to colleagues and to spend time with officials to make sure that we are all satisfied. We all want The Hague convention to be brought into UK law—62 years is too long. We want to get on with it, but also to make sure that we do so in a way that satisfies parliamentarians and means they are happy that it will deliver the desired effect.

Although dealers will need to satisfy themselves through due diligence that there is no reasonable cause to suspect that objects presented for sale have been unlawfully exported from an occupied territory, existing codes of conduct already oblige dealers not to import, export or transfer the ownership of objects where they have reasonable
cause to believe that the object has been exported in violation of another country’s laws. Dealers will not be required to carry out any further due diligence beyond that which they should already be conducting. In order to commit an offence, a dealer must deal in an object knowing, or having reason to suspect, as the hon. Member for Rhondda has pointed out, that it has been unlawfully exported. If a dealer takes temporary possession of an object for the purposes of carrying out due diligence or providing valuations, they will not be dealing in that object, because they will not be acquiring the object.

The rest of part 4 outlines the circumstances in which unlawfully exported cultural property would be liable to forfeiture, and creates the necessary new powers of entry, search, seizure and forfeiture. Part 5 provides immunity from seizure or forfeiture for cultural property that is being transported to the UK, or through the UK to another destination, for safekeeping during an armed conflict.

Finally, part 6 ensures that if an offence under the Bill is committed with the consent or connivance of an officer of a company or Scottish partnership—for example, directors of private military contractors—that officer will be guilty of an offence, as well as the company or partnership.

There is already a legal framework in place that is designed to tackle the illicit trade in cultural property. The Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, the Theft Act 1968 and the Syria and Iraq sanctions orders enable the UK to take action where authorities suspect that individuals might be engaged in illicit trade. The Bill helps to strengthen that framework in relation to cultural property that has been taken illegally from occupied territories.

In addition to enabling prosecution, the existing legislation also has an important deterrent effect, sending out the message that the UK will not tolerate any illicit trade in cultural property. As well as providing teeth that can be used when required, the Bill will strengthen that deterrent effect.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that I greatly support this Bill. She is talking about enforcement and greater teeth for the legislation. Why does she think there has been only one prosecution in this country since the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003? Should we not have done better by now?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend helps to make the point about the deterrent effect of the legislation. It is deterring dealers from taking cultural property that has been stolen from occupied territory. Clearly, law enforcement and others need to understand the legislation, the offences and the action that can be taken in order that prosecutions can be brought if there is evidence that a crime has been committed.

On passing the Bill, the UK will be the first permanent member of the UN Security Council to become a party to the convention and its two protocols. Given with the other initiatives we have set in motion in this area, we will have ensured, in the strongest terms possible, that the UK will be a champion for cultural protection in times of peace and war alike. I commend the Bill to the House.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I welcome the Bill’s Second Reading, and I thank the Secretary of State for her introduction. As she said, the Bill has been a long time coming, as it will enable the 1954 Hague convention to be ratified. It has taken only 62 years. Back in 1954, Winston Churchill was Conservative Prime Minister; Gaitskell, I think—my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) will correct me if I am wrong—was leader of the Labour party; and the Liberals had only six seats in Parliament, so some things do not change too much even over 62 years.

The destruction and theft of cultural heritage goes back long before 1954 and even before the second world war, the events of which triggered the Hague convention in the first place. Hon. Members will remember that in 1700 BC the Assyrians invaded Mesopotamia—now called Ramadi and Fallujah in Iraq—took the stone gods of the Arab tribes and took them back to Nineveh to force the Arabs to negotiate to get their gods back. It is a sad fact that the treatment of cultural artefacts in exactly those locations has progressed so little in the intervening 3,500 years. Indeed, it is worse now because of the destructive potential of modern weapons of war.

The previous Labour Government, as the Secretary of State pointed out, put the ratification of the Hague convention on the political agenda in 2004 and published a draft Bill in 2008, which was scrutinised by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Unfortunately, the Bill ran out of time, but we are pleased to see that the Government agree on the importance of protecting cultural property and of making that priority known to the international community by introducing the Bill. We hope that the principles of mutual respect and cooperation will permeate all Government policies from now on.

Cultural property is targeted because it matters. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is in her place, campaigned effectively—as did other hon. Members whom the Secretary of State mentioned—for the Government to introduce the Bill. As my hon. Friend has written, “art, statues, architecture—these aren’t societies’ frills, but a fundamental part of the fabric.”

She is not alone in that belief. It is shared even by those whose first priorities might lie, correctly, elsewhere. Michael Meyer, head of international law at the Red Cross, has said:

“Why is the Red Cross worried about buildings and books when human lives are usually our focus? I will always argue that a human life is more valuable than a cultural object. But culture is essential to one’s identity. It’s an important factor for communities and nations.”

Karen Bradley: I want to put on the record my thanks to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). I failed to do so in my opening remarks, and I wanted to get that on the record.

Kevin Brennan: I thank the Secretary of State for doing so. It is characteristically generous of her, and I am sure that my hon. Friend and the House are grateful.

The Hague convention is based on the consensus that cultural property, moveable and immovable, is central to identity. Such items embody a society’s past and encapsulate its ideas and often its ideals. Because of the
consensus on the importance of cultural property, attacks on it in recent armed conflicts have drawn the attention of the international media. Daesh’s destruction of Palmyra and al-Qaeda’s demolition of mosques and mausoleums in Timbuktu have, quite rightly, sparked international outrage. For those who live in areas of armed conflict, the destruction of cultural property adds another layer of pain to the process of recovery in terms of both money and morale. Cultural property is a precious resource. When conflicts are over, monuments and their equivalents are key to kick-starting tourist-related industries, so cultural property can be crucial to economic regeneration.

Tom Tugendhat: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that although Daesh brutality is obvious in places such as Palmyra, a more common example might be the golden mosque in Samarra, or the ethnic cleansing and the destruction of churches in places such as Mosul? Does he agree that cultural destruction often goes in hand with forms of ethnic cleansing, whether religious or sectarian?

Kevin Brennan: I strongly agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point. Palmyra was visited each year prior to 2011 by 150,000 tourists, and a UNESCO mission to the site in April this year found that the triumphal arch and the temple of Bel had been smashed to smithereens. In such circumstances, preserving and sometimes restoring as much as possible of these ancient structures is crucial to rebuilding. The Bill aims to provide the ways and means to allow states to do so.

In that respect, the offences and subsequent sanctions created by the Bill for damaging cultural property are particularly welcome, as is the introduction of immunity from seizure for cultural property that is being moved to or through the United Kingdom from an area of armed conflict for safekeeping. It is important to note that the UK armed forces already abide by the terms in the Bill and respect cultural property during conflict. The impact assessment that accompanies the Bill shows that their behaviour would need to change very little as a result of the introduction of the Bill. However, ratifying the 1954 convention would send a clear signal to the international community of what we already know at home: that the preservation of cultural property is a priority for the United Kingdom.

As I have mentioned, there are consequences for morale as well as for money when monuments are destroyed and when stone is turned to sand. When it comes to art and architecture, we expect continuity and longevity—a bridge between what was and what will be. Hon. Members will be familiar with the words of John Keats, who wrote about a Grecian urn:

“When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man”.

Just as preserving culture is about projecting pride and history, so the destruction of cultural property is bound up in power and subjugation. Hon. Members might have seen an interview that was given to the BBC by Mirza Hussain last year. In 2001, when he was 26, the Taliban took over his city in Afghanistan and ordered him to destroy the Buddhas of Bamiyan. The Buddhas were up to 55 metres tall and were carved into a cliff face in the sixth century, but the Taliban believed that they were idols.

Among a group of prisoners, Mirza was fed very little, left freezing cold at night and saw his fellow prisoner shot. He was then forced to detonate trucks of dynamite below the Buddhas, and when that did not work, two or three explosions were carried out every day until the Buddhas were destroyed. He said:

“We drilled holes into the statue to plant the dynamite. We didn’t have proper tools. The whole process took 25 days.”

He went on to say:

“I regretted it at that time, I regret it now and I will always regret it. But I could not resist, I didn’t have a choice because they would have killed me.”

I am sure that that will bring to hon. Members’ minds the tragic death of Khaled al-Asaad, the archaeologist who had worked at Palmyra for 40 years and was brutally murdered by Daesh in August last year at the age of 82 for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of Palmyra’s treasures.

That leads me to one of the central concerns about the Bill. We will support it on Second Reading tonight and throughout its later stages. However, although the Bill has been brought forward in the context of the aftermath of the destruction of cultural treasures in recent conflicts, it does not, as I understand it, cover the actions I have described because they were carried out by occupying forces that are not recognised states. I hope that the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but the Bill will not necessarily prevent extremists from intimidating people into complying. In her response to the debate, will she tell us whether that comes within the Bill’s scope or powers?

Tim Loughton: I am genuinely impressed by the hon. Gentleman’s knowledge of Mesopotamian and other archaeology. Indeed, his own party’s Ed stone at the last election could be seen as an homage to the stele of Hammurabi, the great lawgiver of Mesopotamia in the 18th century BC. I want to query his last point, because it may well take another change to the UNESCO convention to take into account the modern phenomena of ISIL and other terrorist groups. Would he support our negotiating internationally to try to get the law brought up to date?

Kevin Brennan: I am sure that the whole House would welcome any measures that were negotiated internationally to cover these horrific crimes. In speaking for the Opposition, I am sure that we would support the Government should they seek to negotiate further international agreements to that effect.

I am conscious of the fact that the Bill will bring the 1954 convention into UK law, as well as give effect to the 1954 and 1998 protocols. In that sense, it is limited in its scope. It is important to point out on Second Reading that, although we all understand the context in which the issue has become more and more pressing in recent years, particularly in relation to what has been going on in modern Iraq—ancient Mesopotamia—and modern Syria, the Bill cannot deal with the perpetrators of such crimes. We may be able to deal with such crimes in other ways. For example, if UK citizens engaged in this activity went to fight on the side of Daesh in Syria, they might well be caught—I am sure that they would
be—by other aspects of UK law, but that does not mean that the penalties available would be the same as those available under the convention in the Bill, including the possibility of a 30-year jail sentence for any breaches.

Chris Bryant: We have focused on trying to stop further outrages. Does my hon. Friend agree that the British Museum plays an absolutely vital role—not only in this country, but in modern Iraq and Syria—in trying to protect many Mesopotamian antiquities? Indeed, the British Museum was in closer contact than anybody else with those who were summarily executed.

While we are being nice to Government Members, will my hon. Friend congratulate the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on the fact that, from the moment he arrived in the House, he has pursued this issue?

Kevin Brennan: It would my pleasure to do so, and it is always nice, as well, to hear my hon. Friend being nice to Government Members.

As I have said, the Bill has been introduced in the context of such events, but it is important to note what it will and will not do. It will not necessarily prevent extremists from intimidating people into complying in the way that Mirza was intimidated into doing in Afghanistan. However, we welcome the ratification of the 1954 convention. It is part of an international project to ensure that we are not faced with gaping craters where great statues once stood. When she sums up, will the Minister be absolutely clear about what the Bill does and does not cover, so that there can be no doubt?

My hon. Friend mentioned the British Museum, which is a wonderful institution. If we are candid, however, we should recognise that our own hands are not necessarily entirely historically clean in relation to the removal of cultural property. That occurred in Britain’s colonial history, and it was used to build British wealth and power at the direct expense of colonised nations. Recent speculation concerning the repatriation of the Parthenon marbles to Greece, as well as campaigns to return the Koh-i-noor diamond to India and the Benin bronze cockerel to Nigeria, shows that the removal of cultural property reverberates through the centuries. I notice that the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is shaking his head.

Tim Loughton: The hon. Gentleman is revisiting an old canard. Will he not just acknowledge that, for example, the Elgin marbles would not exist had they not been saved by the people who endowed the British Museum? The British Museum is a world museum. It is visited by 7 million people, which is substantially more than the number who visit the Parthenon in Athens. These treasures of the world can be seen in the best possible context, rather than decontextualised and open only to the few who would have to pay an admission fee elsewhere.

Kevin Brennan: I will not get into a lengthy debate about the wheres and the what happens.

Chris Bryant: You started it.

Kevin Brennan: I have spent my whole life starting fights and then running away from them. That is what happens when you are quite small.

Occasionally, when we get on our high horse about these things, we should remember that there have been times during the course of history when we have removed cultural property from other states during warfare and, indeed, when we have destroyed cultural property. The convention applies only to events after 1954, so we fortunately do not have to revisit all those times in too much detail; otherwise, before we knew it, we would have SNP Members going on about the Stone of Scone.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We’ve already got it.

Kevin Brennan: I think the hon. Gentleman is going to mention that in his speech.

In that light, the particular attention paid in part 4 of the Bill to the export of property from occupied territory is especially important. With Britain’s history in mind, the ratification of the first protocol could be said to indicate that we have at least learned something from any past transgressions and that the UK is committed to supporting other states in avoiding that sort of event.

I understand—the Minister will correct me if I am wrong—that no one has ever been charged with the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. That brings me to some of the technical concerns about the Bill. Will the Minister say how, if at all, The Hague convention would apply to the conflict in Afghanistan and other such recent conflicts? Likewise, there are concerns that a convention written in the 1950s, of which the most recent component—the second protocol—was drawn up in the relatively early years of the internet, will not sufficiently protect cultural property in digital form. We have come a long way from the days of Keats’ Grecian urn. The success of the landmark legal case against Uber on Friday is part of an ongoing effort to bring legislation up to date in relation to digital advancements, and the Government must bear that in mind. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and I have been busy working away in Committee on the Digital Economy Bill, which is meant to update legislation to reflect the digital revolution.

Lord Stevenson raised that issue during this Bill’s Committee stage in the Lords in relation to how cultural property is defined, and he received assurances from the Minister, Baroness Neville-Rolfe, that the wording was “flexible enough” to encompass technological advancements. If the Minister is willing to do so in her summing up, will she reinforce that reassurance that digital formats will equally be protected and included in the Bill’s definition of cultural property? As the convention dates from 1954, some of the definitions may seem slightly arcane, but some of the finest cultural objects in this country are things such as the archive of the British Film Institute—I have visited it—which can only be described as an absolute treasure trove of this country’s culture. Confirmation from the Government that such cultural artefacts are covered by the Bill, in bringing the convention into UK law, would be very helpful.

I want to ask one or two questions about how joined-up the thinking is. During the Second Reading debate in the Lords, Lord Redesdale mentioned the Ministry of Defence’s plans to create a squad of monuments men—and, presumably, women as well—whose focus would be to safeguard cultural property during armed conflicts. As I understand it, they would be soldiers with archaeology
qualifications and the like. Meanwhile, the Department for Education has been campaigning against so-called soft subjects, leading to exam boards ending archaeology, art history and classical civilisation A-levels. The AQA explained its decision to cut A-level archaeology as follows:

“Our number one priority is making sure every student gets the result they deserve...the complex and specialist nature of the exams creates too many risks on that front”— I am not sure how not offering an exam in a subject will make it any less specialist than it already is. On history of art, the AQA stated that the decision had nothing to do with the importance of the subject and “won’t stop students going on to do a degree in it”.

That logic seems flawed to me. But it does not make a pretty picture overall, let alone a masterpiece, to have the Ministry of Defence wanting more soldiers with knowledge of art history and archaeology and the Department for Education cutting those same subjects from our classrooms, while the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is ratifying conventions and proclaiming that a national priority.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making a very fine speech, but had he spent any time in an officers’ mess, he would realise that art history surrounds people, archaeology is what they are equipped with and history of culture is often what they are eating. I do not feel that there is a need for much more qualification than that.

Kevin Brennan: I have spent a lot less time in officers’ messes than the hon. Gentleman, but I have spent a lot of time in the classroom as a teacher. The loss of those subjects undermines the Government’s stated aims. I will make this next point very carefully, but it seems to me that it should not only be those who have had access to those subjects through private education, who may well form a disproportionate number of officers in the armed forces—[Interruption.] I will allow the hon. Gentleman to correct me that score, but it should not be only those people who qualify for these jobs in the monuments squad that the MOD says is necessary and wants to recruit. Will the Minister therefore indicate which policy is the outlier? I am sure that she will produce a very creative argument to explain everything to the House.

I have outlined some of the issues that need to be clarified, but we support the principles behind the Bill because they firmly chime with our own. At the core of the convention is the belief that we must co-operate to promote human wellbeing. The 1954 convention states that “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world”.

The Labour party has championed those beliefs throughout our history—that everyone is entitled to their culture and heritage and their right to express it, that the success of one is tied to that of all society and that we must work in solidarity with each other because we are all the better for it when we do so.

Given the unfortunate and occasionally ugly tone of political discourse in recent times, the Bill is a welcome reminder of internationalist values and shared civilisation and culture. We have had an increase in attacks since the Brexit vote. In that context, the Bill recognises the importance of preserving our collective past and cultures and the fact that that is now more important than ever, whatever someone’s heritage and background.

The Bill is a signal to the international community not just of our national priorities but of the UK’s remaining willingness to co-operate on an international scale and a recognition that we can often enact change better together. It gives welcome hope that, although occasionally some Government rhetoric may shrink towards little England, Britain still has great aspirations to play a leading role in a rules-based world. The Bill may not be controversial, but it is a small beacon showing that the Government recognise that division is not the way forward, that we have more to gain through co-operation internationally and that we should extend to Syrian people fleeing conflict and seeking refuge the same respect that we give to their ancient architecture and monuments. We will not oppose the Bill; rather we hope the principles behind it will permeate through the Government’s principles.

6.54 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am delighted to welcome the Bill’s Second Reading. As has been pointed out, this is a Bill we have welcomed in the past; indeed, I chaired the Select Committee that considered the draft Bill in 2008, when we subjected it to pre-legislative scrutiny. At the time, we very much welcomed the Government’s intention to introduce it. We pointed out then that it was 55 years since the adoption of The Hague convention and that 118 countries had already signed it. Another eight years have passed since then, and I am proud that the Bill should finally go on to the statute book under a Conservative Government in their second Session in office.

When we took evidence, it was pointed out to us that there had been some examples of damage to heritage assets during the course of the Iraq war, particularly some in the city of Babel, that may have been caused by coalition forces. Although that was obviously not deliberate, it highlighted the importance of stressing the need to protect cultural assets.

Chris Bryant: I have a specific question on cluster munitions. The right hon. Gentleman just used the words “not deliberate” in reference to the fact that often some cultural objects are destroyed in war. Cluster munitions can be so indiscriminate and they spread across a wide area, and so their use is one reason why cultural objects are often destroyed. Is it not incumbent on us now as a country, having given up cluster munitions ourselves, to try to persuade all our allies to do the same?

Mr Whittingdale: I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman’s point. All signatories to the convention should certainly do their utmost to prevent damage to cultural assets and assets that have been identified as culturally important. I would therefore expect our allies who are signatories to adopt that approach as much as we do.

As has already been raised, however, there is a huge gap between what may have happened as a result of actions by forces in the Iraq war and what we have seen being carried out by Daesh in Syria in recent years, in Palmyra in particular but in other places as well. The first priority has to be the humanitarian crisis and
preventing loss of life, but the destruction of cultural assets is hugely damaging. As has been said, they are part of the history and national identity of a people. They are also, potentially, part of their salvation, for when conflict comes to an end cultural assets can represent economic assets from which one can rebuild an economy by attracting people to visit.

Cultural assets are also part of the world’s heritage, and we all have a duty to do our utmost to safeguard that heritage. For that reason, I was delighted when the Government established the cultural protection fund, worth £30 million, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), Chancellor of the Exchequer when the fund was established, and the Education Secretary, who was then Secretary of State for International Development, for their part in agreeing to that, as a large part of the fund can be classified as international aid. I also pay tribute to Neil MacGregor—he has already been mentioned—who was the driving force for the establishment of the fund. He and I launched it together, and, as the director of the British Museum at the time, he took responsibility for the first phase, a £3 million fund administered by the British Museum to send archaeologists into Iraq to advise and help in restoration where damage had taken place.

I was also immensely privileged to meet Dr Maamoun Abdulkarim, who is director-general of antiquities in Syria. He was the boss of Khaled al-Asaad, whom the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) mentioned. Dr Abdulkarim described the courage shown by his colleague, who did not wish to divulge where very valuable artefacts had been concealed and as a result was beheaded by Daesh.

The question of whether Daesh comes under the definition of occupying forces has already been raised. Even if it did, one has to admit that it seems unlikely that the passage of an Act will prevent it from carrying out any act contrary to that, as a large part of the fund can be classified as international aid. I also pay tribute to Neil MacGregor—he has already been mentioned—who was the driving force for the establishment of the fund. He and I launched it together, and, as the director of the British Museum at the time, he took responsibility for the first phase, a £3 million fund administered by the British Museum to send archaeologists into Iraq to advise and help in restoration where damage had taken place.

The more serious concern related to clause 17, which makes it an offence “to deal in unlawfully exported cultural property, knowing or having reason to suspect that it has been unlawfully exported.” As has been pointed out by the legal advisers, there is a huge difference between “having reason to suspect” and “to suspect”, which is causing concern. If the definition of the offence covers “reason to suspect”, it gets into mens rea, as I understand lawyers call it. I will leave it to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) to say more on that subject with considerably greater expertise.

The issue was flagged up for the Committee when we looked at the Bill eight years ago, which is why we suggested a clearer requirement of dishonesty. That is what currently applies in the Theft Act 1968, which carries a penalty of seven years, and in the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, which also carries a penalty of seven years. The Bill introduces a penalty of seven years, and therefore it seems reasonable to ask that the same threshold should be required. I am delighted to hear from the Secretary of State that she is aware of that concern and will have further discussions.

Kevin Brennan: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Is he aware how many people have been convicted under the 2003 Act? My understanding is that the number is very low, and perhaps even zero.

Mr Whittingdale: That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) earlier. The fact that there have been no convictions does not necessarily imply that the Act is not working—it is important to have it on the statute book. I do not believe that this country is full of dodgy art dealers who wilfully ignore the law and deal in plainly illegally exported objects.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Nor should we go around lowering the threshold in order to scoop up innocent people.

Mr Whittingdale: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a perfectly valid point and I agree with him. The art market is determined and supports the Bill. The last thing it wants is for this country to become a place where people can deal in unlawfully exported objects. It is worth bearing in mind that the market is hugely competitive and the third biggest in the world—it was worth something like £9 billion in sales in 2014. I would not like to see it inadvertently put at a disadvantage compared with other markets around the globe. I hope the Government bear that in mind. As I have said, I very much welcome their commitment.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Whittingdale: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I have finished my speech.
7.5 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Scottish National party Members and the Scottish Government very much welcome the Bill and the purpose it serves. The Government can be assured of our support in getting this much needed legislation through Parliament so that we put in place the necessary domestic legislation to enable the UK to ratify The Hague convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict, and to accede to both the 1954 and the 1999 protocols.

I share the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) that a 1954 convention that was last updated in 1999 may lack understanding of what is required in the 21st century, particularly the need to deal with the role of non-state actors in modern conflict in the destruction of cultural heritage. With that caveat, SNP Members are firmly of the opinion that, no matter where it is located in the world, we all benefit from a rich and diverse historical and cultural heritage, and that every effort must be made to protect it in a time of war—and, indeed, at all times. Although there has been widespread parliamentary support for that, going back many years, time has never been found—for whatever reason—to introduce primary legislation to ensure that the UK can fully meet its obligations as set out in the convention and subsequent protocols. Many hon. Members have said that the Bill has been a long time coming—it has been 62 years—and I fear that, had it been delayed any longer, it would be almost as old as some of the artefacts it is designed to protect.

We welcome the fact that that wrong is about to be put right, and that very soon the United Kingdom will join many other nations in tightening up its domestic law on the protection of cultural property in a time of conflict. I happily acknowledge that, despite the Government not ratifying the convention, UK armed forces fully comply with it during military operations, and recognise the blue shield—the emblem that identifies cultural property protected under the convention and protocols. In ratifying the convention and protocol, the UK will formalise the responsibility of its troops when they are operating in armed conflict overseas.

In 2008, when the subject was last debated in Parliament, one of the main concerns was whether such a Bill would constrain our troops on military operations by limiting their freedom to protect ourselves should they come under fire from opposing forces based in a museum or holy place of worship. Back then, the Ministry of Defence appeared to be confident that the passage of the Bill would not be problematic. I was pleased when the then Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), repeated last year that the cultural property convention is upheld across the armed forces. We know that they currently act within the spirit of the convention and are fully compliant with their own statute. Given that the Ministry of Defence was so relaxed about the consequences of ratifying the convention—the ’94 protocol and the ’99 protocol—last year, I trust that nothing has happened to change its view.

If anything, that view should have hardened as the stories and images of the wanton destruction by Daesh of some of the world’s greatest and most important heritage sites in Iraq, Libya and Syria have become widespread. The destruction of temples, churches and mosques, as well as the ancient cities of Palmyra and Nimrud, can be seen only as deliberate and calculated attempts to erase our collective human experience. They were unspeakable and barbaric attacks on thousands of years of human progress and civilisation.

UNESCO director-general Irina Bokova was right when she branded the activities of Daesh as “a form of cultural cleansing”.

What Daesh is doing, in willfully desecrating and pillaging the artefacts in those sites, is a shameful and inexcusable crime against all of humanity. But let us be clear, not everything that Daesh is doing can be dismissed as simply malicious vandalism or an attempt to eradicate all traces of a pre-Islamic civilisation, as there is irrefutable evidence that when Daesh seizes a new city, one of its first acts is to plunder the museums and cultural sites for artefacts to raise much needed cash. Its looting of priceless artefacts is done for profit, and the flood of stolen antiquities being smuggled into the open arms of collectors across Europe and America shames us all.

Michael Danti, a Boston University archaeologist who advises the US State Department on smuggled antiques, said last year,

“What started as opportunistic theft by some has turned into an organized transnational business that is helping fund terror”.

Irreplaceable artefacts are being stolen from an already beleaguered people and are being sold on the black market to an unscrupulous but fabulously wealthy elite, whose money is funding Daesh’s murderous campaign.

I am delighted that the Bill will make it a criminal offence to deal in cultural property that has been illegally exported from a territory that has been occupied during an armed conflict. Such a measure is long overdue and very welcome. We urge the UK Government actively and vigorously to implement the measures outlined in the second protocol of 1999 and bring to justice those individuals who engage in and profit from the illegal and totally immoral trade in stolen ancient artefacts.

As the respected Lebanese-French archaeologist Joanne Farchakh told Robert Fisk of The Independent last year, antiquities from Palmyra are already on sale here in London. She explained that Daesh sells the statues, stone faces and frescoes to the international dealers. Daesh takes the money, hands over the relics and blows up the temples and buildings they come from to conceal the evidence of what has been looted and, presumably, to help to protect the identities of its paymasters—the dealers and collectors across Europe and America.

France Desmarais, the director of programmes and partnerships at the International Council of Museums, has described what has happened in the middle east as the largest scale mass destruction of cultural heritage since the second world war. That has to stop, and hopefully the Bill, by creating a new offence for a person to deal in cultural property, knowing or having reason to suspect that it has been unlawfully exported from occupied territory, will go some way to stopping it. We welcome that. The purchase of plundered antiques in such circumstances is deeply immoral on so many levels, and if the Bill can stop the trade and bring those guilty of dealing in looted artefacts to justice, it will have served much of its purpose.

A people’s cultural heritage is a crucial part of who they are and what they were in the past. For almost all communities, anywhere in the world, it is a symbol whose
importance cannot be overstated. What also cannot be overstated is the social and economic importance that cultural heritage has in helping Syria, Iraq, Libya and others to begin to recover, once Daesh is defeated. I sincerely hope that the Bill will ensure that, post conflict, plans are in place to repair as much of the damage that has been done to the cultural heritage of communities as possible. It is incumbent on us, and the rest of the world, too, to help them to regain those important and socially valuable, tangible reminders of their cultural identity, around which they can repair in peaceful times.

While The Hague convention is specific to times of armed conflict, the work of protecting cultural heritage must also continue in peacetime. In the spirit of the convention, we urge the Government to take this opportunity to return the Parthenon marbles—the Elgin marbles—to Greece where they belong. The passing of the Bill and the ratification of the protocols give the Government an excellent opportunity to lead by example and celebrate the ratification of the convention with a highly appropriate and long overdue gesture.

Finally, let me reiterate the position of the Scottish Government. It is for the UK Government to accede to an international instrument such as The Hague convention and it is important that the same or similar standards are applied across the UK. The UK Government’s Bill contains all the provisions that are necessary to enable implementation of the convention in the UK, while making appropriate provision for Scotland. It is the view of SNP Members and the Scottish Government that it is in the interests of the Scottish people and good governance that the provisions outlined within the Bill should be considered by the UK Parliament, and we will support its passage through this place.

7.15 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly in the debate. As I have mentioned, I may not be able to observe all our conventions, as I will shortly host an event for the Holocaust Educational Trust. That may be pertinent, as it is worth reminding the House that the UK has been in advance of many other nations in dealing with spoliation—the unlawful taking of goods from the Jewish community during the second world war. That issue has been handled well in this country, which bodes well for how we will handle aspects of The Hague convention in the future.

One waits six years for a DCMS Bill and then, like buses, two come along at once. I am pleased that I have been able to speak in debates on the Digital Economy Bill and this Bill. I wanted this Bill for a long time as Minister. When I was an Opposition spokesman, I remember looking forward to its introduction by the Labour Government, but it fell by the wayside as the election approached. I argued vociferously for six years for the Bill, but for some reason the Government’s business managers did not see its importance. I am glad that, under the new Government, they do understand how important it is. Many officials have brought it to fruition, but I wish to mention Hillary Bauer, who originally brought the Bill forward. So long has the process been that she has now retired. Of all hon. Members who have an interest, I wish to pick out in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who has been vociferous about cultural protection. He has engaged with me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) about the issue.

I wish to draw the Minister’s attention to three issues for when she sums up. Having watched the video of her playing keeppy-uppy last week, I know that her summing up will be something to behold. First, I hope that she will make it clear that our own troops will not be at risk under the convention. The convention and the Bill make it clear that it is the intentional destruction of cultural property that comes within their scope—something that our British troops could never be accused of doing. They already act within the terms of the convention, and indeed it is wonderful to hear that the Ministry of Defence is working with DCMS to set up a 21st-century version of the monuments men, made up of people from the Army reserves. I would welcome any information the Minister has on progress regarding that point.

Secondly, on the vexed question of clause 17, my understanding is that the convention has been in place in Germany for the past 10 years and I know of no cases in which art dealers have unwittingly been brought within its scope. The legislation is clear: there must be some degree of suspicion on the part of any dealer before they could possibly be brought within scope. Given the noble profession of art and antiquities dealers in this country, any dealer who had a suspicion that something had been looted or trafficked would immediately alert the authorities, so dealers have nothing to fear from the Bill.

My third point is about the cultural protection fund, which is close to my heart and something for which I campaigned as a Minister—wholly unsuccessfully—on the back of Neil MacGregor, the then director of the British Museum. He said to me early in my time as a Minister that the museum, and many of our other national museums, do extraordinary work in many jurisdictions to support the work of archaeologists and the preservation of antiquities. My campaign was unsuccessful until my hon. Friend the Member for Newark raised the issue. I think the situation in Palmyra also changed the Chancellor’s mind.

I am glad that the Department for International Development has, I gather, stumped up most of the money for the cultural protection fund. It is deeply frustrating that the terms under which DFID operates—the alleviation of poverty—seem to preclude it from helping out in these areas. The fact remains that our national museums do this work all over the world, and it seems to me wholly legitimate that international development funds should supporting the skilling up of people in developing countries in archaeological expertise, as well as the preservation of their culture. We should, without doubt, support that.

I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State to take the cultural protection fund as a starting point for the UK to become an international centre for the preservation of antiquities and the skilling up of archaeological schools around the world. Members in the other place have suggested that we could become a repository—a digital archive—for some of the great treasures around the world, as well as the centre for the blue shields. I urge the Secretary of State to take that up.

Finally, I cannot resist the bait from the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara). He talks about the Elgin marbles. I am afraid he does this great convention and the Bill a disservice by bringing up the Elgin marbles. They were, of course, purchased legitimately in the
19th century. Not only that, they have been preserved to the very highest standards possible in the greatest museum in the world which, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) pointed out, is a world museum that is open to all, free of charge. The Elgin marbles are seen in pristine condition by millions of people. Indeed, they were recently loaned to Russia for even more people to see, which goes to show that the British Museum preserves the Elgin marbles not for any national self-interest, but for the world.

7.22 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the former Minister. I am sure he recalls the many occasions I asked him about this very issue. He did tell me, in answer to a written question, that he intended to legislate as soon as possible, so he will be pleased that this day has now come. The Bill is very important not only for this country but for the protection of cultural property worldwide. We need to play our part to safeguard the centuries-old cultural and religious heritage of the world.

The UK is the only member of the UN Security Council that has not yet ratified the convention. The Bill seeks to change that. Ratification would be an important step towards the UK becoming the first permanent member of the UN Security Council to have ratified both the convention and its protocols. I am very pleased about that.

I am aware that the Opposition, when in government, published the draft Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill in 2008. Many of us regretted that that Bill was not passed then. As the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), said, the Labour Government simply ran out of time, and I am pleased that Labour supports this Bill. Back in January, I called on the Leader of the House to bring forward the Bill in the Queen’s Speech and I am pleased the Government have chosen to do so.

The destruction of cultural capital is a powerful propaganda tool and is part of a long history of demoralising communities. The Opposition spokesman mentioned the Nineveh period, but I have to say that in this country the Vikings started it. Recently, in Syria, we have seen the continued destruction of places such as Palmyra. Indeed, the Bill has been introduced as a result of that continuing catastrophe. It is, however, not the first catastrophe to have taken place.

The Government say that the Bill will ensure that the UK can act, and be seen to act, legitimately according to international law in response to such crises. Baroness Neville-Rolfe said in the other place that the Bill will mean that a UK national who is fighting with Daesh in Syria can be prosecuted in relation to “theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property”.

I do not quite share her confidence. I recently wrote to the Home Office to ask how many people had been charged with terrorism offences committed overseas on their return to the UK in each of the last three years, and was told:

“The number of individuals suspected of involvement in acts of terrorism or criminal matters who are arrested and then formally charged is recorded and collated in the Home Office Quarterly Statistical Bulletin which was last published on 22 September 2016. These statistics do not disaggregate arrests, charges and convictions relating exclusively to overseas returns.”

So the answer is that the Home Office does not know. I am not sure how it would be possible to identify a UK national fighting with Daesh in Syria and prosecute them in relation to “theft, pillage or misappropriation of, and any acts of vandalism directed against, cultural property” when the police are not able to prosecute jihadis returning from Syria.

The Bill is particularly important to me because it is very important to a large number of my constituents. Cyprus has witnessed its cultural and religious heritage now fall prey to the policy of pillage, destruction and desecration instituted after the illegal invasion of the island in 1974, and during the subsequent and continuing occupation. Churches, chapels, monasteries, archaeological sites, libraries, museums and private collections of religious art and antiquities in the occupied areas of Cyprus have been systematically looted. The art treasure market of the entire world has for years been flooded with Cypriot antiquities from the occupied part of Cyprus. Sculptures, ceramics, figurines, statuettes, tools, weapons, frescoes, religious paintings and other works of art from Cyprus are routinely found at auction houses around the world, in particular here in London. I sought to intervene on my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) to gently remind him that London is not only a centre of antiquities; it is likely to be a significant place for illegal antiquities, too. Research undertaken by The Guardian found the illegal market to be flooded with antiquities, and there are various reasons why the Government have not been able to stop it.

Since the 1974 invasion of Cyprus, 77 churches have been converted into mosques after being stripped of all icons and church furnishings. The others have been pillaged, destroyed, used as stables, warehouses, garages, arsenals, mortuaries, hotels, art galleries and night clubs or simply abandoned to their fate. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and I know this very well, having visited many of these locations. That number, however, does not include 50 sacred buildings whose condition is still not known because they are located in zones under direct military control, and others that have been demolished. Numerous archaeological sites in the area have not escaped theft and despoliation either.

Other reasons for alarm are the removal and selling of mosaics, frescoes and thousands of icons, which are now practically lost in the international market of smuggled art works. This phenomenon is unfortunately common to many areas of the middle east, as they experience war and conflict. One of the more clamonious examples is the church of Panagia Kanakaria, which held a work of art of inestimable value. Its apsidal mosaic from the Justinian period was one of the few images in the eastern Mediterranean that had survived the fury of the iconoclasts. In 1979, it was removed, stolen and broken up. It represented Christ in the arms of the Virgin seated on
a throne, surrounded by the archangels Michael and Gabriel and thirteen medallions with the faces of Christ and the apostles. Four pieces re-emerged in Europe in 1988. A Turkish art dealer, Aydin Dilmen, offered them to the American antique dealer Peggy Goldberg, who in turn offered them to the Paul Getty Museum in Malibu. The museum was savvy enough to realise there was something wrong and went to the American authorities. I am pleased to say that these pieces have now been returned and can be seen in the Byzantium museum in Nicosia, which my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate and I have also visited. That is just one example of destruction and illegal sale. At this point, I would like to congratulate my constituent Dortos Partasides on his work documenting churches on the island. His invaluable work documents the destruction that has occurred over many years.

Returning to the Bill, London is one of the world’s largest antiquities markets and is considered a natural destination for looted goods. There have been UNESCO conventions on antiquities since 1970. At the beginning of the year, the UN Security Council banned trade in artefacts illegally removed from Syria since 2011 and from Iraq since 1990 in an effort to stop the funds of terrorism groups. Enforcement in countries such as Syria is near impossible for obvious reasons, but in the destination countries, including the United Kingdom, it is up to law enforcers to establish when those objects left conflict zones.

Just as I am concerned about the prosecution of theft and vandalism of cultural artefacts, I am concerned about how the Government intend to legislate on what constitutes “an illegal antiquity”. A common practice by smugglers is to claim that an antiquity has been in their family for a long time, and so it could not have been smuggled. They also sometimes say, “I bought it at auction, and there is no paper trail.” Or they could say it came from a private collection in Jordan or Lebanon a couple of years ago. How do the Government propose to prove that any of these treasures were smuggled out during a conflict?

That said, I support the Bill, which will greatly assist in not only tackling further looting, but ensuring that stolen property such as that stolen from Cyprus will be returned to its legal and rightful owners, because it will make it an offence to deal with cultural property that has been illegally exported from territory occupied during an armed conflict and it will provide powers for the forfeiture or seizure of such cultural property.

7.31 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Speaking as co-chair of the all-party group for the protection of cultural heritage, it is a pleasure to support the Bill. One of the main reasons for establishing the APPG was to support the ratification of The Hague convention and it is great to see the aim fulfilled in the passage of the Bill.

We MPs are probably creating an impression that seems far removed from watching a Formula 1 grand prix, but I would like to draw an analogy. We can share the same enthusiasm as is expressed in Mexico City when the grand prix takes place. Until this Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill is enacted, the UK is, let us say, at the back of the international grid. That is significant; that is what this is about. We are at the back of 127 countries that have already ratified The Hague convention. We are catching up with those already on the grid that have got away in the race, to ensure that we fulfil our international obligations.

We can recognise through domestic legislation, through our compliance with European legislation, through sanctions and through other legal forms that we have played our part in seeking to hold to account those who are illegally trading in arts and antiquities, but while we were out there seeking to take a lead, just as we did with the cultural protection fund, it was somewhat embarrassing that we were not ratifying The Hague convention. We had taken an international lead in this area in many circles, but we are now playing catch-up in this particular respect. Now we are on the grid, showing that we mean business.

We were at the back of the grid regarding the permanent UN Security Council members. That is particularly significant because the Government have in the past flirted with ratification. I would like to pay tribute to Members who have expressed cross-party concern which has helped to ensure that we have got where we are today. I pay particular tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), who got behind the wheel. He was there as poacher turned gamekeeper, scrutinising legislation and seeking to bring it to fruition. He responded to calls from across the House. From my limited experience as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in various Departments, I know how difficult it is to make progress in managing the business and get a Bill into a legislative programme in a second Session of Parliament. That is why we must pay my right hon. Friend a particular personal tribute for bringing us up to speed.

Over the passage of time, we benefit not only from the ratification of The Hague convention, but from inclusion of the first and second protocols. That has helped us to get into pole position on the grid with other Security Council members. I hope that speedy passage of the Bill will mean that we get there first—although 60 other countries have got there before us! Still, among the permanent members we will get there first, which is important.

I am not an expert in many things, including arts and antiquities, archaeology or history, but I have developed a particular interest in cultural property and heritage, as I have seen and started to understand the impact of the destruction of such cultural property—yes, in relation to recent scenes in Syria and Iraq, but also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) said, what has happened in northern Cyprus. When we visited northern Cyprus, we saw that appalling acts of desecration and pillaging had taken place and not been properly taken account of. Given that it is an occupied territory, we should try to ensure that that happens if any objects come into this country’s jurisdiction.

I am concerned, as doubtless we all are, about human dignity. That is what gets my passions and convictions going. It is important to see the appropriate link between the trafficking of human beings and the trafficking of cultural property. There is the same disregard for people, for their faith, for their community and for their identity. Indeed, there is a cross-over from funds from trafficking providing further reasons for exploitation—whether it be of property or of human beings. It is therefore appropriate that the Secretary of State introduced the Bill today, given that she guided the Modern Slavery
Act 2015 through the House so well. She will fully appreciate the connections that I mention and the concern for human dignity.

As museums and other such places see architectural monuments, works of art and manuscripts mainly as aesthetically significant and pleasing, it is important to realise, as already mentioned, that the destruction and looting of these items is an offence to human dignity. The culturally unique way in which communities relate to their property demonstrates that a property can be much more than an isolated monument or piece of art. It can be very much part of a cultural narrative, authored by the people who live among that cultural heritage. This is what makes the whole issue of cultural property a wider project of concern for us all, particularly when we see the ravages of destruction. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon quite rightly said, within the ravages, the debris and the ruins, we must look at the hope and opportunity of restoration. That is why the cultural protection fund is so important. That is why within the second protocol, although the voluntary fund administered by UNESCO takes some hits from different commentators, it still plays an important role. The funds going into it are important for the future, so we should contribute.

I must pay tribute to Tasoula Hadjitofi. I got to know her through her concerns about her home in Famagusta, which is still frozen in time. With all the pillaging that has gone on, it is as though her whole identity has been frozen. Through the “Walk of Truth”, she looks at areas of conflict and sees examples of property being pillaged and destroyed, but she tries to view what has happened as a means of bringing the communities together. She provides routes to reconciliation, which is something that we should commend.

I welcome the fact that at last the UK will be able proudly to bear its international duty to protect. My interest, as already alluded to, is a constituency interest. A considerable number of Cypriots live here in the UK, who have seen for themselves wanton destruction and pillaging of their heritage. That is why it is so important that we join together and make sure that this long-fought battle to ratify The Hague convention comes to fruition. We look forward to the unification of Cyprus in the long term, but in the meantime, we must make sure that people are held to account when they seek to profit from the proceeds of crimes of destruction.

Let me touch on the Bill’s wording, which has been a matter of concern to the Association of Art & Antique Dealers and others. Clause 17 in part 4 needs careful attention, and we will no doubt hear more from Members about it. It is worth noting that the National Police Chiefs Council lead for heritage and cultural property crime, who should be commended and for whom resources for the enforcement effort are important, said that given that dealers in cultural property are expected to conduct due diligence checks, they would be unlikely to fall foul of the objective test of “reason to suspect”. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport impact assessment is in agreement with that, which is perhaps not surprising.

We could also look at precedents. Section 338 of the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 is relevant, and honest dealers have been able to rely on the same form of words: “reason to suspect”. It is not dissimilar to the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, which makes reference to the terms “knowing or believing”. It is similar, too, to the sanctions order referenced in respect of Daesh, both the Iraq sanctions order and the Syrian sanctions order, while there is also the example of article 11c in the EU Council regulations. Again, the language is similar, mentioning “reasonable grounds to suspect”, so there is parity with the Bill.

Other countries have enacted the ratification of The Hague convention in their own domestic law, and the wording of section 17 of New Zealand’s Cultural Property (Protection in Armed Conflict) Act 2012 in respect of reasons to suspect someone of committing an offence is similar to the wording of clause 17 of the Bill. That is worth pursuing in Committee.

As has been pointed out, the Bill has limitations. For instance, it does not cover the international law definitions in relation to Daesh, because we do not recognise Daesh as a state. I appreciate that, and I appreciate that the gaps are filled by the sanctions orders and other legislation, but now that we are up to speed and in pole position in relation to the first and second protocols, I urge the Government to ensure that we work collaboratively, on a cross-party basis, to create a third protocol to deal with the activities of Daesh.

I pay tribute to the cultural protection fund, and look forward to seeing it do good work in the coming weeks, months and years. I also pay tribute to the work of Lieutenant Colonel Tim Purbrick, who has set up a property protection working group of so-called monuments men. He is doing fine work, and we must ensure that the Ministry of Defence gives his group all the support that it needs.

I could go on, Mr Speaker. I have a long night’s sleepout waiting for me at Lords cricket ground in support of the good work of the homelessness charity DePaul UK. However, I recognise that other Members probably do not want such a long night, and would prefer me to cut my speech short. Let me end by saying that I strongly support the Bill. We have waited a long time for it, but better late than never. It is certainly worth it, because it protects not only property but human dignity.

7.42 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): As such a lowly Member, I was not expecting to be called at this point, so thank you for doing so, Mr Speaker.

I warmly welcome the Bill. Eighteen months ago, a select band of us—a happy few—engaged in a Backbench Business debate. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) made a particularly notable speech, which led to his being described as the Gertrude Bell of the House of Commons. I felt like a pupil sitting at the feet of the professor; the House may have the same experience later this evening.

During that debate, we called for three things. First, we asked that a great wrong be righted and that, after all these years, The Hague convention be brought into our law. Secondly, we asked for something to be done to enable us to make a practical contribution to staying off extremism in the middle east and to build capacity among those who were on the front line of protecting culture. We built on the idea of many others before us of creating a national cultural protection fund. Thirdly—this was equally important—we asked the Government to
escalate the issue of cultural protection, tackling the illicit trade in antiquities and, more generally, to take seriously Britain’s role as a world leader in cultural diplomacy. The list of courses include cultural protection, which is currently centre stage.

It is greatly to the Government’s credit that they listened, and just 18 months later, they have acted on each of those concerns in a way that no previous Government have done. I thank the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, and the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), and my right hon. Friend the Members for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who pushed these measures through when they were in office. I thank cross-party colleagues such as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—continuing our earlier bromance—and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, as well as, of course, the current Secretary of State and Ministers.

I am grateful to persistent and eloquent supporters outside Parliament. The most notable, in my view, was the former director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, who was a superb supporter on all three of the fronts that I mentioned earlier. Indeed, he was the instigator of many initiatives.

When we first raised these issues two years ago, the legitimate retort from many, especially in the media, was to ask why we should be interested in the destruction of mosques, libraries, souks and documents, when the real tragedy in places such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen was an unimaginable human tragedy: the murders, the rapes, the starvation, the displacement and the ethnic cleansing. One answer, of course, was that the scale of the destruction in recent years was so great. It was the greatest in any era since the end of the second world war, and some of the greatest sites of our shared civilisation were affected: Aleppo, Mosul, Nineveh and Palmyra. We were facing one enemy, Daesh, that was doing more to destroy the world’s cultural heritage than any other group since the end of the second world war, if not before.

The destruction that we saw 18 months or two years ago has continued, if not escalated. Only last week, we were discussing the conflict in Yemen, and a corollary of that has been the destruction of much of the great city of Sana’a, with its wonderful tower houses, any one of which would be considered one of the great monuments of other parts of the Gulf.

The second answer to that question—which is, perhaps, more important to me and which is relevant to what we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes)—is that there was a human dimension. That was brought home to me earlier this year when Nadia Murad, whom many Members will remember, came to Parliament on a couple of occasions to speak to us. When I talked to her afterwards, she surprised me, given all that she had been through—she had been raped and beaten, and her family members had been killed in front of her—by emphasising the destruction of the culture of the Yazidis as much as her own physical and mental torture. That, she said, was because she felt that there was a wider attempt to rob future generations of any connection with their past and that extremists were trying to impose their own contorted views on her and her people and eradicate their ancient culture.

We should bear in mind that some of the people who have been on the frontline of protecting our culture have faced a very great penalty for that in recent years. We have already heard about Professor al-Asaad, the wonderful creator and director at Palmyra, who lost his life while trying to defend treasures there. I have been told other stories over the last few years, and one in particular stuck with me. It concerned a guard who used to take money and open the gates at Nineveh and whom members of the British Museum had known for many years. He was a wonderful elderly gentleman who refused Daesh entry and was subsequently executed. To compound the tragedy, every male who attended his funeral service a few days later disappeared and was executed, including all the known staff of that wonderful site.

There are countless other stories. Only recently, when I had the pleasure of bringing to Parliament the first archaeologists and curators who had come here from Iraq, thanks to the cultural protection fund, and who were later given some press attention in The Times and The Daily Telegraph, they had to remain anonymous owing to the grave risk that, even when they returned to fairly safe parts of Iraq, extremists would target them because of the work that they were doing.

The last reason why I felt that this was important then—I think that it remains so today—was not just the destruction, but what was happening to the material that was being systematically looted and stolen. This is a revenue stream for Daesh, the Assad regime and others. As Neil MacGregor so eloquently put it, sculptures were being turned into tanks, which should worry us all. The channels used by that trade are at times very dark and very dangerous. As we have already heard this evening, they are interwoven with the drugs trade, the arms trade and human trafficking. The lines established in Iraq, from which much of the material is moved, were established by Saddam Hussein and his regime. Action here matters to us all, whether or not we care about the cultural aspects, because it is part of tackling extremism and part of tackling serious organised crime and the funding of terrorism.

While this cultural barbarism at times appears utterly hopeless, and we have to temper our remarks about what we can possibly achieve, I always believed, as did many others, that it was possible to do something and that we could make a modest national contribution while also, as part of that process, enhancing our reputation as a country in the region and around the world. That is what this Bill really does, and we have to see it in tandem with the cultural protection fund, which is an important aspect of our cultural diplomacy. It gives us above all a firmer foundation on which to speak on these issues of cultural diplomacy and protection. It makes practical contributions to those on the frontline who are already appreciating it thanks to the £3 million we have already given to the British Museum, with more on the way. Lastly, it helps to tackle the illicit trade through the offences in the Bill and in other ways, on each of which I shall say a few words.

This is not a panacea, of course, and it does not apply to some of the crimes happening in Syria and Iraq today, but it is very relevant because it is an historical wrong that was a drag on our international reputation. The leading experts in this field, such as Neil MacGregor, who are really diplomats and ambassadors...
for Britain in the cultural sphere, felt it was a shame and a stain on the UK’s reputation that we had never done this. So purely by doing it we enhance our reputation in the world. That enables us to play a stronger role in this. So purely by doing it we enhance our reputation in the UK’s reputation that we had never done for Britain in the cultural sphere, felt it was a shame and a stain on the UK’s reputation that we had never done for Britain in the cultural sphere.

Robert Jenrick

The cultural protection fund is a huge step forward. It is the first major fund of its kind. François Hollande has copied us and has supposedly created a €100-million fund, which is about to be launched. I am pleased we were in the vanguard of doing this and would like us to do more.

I am very pleased that what we have done was able to be ODAed because that makes a difference; it recognises that this is not just about art and architecture, but about economic regeneration post-conflict and healing the wounds of conflicts and bringing cultures together. We must view this as just the beginning, however, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) said; I would like us to see it as seed capital for us to be bolder and for this to turn into a major lasting national achievement.

Most of the Bill is about the illicit trade, and we must shrink the demand for these works in the world today. Contrary to some of the remarks made in passing this evening, the UK is very good in this regard. We are not the epicentre of the illicit trade in art and antiquities; that is to be found in the Gulf states, in China, in Russia and in other parts of the world. The UK is actually at the forefront of having responsible dealers and major auction houses who care about their reputations, but that is all the more reason for us to do this and lead the world in enforcement.

I want to say a few words about the offence of dealing unlawfully in exported property. We must tackle this issue, and I would like to think that the Minister would give this further thought on Report. This matters because, if we want to shrink the illicit market, we have to defend the legitimate market. The great auction houses such as Christie’s and Sotheby’s actually have very little interest in maintaining their antiquities departments; antiquities account for 1% or less of the turnover of such auction houses. It would be very easy for them and for experienced legitimate dealers to walk away from this trade, and that would matter because it would push more objects on to the black market and on to smaller auction houses that lack the compliance and legal and regulatory structures to do due diligence properly, and it would push out good dealers and give trade to those we are more concerned about.

Essentially, there is no right or wrong answer when doing due diligence. The way an auction house assesses property is by making a judgment. A whole range of material comes forward for any piece being sold in antiquities sales. Some will come from blogs that are emerging; others from states such as Egypt that automatically challenge the sale of every piece being sold in the UK. An experienced professional—whether a dealer, a specialist in an auction house or someone in an auction house legal department—has to weigh up the factors and make a judgment. I would not want this Bill to criminalise people who ultimately make honest mistakes. That would set us back in our task of shrinking the illicit market and empowering the people at the forefront of getting this right. The Minister kindly reassured me in a letter she sent to Lord Judge that answers some of these points, but I would like this to be further considered on Report. It is extremely important that the due diligence being carried out is proportionate and does not dissuade legitimate businesses from participating in the market.

We have heard from other Members that no law is worth legislating for if it is not properly enforced. Sadly, enforcement in this area is very poor. The Met police have a small art and antiques squad. At different times, it has had between one and three members, and in the present has, I think, one and a half people. They are excellent individuals; I have met some of them and my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) and others know some of them, and I do not want to criticise their professionalism, but they are very constrained. This has been viewed as a sort of Lovejoy area of the criminal market that does not really matter; it is considered to involve harmless rogues in a barn in Suffolk. However, this is serious crime that is linked to human trafficking, the drugs trade and the funding of terror, and the policing needs to match that.

I hope the good intentions set out in this Bill will lead to a prod to the Met police and others to beef up their policing as soon as possible, or else our efforts in this Bill will ultimately be in vain.

I welcome the Bill and am grateful to the Government for doing this. It is to their huge credit that we have finally done this. In debates such as that last week on the conflict in Yemen, we hear of cities of enormous value such as Sana’a being destroyed and of cultures under threat, and we need to do something about it. It matters because it is about protecting our shared international heritage and ensuring extremists never win.
The establishment of the £30 million cultural protection fund, our sponsoring of UN resolution 2199 designed to stop Daesh from transforming cultural destruction into financial profit, and the work of the joint military cultural protection working group all bear witness to the UK’s ongoing commitment to protecting cultural property in spheres of conflict. It is worth emphasising that the successful passage of this Bill would make the UK the first permanent member of the UN Security Council to ratify the convention and accede to both its protocols, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) pointed out. As the House has heard, that has been in the offing for more than 10 years, so it is perhaps a good time to recognise the work of those who prepared the original draft Bill, which bears a striking similarity to the one we are considering today.

As I said, this is a timely moment to be passing such legislation. We recently saw the first person be charged by the International Criminal Court for damaging mankind’s cultural heritage in Timbuktu. Our minds are also concentrated by Daesh’s appalling targeted destruction of cultural sites in north Africa and the middle east, including St Elijah’s monastery, historic libraries and pretty much any other representational art that it comes across.

To talk about the importance of cultural property in conflict is obviously not to undermine in any way the essential truth that the preservation of human life will and should always be the prime motivating factor in the conduct of military operations. That truth is enshrined in the doctrine of military necessity that formed a vital part of the original convention and is strengthened in the second protocol, which we will also be approving should we pass the Bill. The Bill will make a strong statement about the UK’s commitment to the future at a time when such protection is more necessary than ever.

Finally, the Bill, and the convention it ratifies, deals largely with state-to-state conflict. In offering my support, I would be grateful to hear more from the Minister about how the Government will continue to work to provide a similar level of protection in more asymmetric conflicts involving non-state actors such as Daesh. The states and groups that destroy monuments and artistic expression are trying to hide. They are trying to destroy pluralism, thought, inclusivity and diversity in order to reimpose a childishly simplistic, inverted form of good and evil. I do not need to tell the House that cultural heritage enables all peoples to see themselves clearly as individuals and as members of an historically coherent and culturally significant whole. The House will remember the words of Heinrich Heine, now engraved into the ground where the Nazis burned thousands of books in 1933:

“where they burn books, they will in the end burn people”.

8.2 pm

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) but, with all due respect, if there are two speeches to which the Government should pay particular attention, they are those of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). Despite the excellence of the other speeches from both sides of the House, they are the two that really hit the problems on the head.

The Bill is welcome and I wholeheartedly support it, subject to one or two concerns that I shall touch on briefly. The first relates to the definition of cultural property, as mentioned by several hon. and right hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport also touched on the topic in her opening remarks. The definition in the Bill lacks sufficient clarity. I accept that the Bill refers us to article 1 of The Hague convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict but, taking the example of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), film and so on were I suspect not considered when the convention was drawn up in the early 1950s. New forms of heritage—if that is not a contradiction in terms—have emerged since then, and the Government need to give the definition of cultural property a little more thought. That is not an aggressive point; I simply want to point out something that it would be sensible for the Government to look into.

The other area that also needs more thought is the absence of any definition of an occupied territory. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon mentioned that when he was Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the west bank, the Golan heights and perhaps another place—

Mr Whittingdale: East Jerusalem.

Sir Edward Garnier: East Jerusalem—they were designated as occupied territories. However, the world has moved on and, as my right hon. Friend correctly pointed out, there are now other parts of the world that could, either as a matter of fact or as a matter of law, be considered occupied territories. The Government must be more open, or at least clearer, about the definition of an occupied territory.

There is, however, perhaps an even more important matter that needs resolving, which involves the level of criminal intent for the offences described in clause 17. In framing my remarks, I am grateful for the help I have had from the British Art Market Federation, the British Antique Dealers’ Association, Mr Hugo Keith QC, and Professor Janet Ulph of the University of Leicester school of law. I stress, however, that what I shall say is my interpretation. If I have got things wrong, that is my fault and not the fault of those who valiantly tried to explain the matter to me. You will be glad to hear, Mr Speaker, that I cannot for reasons of time go into the detailed legal analysis undertaken by them, but I sent the Secretary of State a copy of my Keith’s opinion, which carefully explains why the use of “reason to suspect” in the context of this Bill is unwise and unfair.

Clause 17(1) makes it an offence to “deal in unlawfully exported cultural property” that the dealer knows or has “reason to suspect…has been unlawfully exported.”

So far, so good. No one can support the dealing in unlawfully exported cultural property when they know it has been unlawfully exported, but the mens rea—criminal intent—required under the provision has caused concern in the London art market. The worry is that “reason to suspect” will place an unacceptable and stifling burden on the market. That aspect of the Bill was touched on only briefly in the other place but was not taken up by the Government.
Clause 17 creates an offence of dishonesty, carrying with it a sentence of imprisonment of up to seven years, as well as the destruction of reputation. The problem that worries me arises from the provision that relates to the state of mind, which must be proved before the defendant can be convicted. Dealing in prohibited property knowing that it has been unlawfully exported, the first offence created by clause 17, is simple, easily described, uncontroversial and comes within well-established and clearly understood principles of criminal law. Dealing in such prohibited property believing that it has been unlawfully exported would also be an equally straightforward offence. “Knowledge” or “belief” identify, in such prohibited property believing that it has been unlawfully exported, the first defendant can be convicted. Dealing in prohibited property having reason to suspect may be prohibited. Just because he may in good faith decide that his suspicions have allayed and proceed to deal in the property. For a defendant who has, or may have, acted in good faith to be convicted of an offence, my hon. Friend is right to say that this is a rare, and wholly unusual distinction, and I quietly urge the Government to think again.

As drafted, this provision abandons the principle that it is the defendant’s state of mind that must be “criminal”, whether defined in terms of belief or even suspicion, for an objective test: whether he had reason to suspect. What may arise from an offence defined in that way can be quickly described. The defendant may be offered property which, because of the circumstances, he may have reason to suspect may be prohibited. Just because he wishes to proceed with caution, and to avoid committing a criminal offence, after sensible inquiry and investigation he may in good faith decide that his suspicions have been allayed and proceed to deal in the property. For a defendant acting in good faith to be convicted of an offence of dishonesty is a novel proposition. It may be suggested that the offence is not intending to apply to such an individual, but only to the individual who, notwithstanding any investigations he may make, turns a blind eye to reasonable grounds for suspicion, but that is not what the clause says. The offence can and should be defined in terms of the defendant’s belief or suspicion, and currently it is not.

Surely the question to ask is whether the defendant did or did not believe, or did or did not suspect. The more powerful the evidence that he had reason to suspect, the more likely it is that the jury would conclude that he did indeed believe or suspect, and that the offence is proved. In short, where the defendant did indeed have “reason to suspect”, that would provide the evidence to establish that he did indeed believe or suspect that he was dealing in prohibited property. That however goes to the evidence available to prove guilt; it should not define the offence.

It would be unusual for an offence of dishonesty to be created that did not focus on the defendant’s personal state of mind. It would also be unusual to create two offences in a single provision which make provision for separate and distinctive forms of criminal intent: knowledge, which is entirely subjective; and reason to suspect, which is not. Any summing up in an indictment which alleges the two offences as alternatives would not be straightforward. Worse still, it would be unwise, and it would make for significant complexity in any trial for two statutes with the same objective—the protection of the cultural heritage of every nation—not to define criminal intent in exactly the same way.

Section 1 of the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003 states—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I do apologise to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but when he leant down like that, I thought it was because he was approaching his peroration. That may have been a triumph of optimism over experience.

**Tim Loughton:** Ungallant.

**Sir Edward Garnier:** One often sees the type currently drafted into clause 17 when a defendant has to rebut a presumption—the possession of certain items in sexual offences or drugs offences. It is also to be found under certain rarely used disclosure offences, such as under section 119 of the Companies Act 2006—something that we speak about so frequently in the clubs and bars of Market Harborough. As regards the substantive criminal law and the making of a substantive criminal offence, my hon. Friend is right to say that this is a rare and wholly unusual distinction, and I quietly urge the Government to think again.

As drafted, this provision abandons the principle that it is the defendant’s state of mind that must be “criminal”, whether defined in terms of belief or even suspicion, for an objective test: whether he had reason to suspect. What may arise from an offence defined in that way can be quickly described. The defendant may be offered property which, because of the circumstances, he may have reason to suspect may be prohibited. Just because he wishes to proceed with caution, and to avoid committing a criminal offence, after sensible inquiry and investigation he may in good faith decide that his suspicions have been allayed and proceed to deal in the property. For a defendant acting in good faith to be convicted of an offence of dishonesty is a novel proposition. It may be suggested that the offence is not intending to apply to such an individual, but only to the individual who, notwithstanding any investigations he may make, turns a blind eye to reasonable grounds for suspicion, but that is not what the clause says. The offence can and should be defined in terms of the defendant’s belief or suspicion, and currently it is not.

**Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con):** Can my right hon. and learned Friend think of any other examples of mens rea of this type that are in use?

**Sir Edward Garnier:** Ms Bell, I think, has spoken on my behalf. I was just advising you, Mr Speaker, about section 1 of the 2003 Act, which I know you want to hear about.

**Mr Speaker:** Indeed.

**Sir Edward Garnier:** At least I am right about that. It states: “A person is guilty of an offence if he dishonestly deals in a cultural object that is tainted, knowing or believing that the object is tainted.” This Bill says that it is “an offence for a person to deal in unlawfully exported cultural property, knowing or having reason to suspect that it has been unlawfully exported.”

For the reasons that I have been briefly explaining, I suspect that the 2003 Act provides the better wording. The provision in this Bill is not following well-established principles relating to the prosecution of offences of dishonesty. I am concerned that the Bill, which is concerned with the same issues, fails properly to take into account that set of principles. As drafted, it may result in the prosecution and conviction for an offence of dishonesty of a defendant who has, or may have, acted in good faith.

It is one thing for a defendant to be convicted of handling stolen goods where they have been shown to have known or believed the goods were stolen—the law is clear and the defendant knows when he is convicted that the jury was sure he knew or believed the goods were stolen—but under this Bill, as currently framed, a convicted
defendant cannot be sure that his conviction reflects his actual state of knowledge or belief and that he was not convicted simply for lacking curiosity. Absence of curiosity may be regrettable and sometimes stupid or negligent, but it should not lead to a conviction, with all the reputational damage that flows from it.

Beyond that, I urge the Government to consider what effect this provision will have on the art market here in London. As was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark, who speaks with the advantage of being not only a lawyer, but a former director of Christie’s, this will have a stifling effect. It may be that there will not be many convictions or many arrests, but the mere threat of the reputational damage caused by this possibility is enough to put the mockers on this valuable and entirely legitimate aspect of the London art market. The art market will go elsewhere and the crooks will get away with it. If we want to catch the bad boys, and if we want to inhibit this wrong and immoral market, why not stick to the 2003 wording or something similar to it, rather than allowing this Bill to contain an error of principle which could confound the interests of all of us who wish to see the destruction and the dealing in cultural objects that have been stolen brought to an end?

8.16 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am delighted to follow my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier), peroration and all. I declare an interest, as the chairman of the all-party groups on archaeology and on the British Museum, and as a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

As we have all agreed, the Bill has been a long time coming—it is 62 years old. As I glance around the room, I hazard a guess that that makes it older than anybody in the Chamber, now that my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) who, in his relatively short time in this House, has made a big impact in this area. It is really important now that we get on with it. We need to gain the moral high ground and become the only one of the five permanent UN Security Council member countries to ratify both the protocols and the convention.

I do not want to be churlish, because I really welcome the Bill and the commitment behind it. I absolutely praise all those who have played an integral part in this. Many of them have been mentioned today. I am talking about Sir Neil MacGregor, the former outstanding director of the British Museum, and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) has left.

Sir Edward Garnier rose—

Tim Loughton: I am delighted to be put right by my right hon. and learned Friend, although we would never know it, Mr Speaker.

I also pay tribute to what is left of the Labour Opposition and the remarkable dexterity of the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) who, in a debate on cultural artefacts, managed to mention Keats, Uber taxi drivers, the temple of Bel and an attack on private education. He certainly gave us his money’s worth, even if he does not have many mates with him to support this excellent Bill.

I very much welcome the Bill. We know that the original protocol and convention were passed in 1954, largely as a reaction to the destruction of cultural artefacts of the second world war. We know that the second protocol, which came about in 1999, mostly followed in the wake of great destruction in the former republic of Yugoslavia. We recall the familiar scenes at UNESCO world heritage sites such as the Mostar bridge, which really brought home the futility of war, and the destruction of our culture, which we just do not get back. That protocol recognised that the desecration of cultural property could become a war crime and identified the blue shield scheme, which many Members have referred to. It also set up an international non-governmental organisation advisory body to the intergovernmental committee for the convention. There were therefore great hopes in 1999 that we might follow suit. We have made reference to the heritage Minister Andrew McIntosh, who brought forward in 2004 a commitment to ratify the convention. That led to a Bill in 2008, which was scrutinised by the Select Committee, led by my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). The Bill was supported by the Ministry of Defence and the whole heritage sector, but the excuse given for what happened was that it became overshadowed by the financial crisis and ran out of parliamentary time. Then in 2011, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), as a Minister, reconfirmed the Government’s commitment to ratification at the “earliest possible opportunity”.

In 2014, there was another great body blow when the Cabinet Committee said that it had not been able to grant drafting authority for a Bill—not even a handout Bill. The commitment of successive Governments was in question when their warm words were not followed up by definitive action. At long last, that earliest possible opportunity has arrived. I particularly pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon—he is not in his place at the moment—whose personal commitment to this matter and lobbying of the powers that be at No. 10 has made this Bill a reality.

The announcement in last year’s autumn statement of the £30 million cultural protection fund together with a summit of heritage experts really gave flesh to that commitment. The legislative wheels grind frustratingly slowly, and, as with the second protocol, it has taken the cultural cleansing atrocities in Syria and Iraq to concentrate the minds of those in a position to bring forward this ratification today.

Why is this important? At a time when we are seeing horrific scenes of women, children and men being bombed, murdered and executed in the most grotesque fashion by Daesh in the tragic conflicts in both Syria and Yemen, why should we be concerned about a bunch of old rocks and relics? My hon. Friend the Member for Newark described just a couple of examples. Let me mention Professor Assad, the director of antiquities at Palmyra, which I was privileged enough to visit just before the civil war in Syria—it is the most magical archaeological site imaginable, and I speak as someone who studied Mesopotamian archaeology and who has visited many sites—and the guards at Nineveh. These people gave their lives because they appreciated and understood the importance of protecting culture as the...
spirit of a nation, and that it makes mankind what it is and is what separates mankind from savages. As the Heritage Alliance put it:

“The destruction of cultural capital is a powerful propaganda tool and is part of a long history of demoralising communities by destroying the symbols of their nationhood.”

As Irina Bokova, the director general of UNESCO, said, this is “cultural cleansing”, and we must view it as such and in the same terms as trafficking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Many antiquities can be purchased on the black market. Does the hon. Gentleman think that Governments should—either directly, or indirectly through a third party—try to purchase some of those antiquities and keep them for posterity for the years to come?

Tim Loughton: It is an interesting prospect, but I would much rather track down and prosecute the people who benefit from trafficking these antiquities. We do not want to set up a legitimate market, with Governments paying money to criminals. There are other ways of tracking down some of these important antiquities. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Newark that London has, by and large, a very legitimate market in antiques and antiquities. Obviously there are a few people who are the exception to that, but London has an excellent reputation compared with many other parts of the world. Hopefully, this Bill will prompt the United States Government to ratify the protocols, as it is suggested that they have been looking for a lead from a significant military ally.

We have heard several examples of recent high-profile tragedies involving cultural terrorism: the 2015 looting of the Mosul museum; the vandalism of the Nergal Gate at Nineveh; and the destruction of the temple of Baalshamin at Palmyra—separate to the triumphal arch of Palmyra, which the hon. Member for Cardiff West conflated it with, but an important monument to that civilisation. All those tragedies were at the hands of Daesh. Indeed, Palmyra should be treated as a crime scene, given the damage that was done there. Fortunately, there was not as much damage as Daesh might have inflicted on it had it been given more time.

In other continents, shrines were deliberately destroyed by Boko Haram in Nigeria. We have heard one bit of good news, which is the first prosecution in the International Criminal Court of Ahmad al-Mahdi for his destruction in Timbuktu, the centre of Sufi Islam. He directed the destruction of 15th and 16th century Sufi tombs and the burning of the library in Timbuktu. His verdict just last month gave out a nine-year prison sentence for that cultural vandalism. That sends out a very important message, and we need to see many more people being brought to justice to emphasise just how important a crime against humanity this is.

Jim Shannon rose—

Tim Loughton: May I continue a little, because I know that the Minister will want to respond on this?

There has also been mention of Yemen. Again, I was fortunate enough to be able to visit Yemen just before the civil war broke out—I am not a precursor to these civil wars, but I was in the country when it was a slightly less dangerous place to be. There are four UNESCO world heritage sites in Yemen: the historic town of Zabid; the old walled city of Shibam, the Chicago of the desert, with 16th century skyscrapers—the earliest skyscrapers in the world—made out of mud brick rising out of the desert; the magical walled medieval city of Sana’a itself; and the natural world heritage site on the island of Socotra. These sites are going largely under the radar. We hear more about the carnage being waged in Yemen, but little about the important cultural background to that country. Those are just a few of the sites that we know about.

Jim Shannon: May I take the hon. Gentleman’s mind back to when he mentioned Mosul? When we visited Iraq, and Irbil in particular, we had the opportunity to meet Archbishop Nicodemus of the Orthodox Church. He was archbishop in Mosul, and he informed us that his church had been destroyed and the cross taken down. Where there was a church is now a car park. When Mosul is liberated, does the hon. Gentleman think that those responsible should be made accountable for their dastardly deeds?

Tim Loughton: Those people should absolutely be held accountable and brought to justice. I am sure that when it is safe to do so, that important religious establishment will rise phoenix-like again, and I am sure that the people of Mosul of all faiths will want to see that happen as that city gets back on its feet after the terrible things it has been through.

Across the world, spread across 165 countries, we have 1,052 UNESCO world heritage sites, of which 814 are cultural. I have mentioned some of the sites, but those are just the ones we know about. Some 90% of archaeological sites in Iraq have yet to be excavated, and many will have been looted over recent years. There is also the issue, as we have heard, of how cultural looting by Daesh and others finances terrorism.

The destruction of Syria’s archaeological sites has become catastrophic. There are unauthorised excavations going on, and the plunder of and trafficking in stolen cultural artefacts is an escalating problem. Many of the objects have already been lost to science and society, and the context in which many of them are being dug up in unsupervised conditions will be lost forever. The trading in looted Syrian cultural artefacts has apparently become the third largest trade in illegal goods worldwide. It is big business. It is estimated that looting is Daesh’s second largest revenue source after oil sales. There are around 4,500 archaeological sites including UNESCO world heritage sites which have been under the control of Daesh. Hopefully, fewer or none of them will continue to be, as the counter-offensive against Daesh succeeds in Iraq in particular.

Iraqi intelligence claims that Daesh alone has collected more than $40 million from the sale of artefacts. It is the equivalent of what the Taliban were doing in Afghanistan through the cultivation and sale of heroin to feed markets in the west. We took that very seriously and it was a priority for the invading and occupying forces in that country, yet the devastation and profit involved in the plundering of these archaeological sites and the sale of antiquities does not seem to register nearly as clearly on the world’s radar. This is an important part of putting that case firmly on the world’s agenda.
We are facing a quadruple threat. First, jihadists are looting these sites, claiming some sort of religious reason for doing so. They are entirely hypocritically profiting from their destruction on international black markets. Secondly, it is alleged that President Assad is knowingly selling antiquities to pay his henchmen. There are videos showing Assad’s soldiers at Palmyra some time ago ripping out grave relief sculptures and smiling for the cameras as those are loaded on to trucks. Thirdly, the Free Syrian Army in its various guises is looting antiquities as a vital source of funding. Fourthly, an increasingly active part of the population is involved in looting. Ordinary people are looting Syria’s cultural heritage because they have no jobs, income or tangible economic prospects and are increasingly turning to age-old plundering techniques, in some cases looting to order.

As a result of the activities of those four different parties, the fantastic culture of Syria and Iraq in particular is being systematically plundered, yet that hardly features on the west’s radar. We also have to face the consequences of the financing of terrorist organisations through the plunder of antiquities. We look forward to a day in the future when peace in some form comes to this region, but the looting also threatens to deprive Syria in particular of one of its best opportunities for a post-conflict economic recovery based on tourism which, until the conflict started, contributed more than 12% of national income.

It is important for the United Kingdom to be passing this legislation, as we have one of the most professional and strategically thinking heritage communities in the world. The Bill will enable the UK’s soft power and diplomacy agendas to position the UK as an international leader in demonstrating a supportive and facilitating approach to the protection of cultural property. Post-Brexit—something that has not been mentioned this evening—we need to promote our extensive cultural wealth and network of contacts through world museums such as the British Museum to re-forg[e] new relationships beyond the EU. The respectability and gravitas of having signed up to the world’s protection protocols gives us considerably more strength and credibility in doing so.

We have heard about the £3 million which has been given to the British Museum to bring Iraqi archaeologists and restoration experts to the UK to help train them in how to reconstruct their country after the war and the conflict are over and ISIL has been driven out. London hosted the unveiling of the replica of the Palmyra arch, which then went on a world tour—a fantastic example of rescue archaeology and how, in the face of the cultural vandalism, we will rebuild these important heritage sites. I particularly welcome the proposed property protection unit in the Army. The Foreign Secretary and I have already said that we would willingly volunteer to be part of such a force and go out to the middle east to help the new monuments men and women, but they will be much better than the original monuments men.

I gave this example once before, but the extraordinary figure of Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, who came to the House 10 years ago, led the hunt for the treasures looted from the Baghdad museum in 2003, after the allied invasion. He led an investigation into the looting of the Iraq national museum, from which many thousands of priceless treasures disappeared. Probably the most priceless of those was the 5,000-year-old Warka vase—the first representation of the human face in an art form in stone. After the good works of Colonel Bogdanos, a clapped-out red Toyota appeared outside the Baghdad museum, the boot was opened and in a box was a vase in 20 pieces, which turned out to be the Warka vase—what people had forgotten was that, when the German archaeologists dug up the Warka vase, it was in about 20 pieces and was then glued together. Extraordinary work by an American reservist lawyer with a small team of people reconstructed so many thousands of the important artefacts that had been taken from the museum in Baghdad. We can do even better, and we have the expertise in the British Army, British academia and our museums to play a role even greater than that played by the heroic Colonel Matthew Bogdanos.

May I end, or approach my pre-peroration, Mr Speaker, with a few questions for the Minister? I welcome the £30 million cultural protection fund, as everybody else who has spoken today has. It will help to build capacity to foster, safeguard and promote cultural heritage in conflict-affected regions overseas, but what sort of projects does she envisage it being used for? We know about the £3 million for the British Museum. What happens after the three years to which that £30 million has been devoted?

What about more proactive protection measures than just retaking sites, tracking down looted artefacts and carrying out reconstruction? Can we do a lot more to try to prevent these things from happening in the first place? There were tales in the middle east of the residents of a town, in the face of ISIL, linking hands around some of their important monuments to try to protect them—huge bravery in the teeth of such savagery. Surely we could do more to make sure that we get there before the terrorists and that the terrorists are deflected.

When will we hear further about the Army working group? How many people is it likely to include? The excellent Lieutenant Colonel Tim Purbrick, who gave a presentation to the all-party group on archaeology, is hugely impressive and hugely keen, and he wants to get on with it. Perhaps the Minister can give us a progress report on when we might see some tangible results.

Baroness Neville-Rolfe, in the other place, told peers that work was going on in the Department to consider “what cultural property should be covered in the UK”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 6 June 2016; Vol. 773, c. 584.]

Perhaps the Minister can update us on what progress has been made on that, and on when we can expect a definitive list.

Then, of course, there is the thorny issue of when cultural property is attacked by terrorist organisations such as Daesh or Boko Haram that are not covered in the Bill because they are not covered by the protocols to the convention. Effectively, we are asking whether the Minister will pursue the possibility of a third protocol. I know we are only just about to sign the first and second protocols and the convention, but if we are to bring the convention up to date, that will require international co-operation to counter those terrorists who are not part of states.

Penultimately, the heavy workload on the excellent Metropolitan police art and antiques unit has been mentioned. If the Bill is to be effective, that workload will be increased, yet there has, as I mentioned, been only one prosecution to date under the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003. Will the Minister give
some assurances that that unit, which is the responsibility of the Home Office, will be properly resourced so that it has enough people with the skills and training to track down the minority of criminals who should have been tracked down before now?

Then there is the issue of scheduled ancient monuments—archaeology in the ground. There are some 20,000 scheduled ancient monuments in the United Kingdom, but they are not included in the proposed list because they are not graded in the same way as listed buildings, for example. What added protections are there for those monuments, given that they are not specifically covered in the Bill?

What is the future of the blue shield scheme, which the Secretary of State described as the “cultural equivalent” of the Red Cross, as it is currently a completely voluntary organisation that is also, to some extent, undermined by the lack of a central team to co-ordinate its activities and avoid duplication? I think she is supportive of the excellent work by Professor Peter Shaw of Newcastle University, who has done so much to champion this whole cause.

Finally, I cannot resist echoing a point raised, slightly impertinently, by the hon. Member for Cardiff West: how does it help to find the archaeologists of the future, who may go into the Army to be part of the new team of monuments men, when we are about to lose the A-level in archaeology? How are we to find the expertise that is so essential to carry out the terms of the legislation that we are belatedly but thankfully scrutinising today? Will the Minister, as a result of these deliberations, have a conversation with her colleague the Secretary of State for Education to see what can be done to keep that important subject on the curriculum? I studied archaeology at school to A/O-level. I did not, however—I am sorry to burst the hon. Gentleman’s balloon—go to a private school. It was an important subject then and it is an important subject today, across so many areas.

This is a really important Bill. It may be specialist in nature, but it has been pored over, in various forms, for the past 62 years, in expectation of this day. We now, at last, need to get on with it.

8.42 pm

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to rise to support the Bill. As my hon. Friend for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) said, the previous Labour Government put this issue on the political agenda in 2004 and pushed a draft Bill in 2008. The Bill is long overdue, 62 years after the convention was first brought forward. As has been made very apparent during this debate, cultural property is not just bricks and mortar—it is the very fabric and soul of society and our history. It deserves our prioritisation, our attention and our protection. As has been elucidated, unfortunately we do not have to look too far, even today, to see examples of wilful cultural destruction, from Daesh’s destruction at Palmyra and al-Qaeda’s demolition of the mosques and mausoleums in Timbuktu, to the destruction and churches in Mosul, which, as the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) said, goes hand in hand with ethnic cleansing.

We have heard some excellent speeches. The right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale)—who is, I believe, particularly to be congratulated on bringing this Bill forward—gave a moving account of the courage of Khaled al-Asaad, who laid down his life in the protection of the Palmyra site. Not only is there wilful destruction of such cultural property, but Daesh and others are profiting from the proceeds.

The right hon. Gentleman, among others, made a pertinent point about clause 17 and the difference between “knowing” and “having reason to suspect” that cultural property was illegally acquired. He called for a clearer requirement on dishonesty that exists in similar provisions in legislation such as the Theft Acts. I am sure that the Minister will provide us with an assurance that the threshold is not low to scoop up innocent people but rather ensures that prosecutions are brought against anyone who has not conducted their due diligence. Only a single prosecution has been brought under the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, and it has been criticised for its low threshold. I hope that the Minister will stick to her guns on that.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), who spoke on behalf of the Scottish National party, made some excellent points about the plundering of cultural artefacts by Daesh and the role of the European art market.

The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who is not in his place, was full of self-deprecation about how unsuccessful he was as a Minister in introducing the proposed legislation, but he welcomed, as we do, the cultural protection fund. He was right to point out that the British Museum is free to visit, and that is thanks to the last Labour Government, who acknowledged that there should be no class barrier to accessing and participating in culture. Unfortunately, he showed none of the humility that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West called for in recognising some of the less desirable aspects of our history with regard to our colonial past.

The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made an impassioned case for the Bill in relation to illegal antiquities from Cyprus that turn up in London, the biggest art market in the world. It is vital that we enforce against that here, because it is so difficult to do so in war zones such as Syria and in Cyprus.

Similarly, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) said that it is important that we ratify not only the convention, but the two protocols, to bring us into line, finally, with other Security Council members and to ensure that we are at the front of the pack of the five permanent members.

The hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was rightly praised by a number of hon. Members for the role he has played in the Bill’s progress. He pointed out that a great wrong is finally being righted, and he is to be congratulated on his persistence. He spoke in particular about those on the frontline who risk their lives to protect their living histories and about why our cultural diplomacy and how we back it up through our legislation and the cultural protection fund are so important. He was also right to say that the Bill is symbolic.

The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) pointed out that protection is more necessary than ever and that there should be similar protection in conflicts that involve non-state actors. I hope that the Minister will address that in her response.
The right hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) called for greater clarity on the definition of cultural property and pointed out that many new forms of heritage have been developed since the 1950s. Greater clarity is also needed on the definition of occupied territory, given that there are many different forms of it in the world, with Crimea being an interesting example.

Last but by no means least, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) praised the renowned dexterity of his hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West in his opening speech. The hon. Gentleman said that it was important that we hurry up and get on with the Bill, so that we can lead the way and be the first of the five permanent members of the Security Council to ratify the convention, not only to secure and promote London’s reputation as the centre of the international art market, but to prompt other states to ratify the convention and to prosecute those who hypocritically profit from trade on the international black market and, in some cases, as he pointed out, loot to order.

We welcome the Bill and the fact that the Government have finally made time for it. The ratification will put the UK at the forefront of international cultural property protection. The hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West has asked me to thank Ministers for allowing him to meet the Bill team in preparing our response.

Will the Minister assure us that legitimate art dealers will not be caught up by clause 17? In her opening remarks, the Secretary of State said that she did not think that that would be the case, but can the Minister be more explicit?

Will digital formats be protected? My hon. Friend Lord Stevenson said in the other place:

“Who could, these days, expect to understand, debate and discuss the culture of any country or time without having regard to the moving image?”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 28 June 2016; Vol. 773, c. 1476.]

We appreciate how tricky it is to capture the spirit, purpose and language of an instrument that was drafted more than 60 years ago, while creating a relevant and effective regime for the present day, but we would appreciate the Minister’s comments on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West will probe further the issues raised by several Members about mens rea, but we are generally supportive of the Government’s position, which would require effective due diligence by art dealers in relation to clause 17. Finally, we ask the Government to think again about the removal of art history, archaeology and classical civilisation A-levels, for which my hon. Friend has passionately made the case. They are vital if we are to enforce the measures in the Bill and promote our cultural diplomacy across the globe. We are pleased to support this Bill on Second Reading.

8.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): It is with great pleasure and pride that I close the Second Reading debate on the Bill. This piece of legislation has been a long time coming, and I pay tribute to the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) for his success in securing a slot for the Bill this Session. The debate has shown us that there is cross-party consensus in the House, as there was in the other place, on this Bill, and that we are all working to achieve the shared goal of protecting our cultural heritage.

I thank Members of the House who have, over a number of years, pushed for the Government to ratify the convention and accede to its two protocols. I would like to give a special mention to my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and to the work of the all-party group on cultural heritage. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for her campaign when the Labour party was in government.

I thank all the stakeholders who have helped the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to bring the Bill before this House, particularly Professor Peter Stone, Professor Roger O’Keefe, Neil MacGregor, and Michael Meyer of the British Red Cross, who have all worked closely with the DCMS for many years on the subject. In addition, I thank the police, the Ministry of Defence, the armed forces, and Historic England and its counterpart agencies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for their support in bringing forward this Bill. The art market and the British Art Market Federation have also been effective in working with the Department to highlight the Bill’s impact on an important sector of our economy. The Government appreciate and support the work of all those stakeholders to keep the Bill in the spotlight, enabling us to have this well-informed debate.

We have had a good debate that has covered many aspects of the Bill, and I would like quickly to address some of the key points. The two main theses of Syria and the mens rea clause were raised by many. I will deal with some of the specific issues that Members have raised, but some will need to be dealt with beyond the Chamber, so I hope that colleagues will bear with me.

Syria is a complex matter, and we need to remember what the Bill does and does not do. The Bill enables the UK to ratify the convention and both its protocols, delivering a strong message that the UK will not tolerate illicit dealing in cultural property. The Bill applies to the situation in Syria, although its application is limited in part because the UK does not recognise Daesh as a state and because Syria has not ratified the second protocol. However, UK nationals fighting with Daesh could be prosecuted for serious violations under clause 3, because article 15(1)(e) of the second protocol covers property protected under the convention, which Syria has ratified.

Many Members raised concerns about clause 17. It is important to note that the Bill will not require the art market to change how it operates. The matter was not raised on the Floor of the House during scrutiny of the Bill in the other place, but I understand that there is concern in the House. As such, I would be happy to have a meeting with anyone who wants to discuss the matter further. In addition, the Secretary of State and I will meet the chairman of the British Art Market Federation on Wednesday.

If I may, I will explain the Government’s position on clause 17. As dealers should be carrying out due diligence for any piece of cultural property that they wish to buy and sell, in accordance with industry standards, we do not consider that the legislation imposes any extra burdens on those in the art industry. In order for a criminal case
to proceed, the prosecution must be satisfied that there is enough evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction, and that there is enough evidence that prosecution is needed in the public interest. Where there is credible evidence to suggest that an object may have been unlawfully exported, we consider that a dealer would not be acting in good faith if they proceeded in a deal involving that object unless further due diligence were undertaken to rebut that evidence. On that basis, we do not believe that honest dealers should be concerned about the risk of prosecution.

A question was asked about whether the definition of the mens rea exists in other legislation. The answer is yes. The Iraq and Syria sanctions orders create similar offences with similar penalties, using as the mens rea the very similar standards of “reason to suppose” and “reasonable grounds to suspect”. The art market has continued to operate successfully while complying with the Iraq and Syria sanctions orders, so we see no reason why that should be any different in relation to the offence under the Bill. The Government’s view is that the sanctions orders provide the most appropriate models for the offence created under the Bill, given the particular and very serious risk posed to cultural property during times of armed conflict. However, we have listened to the concerns that have been raised, and we are very happy to meet anyone to discuss this matter further.

I will turn to the specific points that colleagues have raised. The hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), like the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) in her summing up, mentioned the issue of digital forms. The reassurance that the noble Baroness Neville-Rolfe gave in the Lords remains true—this was repeated by the Secretary of State in her opening speech—which is that the rare and unique film or music can be included in the scope of the Bill. The hon. Member for Cardiff West also mentioned the issue of recent conflicts, including about how the Bill will apply in Afghanistan. That country has not yet ratified the convention, so the Bill’s application there will be limited.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage started this Bill, so I will finish it for him. He raised the issue of the monuments men. The Bill continues to enjoy the full support of the MOD and the armed forces with regard to the monuments men and women. The MOD has consulted international partners to identify best practice, and it has tasked the Army with examining the best means of delivering the unit. Initial thoughts suggest a small unit of up to 20 personnel from across all three services. I look forward to updating colleagues further in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) raised the question of Cyprus. I think we all agree that the division of Cyprus continues to cause difficulties across a range of issues, and that the most effective way to resolve them is through a just and lasting settlement. It remains important to ensure that the illegal export of cultural property is tackled and the property returned to its legal owners.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate for his support, and I welcome his sporting comparison with Formula 1. As he knows, I am hugely competitive, and the idea of our being the first permanent member of the UN Secretary Council to ratify the convention and the two protocols thrills me enormously. To keep the motorsport analogy running, we in the Department are the drivers on that grid, but the car has very much been built and developed by the Members of this House, including by my hon. Friend.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newark has been rightly praised by all colleagues for his role on this Bill. He made the point that we are not the epicentre of illicit trade; nor do we want to be. He spoke with great knowledge about our art market, and about how the Bill may have an impact on auction houses. He will be aware that the market is very much self-regulated, and that is how it should remain. He will also be aware that the art market itself, through its codes of due diligence, sets the common principles of practice in dealing, with a checklist for dealers. The Bill will not change that. Regardless of whether they are large or small houses, dealers should always be concerned about whether cultural objects have been lawfully exported from any territory. Let us be clear that the dealing offence applies only to a very small but very special category of cultural objects—those which are of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Sir Edward Garnier) for their comments and support. My right hon. and learned Friend raised two additional points about the definitions of cultural property and of occupied territories. On occupied territories, it is for the Foreign Secretary to decide on a case-by-case basis. On the other definition, article 1 of the convention defines cultural property, but we will shortly hold a round-table meeting of experts to consider what cultural property should be covered in the UK.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham was right to pay tribute to the International Committee of the Blue Shield, a voluntary organisation made up primarily of cultural heritage experts keen to mitigate damage to cultural heritage during and after conflicts and natural disasters. My Department is grateful for the support the ICBS has given in shaping the Bill.

The cultural protection fund is work in progress. My hon. Friend asked some specific questions about its future application. I will ensure he gets updated on that on a regular basis.

This debate has shown how important cultural heritage is to all world citizens. The Bill offers the UK the chance to demonstrate its world leadership in the protection of
business is sent a clear message of condemnation to those who intentionally destroy cultural heritage in times of conflict and those who seek to profit from the illegal trade in cultural property and heritage of occupied territories. Combined with the cultural protection fund and the existing legislative framework designed to tackle illicit trade and terrorism-related activities, the Bill is another positive step towards ensuring our cultural heritage is protected for future generations. I commend it to the House.

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

CULTURAL PROPERTY (ARMED CONFLICTS) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).
That the following provisions shall apply to the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords]:

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 17 November.
(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and up to and including Third Reading
(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.
(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.
(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings
(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill (including any proceedings on consideration of any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—[Christopher Pincher.]
Question agreed to.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION
Ordered,
That Dame Rosie Winterton be appointed to the House of Commons Commission in place of Mr Nicholas Brown under the House of Commons (Administration) Act 1978, as amended.—[Michael Ellis.]

Business without Debate

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

TERRORISM PREVENTION AND INVESTIGATION
That the draft Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (Continuation) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 4 July, be approved.—[Christopher Pincher.]
Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: We now come to motions 5 and 6, which relate to new Committees of the House. I suggest that they be taken together.
Ordered.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION
That Alistair Burt, Mr Alistair Carmichael, Maria Caulfield, Joanna Cherry, Jonathan Edwards, Michael Gove, Peter Grant, Andrea Jenkyns, Jeremy Lefroy, Mr Peter Lilley, Karl McCartney, Mr Pat McFadden, Craig Mackinlay, Seema Malhotra, Dominic Raab, Emma Reynolds, Stephen Timms, Mr John Whittingdale and Sammy Wilson be members of the Exiting the European Union Committee.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE
That Liam Byrne, James Cleverly, Mr Nigel Evans, Marcus Fysh, Mr Ranil Jayawardena, Sir Edward Leigh, Chris Leslie, Shabana Mahmood, Toby Perkins and Sir Desmond Swayne be members of the International Trade Committee.—[Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]

Mr Speaker: We now come to motions 7 to 25. I understand that there is a wish to take motion 18 on the Justice Committee separately. With the leave of the House, we will therefore take motions 7 to 17 together.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS
Ordered,
That Wendy Morton be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and Dr Poulter be added.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY
That Paul Blomfield and Jonathan Reynolds be discharged from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and Albert Owen and Anna Turley be added.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT
That Liz Kendall and Jim McMahon be discharged from the Communities and Local Government Committee and Rushanara Ali and Melanie Onn be added.

DEFENCE
That Richard Benyon be discharged from the Defence Committee and Jack Lopresti be added.

EDUCATION
That Stephen Timms be discharged from the Education Committee and Lilian Greenwood be added.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
That Valerie Vaz be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Kerry McCarthy be added.

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT
That Jo Churchill and Rebecca Pow be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Glyn Davies and Matthew Offord be added.
F O R E I G N A F F A I R S
That Yasmin Qureshi be discharged from the Foreign Affairs Committee and Ian Murray be added.

H E A L T H
That Julie Cooper, Andrew Percy, Emma Reynolds and Paula Sherriff be discharged from the Health Committee and Heidi Alexander, Luciana Berger, Rosie Cooper and Andrew Selous be added.

H O M E A F F A I R S
That Victoria Atkins be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Byron Davies be added.

I N T E R N A T I O N A L D E V E L O P M E N T
That Mrs Helen Grant be discharged from the International Development Committee and Paul Scully be added.

—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Justice Committee

9.2 pm
Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,
That Chris Elmore and Dr Rupa Huq be discharged from the Justice Committee and Kate Green and Keith Vaz be added.

This motion is the decision of the Committee of Selection. It respects the wish of the Labour party in electing those Members to this Committee.

9.3 pm
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I rise to object to the appointment of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) to the Justice Committee. I informed the right hon. Gentleman's office this afternoon of my intention to do so.

I am aware that this is not a conduct debate and will therefore try to limit my remarks to why I believe the right hon. Member for Leicester East is at this time unsuitable for a role on the Committee to which he has been nominated, and to matters already on the public record and in the public domain. I am sure that should I cross the line or if my remarks are out of order, you will be as quick as always to advise and correct me, Mr Speaker.

I put on record that I have no objection to the appointment of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). In my view, it is unfortunate that her appointment has been linked with that of the other Member in question.

Mr Speaker, since I have been in this House, and on almost a weekly basis—from memory, it is usually on a Wednesday around about noon—you have reminded us how important the public perception of the workings of the House and the behaviour of its Members are in fashioning the public’s opinion of Parliament and our whole democratic system. You were quoted only last week, following the hugely successful Nottinghamshire event, as saying:

“There is a lot of evidence that people have a low opinion of politics and politicians”.

I agree, Mr Speaker, and that is unfortunately true. I do not believe that the right hon. Member for Leicester East joining the Justice Committee will do anything to enhance the reputation and perception of Parliament among the public; indeed, it will do the opposite.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am a member of the Justice Committee. I am also a member of the Labour party. As the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) said, it is the Labour party’s choice to put my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) on the Committee. What right does the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) have to tell the Labour party who to put on our Committees?

Andrew Bridgen: If that is the right hon. Gentleman’s belief, I suggest he speaks in the debate on behalf of the right hon. Member for Leicester East. Representing a Committee of the House reflects on this House. As a Member of the House, I have a right to object.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether you could clarify to the House what the rights of Members of other parties—parties that do not have nominating
Mr Speaker: It is the House that appoints to the Committee, and it is for the House to decide. It is on that basis that these matters are brought to the House and subject to motions moved by the Committee of Selection. Of course, as the right hon. Gentleman’s long experience will tell him, it is normal and commonplace for these matters to go through without objection, but it is perfectly orderly for someone to object if he or she so wishes.

Andrew Bridgen rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to the hon. Gentleman—he will continue his speech in a moment. He himself anticipated the possibility that the Chair might take an interest if he were to cross the line between what was legitimate and orderly to say and what was not. Thus far, the hon. Gentleman has observed that distinction and, on that basis, I am content for him at this stage to continue.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is absolutely right that we have procedures, but we also have conventions, which evolve. The convention that has evolved in the House, as far as I am aware, is that each of the parties, within their own ranks, decides their members of the Committees, although the whole House votes, rightly or wrongly, on who the Chairs of the Committees should be. Therefore, gratuitously for a Member to try to disrupt that convention is extremely unfortunate, even if it might be just the right side of the Standing Orders.

Mr Speaker: I entirely understand what the right hon. Gentleman is saying. I am not insensitive to him or to his point, which he has made with his usual force and eloquence. That said, a convention is one thing and a binding rule is another. I must simply make the point that, at this stage, the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) is in order. He may have offended the sensibilities of the right hon. Gentleman, Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) is in order. He may have offended the sensibilities of the right hon. Gentleman, but he is at this stage in order.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Speaker. I am pleased that so far the speech is so good.

An allegation in the Sunday Mirror, with supporting video footage, implied that the right hon. Member for Leicester East abused his position in public office—

Mr Spellar: It is very interesting that the hon. Gentleman should cite the tabloid press which has, from time to time, taken an unhealthy interest in his activities.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): That got disproved, and he is not the one who is up for the Justice Committee.

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr McCartney, calm yourself. Be quiet, young man. We do not need to hear from you. You add nothing and you subtract from the proceedings. Mr Bridgen is perfectly capable of addressing these matters to the best of his ability and according to his own lights. He does not require a sedentary interjection from you.

Andrew Bridgen: I am here to try to address matters pertaining to the reputation of this House. If the right hon. Member for Warley (Mr Spellar) wishes to make light of that, it is for his conscience, not mine. I am here to make my speech and force a vote, in which he will be at liberty to make his opinion known.

In July this year, the Home Affairs Committee published a report calling for the decriminalisation of soliciting by sex workers and of sex workers sharing premises. It also looked at the use of poppers. The Committee, at the time, was chaired by the right hon. Member for Leicester East. Following the much publicised exposé in the Sunday Mirror, he decided—belatedly, in my view—to resign from his position. But here we are, only a relatively few weeks later, and the same Member seeks a position on the prestigious and influential Justice Committee while matters relating to his recent resignation remain unresolved.

I wrote to Scotland Yard on 5 September to establish whether a crime had been committed by the right hon. Gentleman with regards to the allegation of conspiracy to supply a controlled substance. I received a letter, dated 9 September, from Commander Stuart Cundy of the specialist crime investigation unit, stating that an assessment of the information had commenced and that, following that assessment, a decision would be taken on the most appropriate course of action. No course of action has yet been determined by Scotland Yard, so a possible police investigation still hangs over the right hon. Gentleman.

Also on 5 September, I wrote to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards with regard to the right hon. Gentleman. An investigation was instigated and then immediately suspended, as is the procedure, pending the results of the police assessment. Should Scotland Yard decide in due course not to investigate the said Member with regards to potential criminal activity, the parliamentary standards investigation will commence immediately.

It is fair to say that the right hon. Member for Leicester East has quite a history regarding parliamentary standards. He was subject to extensive inquiries by Elizabeth Filkin, the then commissioner, into allegations of misconduct in 2001 and 2002. He was suspended from the House for one month in 2002 for breaches of the MPs’ code of conduct. I do not intend to list all the right hon. Gentleman’s brushes with parliamentary standards as I do not wish to detain colleagues longer than necessary.

Further to my letter to the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, in which I urged Scotland Yard to liaise with Leicestershire police, it has been stated that four witnesses have confirmed that they were recently interviewed by Leicestershire police and that their inquiries have been going on for at least a year. Those inquiries concern allegations that the right hon. Member for Leicester East abused his position in public office—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. He will know that I take advice on these matters. Having treated of matters that are very much within the public domain until now, his speech has strayed from there. I have consulted on the matter and he is now treating of matters that are not in the same category. He must desist.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have raised concerns with you about the conduct of the right hon. Member for Leicester East historically—
Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. Let me say clearly to the hon. Gentleman, and in terms that brook no contradiction, that he would be unwise to go into those matters. He has written to me and I have written back to him. I explained to him factually—factually—in a manner that cannot be disputed or gainsaid that it is not for the Speaker of this House to seek to persuade someone to step down as the Chair of a Committee because of suspicions that some people might have about him. That is not the role of the Speaker of the House of Commons. If the hon. Gentleman were a more experienced Member, he would probably be aware of that fact. I urge the hon. Gentleman to focus on those matters which it is proper and legitimate for him to raise, and not upon those which it is not.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you. Mr Speaker, you have often said that this place must reflect the society for which we make the laws—I agree with you. I respectfully point out to the House that in any other sphere of activity, a candidate with so much hanging unresolved over him would be very unlikely to be considered for such an important office. If the right hon. Gentleman were in the Chamber today, I would ask him to stand down from his nomination, but he is not, so I ask the House to reject his appointment. Otherwise, we cannot blame the great British public for having a low opinion of its politicians and its politics; we can only blame ourselves.

In conclusion, I will leave the House with this question. If the right hon. Member for Leicester East thought himself only last month not fit to be a member of the Home Affairs Committee, and given that the matters relating his resignation are, as I have explained, unresolved, what makes him think that he is a fit and proper person to be a member of the Justice Committee this month?

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Before my hon. Friend draws his remarks to a conclusion, some correspondence has been referred to this evening. I wonder if he will say whether it is possible to publish that correspondence to ensure that hon. Members on both sides of the House have an opportunity to consider all of the facts.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is nothing to do with the debate, as I have just been advised by the Clerk of the House. Don’t frown at me, Mr Berry. I know the facts and you’re about to learn them. That is nothing to do with the debate tonight—point one. Secondly, there is no uncertainty or dubiety whatsoever about the correspondence between the hon. Gentleman and me. Indeed, I do not think there is any uncertainty at all about the advice that was proffered not just by me but by the Clerk of the House. Whether he wishes and is astute enough to take that advice is another matter.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend’s failed attempt to help in this debate.

It is clear that the right hon. Member for Leicester East felt the need to resign last month from the Home Affairs Committee. I think it would be a huge mistake for this House now to place him on the Justice Committee when he has so many questions to answer. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to vote against his appointment this evening.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 203, Noes 7.

Division No. 73 [9.18 pm]

AYES

Afriyie, Adam
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Ashworth, Jonathan
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, Richard
Berry, James
Betts, Mr Clive
Bingham, Andrew
Blenkinsop, Tom
Bone, Mr Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brazier, Mr Julian
Brennan, Kevin
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Burns, Conor
Cadbury, Ruth
Carmichael, Neil
Cartlidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Colville, Oliver
Courts, Robert
Coyle, Neil
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Crouch, Tracey
Cumnings, Judith
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, rh Mr David
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Dr克斯, Richard
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elmore, Chris
Evans, Chris
Evans, Graham
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frazer, Lucy
Freer, Mike
Garner, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Gibb, Mr Nick
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hall, Luke
Hamilton, Fabian
Hands, rh Greg
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Healey, rh John
Heappey, James
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollins rake, Kevin
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Marcus
Kirby, Simon
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Leffroy, Jeremy
Lewis, rh Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopresti, Jack
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Matheson, Christian
Mathias, rh Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCabe, Steve
McElfresh, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Milton, rh Anne
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Mordaunt, Penny
Morden, Jessica
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Offord, Dr Matthew
Onwurah, Chi

Noes

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you. Mr Speaker, you have often said that this place must reflect the society for which we make the laws—I agree with you. I respectfully point out to the House that in any other sphere of activity, a candidate with so much hanging unresolved over him would be very unlikely to be considered for such an important office. If the right hon. Gentleman were in the Chamber today, I would ask him to stand down from his nomination, but he is not, so I ask the House to reject his appointment. Otherwise, we cannot blame the great British public for having a low opinion of its politicians and its politics; we can only blame ourselves.

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Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Before my hon. Friend draws his remarks to a conclusion, some correspondence has been referred to this evening. I wonder if he will say whether it is possible to publish that correspondence to ensure that hon. Members on both sides of the House have an opportunity to consider all of the facts.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is nothing to do with the debate, as I have just been advised by the Clerk of the House. Don’t frown at me, Mr Berry. I know the facts and you’re about to learn them. That is nothing to do with the debate tonight—point one. Secondly, there is no uncertainty or dubiety whatsoever about the correspondence between the hon. Gentleman and me. Indeed, I do not think there is any uncertainty at all about the advice that was proffered not just by me but by the Clerk of the House. Whether he wishes and is astute enough to take that advice is another matter.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend’s failed attempt to help in this debate.

It is clear that the right hon. Member for Leicester East felt the need to resign last month from the Home Affairs Committee. I think it would be a huge mistake for this House now to place him on the Justice Committee when he has so many questions to answer. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to vote against his appointment this evening.

Question put.
COMMITTEES

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 19 to 25 together.

Ordered,

PETITIONS

That Ian Blackford be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Martyn Day be added.

PROCEDURE

That Jenny Chapman be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Melanie Onn be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That David Mowat and Mr Stewart Jackson be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Charlie Elphicke and Kwasi Kwarteng be added.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

That Oliver Dowden, Mr David Jones and Tom Tugendhat be discharged from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and Marcus Fysh, Adam Holloway and Dr Poulter be added.

TRANSPORT

That Mary Glindon be discharged from the Transport Committee and Clive Efford be added.

TREASURY

That Mark Garnier be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Kit Malthouse be added.

WORK AND PENSIONS

That Jeremy Quin and Craig Williams be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and James Cartlidge and Luke Hall be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
Social Housing: Regulation

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

9.32 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I am delighted to have secured this debate. I called for it to voice my concerns about the regulation of social landlords and how they manage their properties. First, I want to pay tribute to the hundreds of my constituents who have campaigned, with me and their councillors, to draw urgent attention to their plight. The focus of my contribution will be how we can ensure that social housing tenants have the proper protection they need and can live in security and safety. This applies in particular to repairs and maintenance services, which if not done speedily and to a high standard can be devastating, and in some cases life-threatening.

At a time when local authorities and housing associations have been facing significant funding pressures, it is vital that the Government and regulators pay particular attention to the experience of social housing tenants. Housing associations are a critical part of the solution to Britain’s housing crisis; they provide affordable, quality rented and shared ownership accommodation, and the best ones are anchored in their communities. Many provide specialist housing services—for example, for people with disabilities. Some housing associations have historical roots in the 19th century and the mutual and co-operative traditions.

Tower Hamlets has many excellent community-based housing associations which have worked well in partnership with the council to look after residents and to be genuinely responsive to the needs of local people, but in recent years I have become increasingly concerned that these progressive aims are being subverted and the not-for-profit ethos of housing associations is being undermined in some cases. Old Ford Housing, which was established in 1998 as the successor body to Tower Hamlets Housing Trust, was widely regarded as one of the best housing associations in east London. It was originally a subsidiary of Circle 33 Housing Group for financing purposes, but it was accountable to its own board of tenants, leaseholders and independent members. In 2005, it merged with Anglia Housing Group to form Circle Anglia. Other associations then joined to form Circle Housing Group.

The quality of maintenance has progressively worsened since the merger. Circle Housing has systematically failed local people. Local councillors and I have had to deal with hundreds of complaints from residents, as have other MPs with housing in their constituency that is managed by Circle Housing. Last winter, it failed to manage its heating repairs properly, meaning that many tenants had no heating or hot water for days. Many other examples have been brought to my attention of missed appointments, repairs left undone, poor-quality work by contractors, and failures to communicate with residents. Tower Hamlets Council has taken the rare step of dropping Circle Housing altogether as a preferred partner for housing development in the borough.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for bringing this important issue to the House for consideration. Does she agree that social housing regulations, in particular the right to repairs, must be further protected? Some people do the repairs themselves and then cannot get the money back from landlords, finding themselves in a precarious situation. Is it not time for the Minister to respond and to address that issue?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more. I will ask the Minister to address that point, because it is unacceptable that housing associations in receipt of public money are leaving some tenants to fend for themselves. I hope the Minister will address that and consider how to strengthen the regulatory framework.

Returning to the issues affecting my constituents, local ward councillors Rachel Blake, Mark Francis and Joshua Peck have been working tirelessly to support the hundreds of residents who have been treated disgracefully by Circle Housing. Some of the cases are heart-breaking, including residents carrying umbrellas indoors because of leaking ceilings, a heavy heater falling off a wall near small children playing on the floor, lifts breaking down on a weekly basis, and 30 flats left without light for weeks. No one should have to live like that.

One of my constituents called the Circle Housing office 40 times over a three-month period to fix leaks that left them using an umbrella when using the toilet. Another of my constituents, who was eight months pregnant, slipped on water leaking from her toilet, which she had reported on 88 occasions. Another couple had a boiler that broke down repeatedly for nearly six months. A disabled resident was left without heating for the best part of two months. Another family had to sit with bowls on their laps and towels on their heads because of unrepaired leaks from above. In another case, repair workers failed to attend four pre-agreed appointments organised since May this year to fix damaged walls and ceilings.

In other cases, leaks from bathrooms that have damaged the ceilings below have been left unrepaired for years. Another family’s unresolved piping problems have left them filling the bath with hot water from the kettle after asking for help for months. An elderly pensioner in her eighties went without heating and hot water for 17 days. Another elderly resident had to live with no hot water or heating for eight weeks. When he informed me about the situation, I asked Circle Housing’s CEO if he could tolerate being treated like that and had to threaten to inform the media about the appalling treatment before my constituent’s boiler was finally fixed. It cannot be right that we have to go to such lengths to make Circle do its publicly funded job properly. It demonstrates incompetence and a dereliction of duty by Circle Housing.

Circle’s poor quality management was recognised in 2015 when the Homes and Communities Agency found evidence of serious detriment to tenants and downgraded Circle Housing Group from G1 to G3, which means there are issues of serious regulatory concern. Circle’s response to such a damning ruling was to close down its subsidiaries, including the Old Ford Housing Association, and centralise services, moving most of its staff to a new call centre in Kent. That has made matters worse.

In the spring, Tower Hamlets councillors reported further failings to the social housing regulator, whose role is to investigate whether there has been a breach of the home standard, which amounts to “serious detriment” to tenants. I could not imagine more cut and dried
examples of serious detriment than leaving dozens, and possibly hundreds, of tenants without heating and hot water for extended periods. The provision of heating and hot water is one of the most fundamental of landlord functions. In response to that complaint, the HCA simply said it was satisfied with the progress Circle was making in improving its services. Earlier this summer, the HCA announced that Circle’s governance rating had been increased again to G2.

My constituents have now had enough. Earlier this year, I received a petition from nearly 1,000 local residents calling on the mayor of Tower Hamlets, John Biggs, to report the continuing service failings to the social housing regulator and initiate legal action against Circle for its failure to honour the promises it made to tenants back in 2005. It also called on me to raise their concerns with the Housing Minister, which I did in writing earlier this summer and as I did to his predecessor—I have not yet received a response. I hope that the Minister will therefore make sure he addresses these urgent matters today.

Given this context of the appalling record of the merger and growth of Circle Housing, it is not surprising that the recent proposal for Circle Housing to merge with Affinity Sutton has raised further alarm bells among residents. If this merger goes ahead, it will create one of the largest housing associations in Europe. Nearly half a million people across London, from Bromley to Brent, from Chelsea to Chingford, will become tenants of this new social landlord, which will own and run more than 127,000 properties. Residents are also rightly concerned that the merger and the centralisation of services, including repairs and maintenance, will see services deteriorate even further.

What we have seen is a complete failure to be locally accountable, with locally accountable board membership having been cast aside. Circle has completely failed to honour the promise it made when the Old Ford transfer happened that that would be maintained and there would be proper accountability. The merger with Affinity Sutton will make matters worse, and my constituents do not want any part of it, nor do residents from other London boroughs who have had similar experiences.

Housing associations receive billions in public subsidy from the taxpayer. Between 2010 and 2016, Circle Housing alone received more than £250 million of Government funding. It must be held to account properly if we are to prevent others from suffering in the way that many of my constituents have over the past few years at the hands of Circle Housing. Will the Minister provide an assurance that there will be more robust systems to process complaints, adjudicate in disputes and provide redress quickly when things go wrong? Will he assure us that he will ensure the HCA urgently investigates why Circle’s management board retained a failing contractor, Kier Gas, to provide its gas safety maintenance, and whether that decision, which left many tenants without heating and hot water for weeks, amounts to serious detriment? With the HCA review due to complete soon, will the Minister commit to empowering the HCA to investigate examples of neglect of repairs responsibilities? Will he think again about the HCA losing the power to give consent to housing association mergers, as set out in the Housing and Planning Act 2016?

I have no doubt that some housing associations and their representative body dislike the old regime from the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 and its predecessor legislation, but this case shows that some housing associations do not always make decisions in the best interests of their tenants. The Government should be empowering regulators, not making them even more toothless and unable to act and therefore inept at standing up for the very people whom they should be serving.

In conclusion, I do not believe for a moment that Circle is alone in providing a shoddy service, or that this is the only proposed merger in the UK that is problematic. Instead there may well be a trend towards bigger, more remote and less accountable housing associations with multi-million pound turnovers and substantial assets and reserves behaving like companies that are not serving their communities. This is the antithesis of the founding principles behind housing associations and the opposite of what is needed now to fix the housing crisis.

I commend the work of the many housing associations in my constituency and up and down the country. It is right and proper that we hold to account those that are letting them down—in this case, it is Circle Housing Group—so that the reputation of good, hard-working housing associations that are responsive to their local communities is not damaged by the actions of the few.

9.45 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):
I congratulate the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) on securing this debate on local authorities and the regulation of social housing and on raising the wholly unacceptable conditions that some of her constituents have been experiencing as tenants of the housing associations to which she referred.

Let me start by setting the scene. I am sure that all Members will agree that everybody needs the security and stability of a decent, affordable home, and nowhere is that need greater than in our capital city, which both the hon. Lady and I have the privilege of representing in this House.

As a Government we have gone some way to try to address the problem. In 2014-15, we saw a record year for London house building. Some 27,000 homes were delivered, including more than 18,000 affordable homes—the most since records began in 1991—but we need to do much more. That is why the Government are doubling the housing budget to more than £20 billion over the next five years to support the largest housing programme by any Government since the 1970s.

We are also building a strong working relationship with the Mayor of London’s team to deliver our shared goals to build more homes and to help more people to own their own home. Indeed, I am due to speak to the Mayor about that tomorrow.

As the hon. Lady acknowledged, the housing association sector has a strong track record on house building. It has delivered nearly 300,000 affordable homes since April 2010. That equates to about a third of all new housing in England every year. To help the sector to continue to build more homes, the Government have already committed £8 billion to deliver a range of affordable housing starts by 2021, and we have made it very clear that we will prioritise housing in London.

In April this year, we published the prospectus for the shared ownership and affordable homes programme. The bidding round closed in September, and the Homes and Communities Agency is currently assessing bids.
We expect to announce successful bidders in December. This programme will get more homes built and help some people take the first step on to the housing ladder.

Building new homes is only part of the picture. One of the key roles of housing associations is to manage their existing stock. I wish now to turn to the role of the regulator, on which the hon. Lady touched during her speech. It has a strong regulatory framework to make sure housing associations are well managed, provide good-quality homes and serve the needs of their tenants and communities.

The hon. Lady may be aware that the Government are committed to deregulating the sector. She touched on that and asked us to rethink our policy. There are two reasons why we are taking such action. The first reason, with which she will not have a great deal of sympathy, is to do with the deal with housing associations to deliver the voluntary right to buy. The second reason, with which I hope that she and the shadow Secretary of State will have a lot of sympathy, is to allow the Office for National Statistics to return the sector to the private sector where it belongs. If we want to deliver more housing through the housing associations, it is very important that we end this decision to treat housing associations as if they are part of the public sector.

To help achieve those aims, a package of measures was included in the Housing and Planning Act 2016. They include the removal of the regulator’s disposals consents regime, so housing associations will no longer need the regulator’s permission to sell their own stock or to charge it for security. The regulator’s constitutional consents regime will also be abolished. That will remove the need for housing associations to seek permission before they make organisational changes.

What will not change is the strong regulatory framework. The regulator’s monitoring powers will remain unchanged and it will continue to take action where necessary. It will also continue with its vital role in encouraging and challenging the sector to improve efficiency and asset management. Its role is to help maintain a viable and well-governed sector that attracts commercial lenders to continue to invest at preferential rates, so that we get the new housing that we need, and crucially to do a good job for the tenants whom those housing associations serve.

Rushanara Ali: I am concerned by the Minister’s response. I cannot understand how that helps to deal with my constituents’ concerns and how they are being treated. It is complacency yet again and does not address the effects on the public. On his point about privatising housing associations, they have received billions in subsidies, so deregulation must go with responsibility and accountability to the public because of that public investment. Surely, the Minister can understand that.

Gavin Barwell: I understand and share the hon. Lady’s desire to ensure that, in return for the very significant public investment that the Government are putting into the housing association sector, we not only get the new homes that we so desperately need—I do not think there is any difference between us on that—and that the housing associations do a good job for their existing tenants. If she will allow me to make a little progress, I hope that I can provide her with some reassurance.

The new freedoms that come with the deregulation measures will undoubtedly bring new challenges and may alter the way that the sector approaches decision making and business planning. The sector has a long history of meeting housing need. The majority of housing associations are still charitable and non-profit making organisations. Although some of them are running very large businesses in terms of the money involved, the hon. Lady was right to allude to the key social value that they provide. They must not lose sight of that, and I am confident that housing associations will continue to be responsible social landlords, acting in the best interests of both their current tenants and those in housing need.

Housing associations must have a process in place for tenants to have a say in how the organisation is run and to deal with complaints when tenants think their service does not come up to scratch. The housing ombudsman has the main role in dealing with complaints where tenants feel that matters cannot be resolved directly with their housing association. However, the regulator considers all the information it receives to determine whether there has been a breach of its standards and serious harm to tenants—as clearly happened in the case that the hon. Lady brought before the House tonight—and acts where it judges that to be the case.

I hope that the hon. Lady will understand that, as the regulator is independent and that independence is very important, I cannot directly intervene in individual cases. I am confident that the regulator takes all complaints seriously and investigates where necessary. I apologise to her for the fact that she has not yet received a reply to the letter that she wrote to me in August. If she has any concerns in future, she should speak to me in person. I want to be kept informed of exactly what the situation is and whether the progress that we both want to see is being made.

We heard a lot from the hon. Lady this evening about her concerns in relation to Circle 33 and Old Ford, two of the housing associations in the Circle group. As she may know, the regulator found that Circle’s long-standing poor emergency repairs service for two of its housing associations, Circle 33 and Old Ford, put its tenants at risk of serious harm. That is a very serious matter. The regulator took decisive action in April last year and downgraded Circle as it judged that Circle fell far short of the required standard and ordered it to make urgent improvements. That is not a decision that the regulator took lightly. I am pleased to say that Circle did take action to improve its performance. The hon. Lady referred to Kier, the contractors. My understanding is that that contract was terminated. The regulator has now upgraded Circle’s rating to compliant standard—so-called V2—but that is not good enough. It still has not reached the level that we all have a right to expect, and I will be monitoring that situation carefully.

The hon. Lady referred in her speech to the proposed mergers. As part of Circle’s drive to improve its governance arrangements, it plans to merge its nine separate housing associations, including Oldford, into one. It believes that this will create a more efficient organisation. Housing associations need to take the views of their tenants into account before making such organisational changes. Indeed, it is one of the requirements of the regulator that they must do so, along with consulting their local authority—Tower Hamlets in this case—and lenders.
Old Ford will need to make its case for this change as part of that consultation. Until the deregulation measures come into force, it will need the regulator’s permission to make this change. The regulator’s criteria for taking a decision include whether the change will lead to simple, clear governance structures and whether it will deliver improved services to current and future tenants. I understand that the regulator has yet to receive an application from Old Ford in this regard. Again, as befits the regulator’s independence, the Government—that obviously includes me—do not have a role in such decisions. It will be up to the regulator, and the regulator alone, to carefully consider the application and to make its decision.

The hon. Lady referred to the merger of the whole Circle group with another housing association, Affinity Sutton. This merger would create a new organisation, to be called the Clarion group, which would manage about 128,000 homes. That would make it the largest housing association in the country. Circle has said this will help to deliver better services to tenants and build it more homes. In this case, I am told it has already consulted tenants, and I am told—the hon. Lady clearly believes otherwise—it did not receive many responses to that consultation. The regulator has given conditional approval to that merger, but it has not yet taken a decision on the nine associations in the Circle group.

I hope that the new organisation will continue to house and protect its tenants in a transparent and accountable manner. The regulator’s job is to ensure that it does. The hon. Lady clearly has real concerns about that. I would say to her that Affinity Sutton’s performance in relation to the repairs service is significantly better than Circle group’s, so there are clearly signs that Circle is merging with an organisation that is doing a much better job for its tenants, and the hope must be that improved service will be brought to bear for Circle’s tenants. However, it is clear from the hon. Lady’s speech that she does not share the confidence the regulator has in that, and I am happy to discuss with her in detail after the debate the reasons for her concern.

I acknowledge that there has been a lot of change in the social housing sector in recent years. It is becoming increasingly complex, and it continues to diversify into a range of new commercial ventures and relationships. The hon. Lady referred to the internal review the Government have conducted of the Homes and Communities Agency. We will publish the results of that review shortly, but I want to reassure her that foremost in my mind in considering that review is making sure that, when we look at the functions the HCA has at the moment—parts of it increasingly resemble a bank that is making commercial lending decisions—we have a strong, clear and robust role for the regulator to look after the interests of tenants.

It is important that housing association boards’ skills and governance structures continue to evolve to match this increasing complexity. Overall, I believe the sector is rising to this challenge, indicating ambitious plans for building the homes this country desperately needs. It continues to invest in increasing supply to help the Government achieve our commitments.

As independent organisations, it is up to housing associations themselves to explore options thoroughly and openly and to make well-informed decisions about what is best, given their particular circumstances. Mergers will not be the answer in every case, but it should be of concern to us all if associations do not explore options that would help them to make better use of the resources they have and to provide an improved service to their tenants.

Finally, I thank the hon. Lady for securing this debate on a very important issue. I have, as Housing Minister, received correspondence from some of her constituents, who are very concerned about the service she has received. I want to apologise again that she did get a reply from me in timely fashion. I mean what I say: if she has ongoing concerns, she should feel free to come and talk to me in the House or to make an appointment to come and see me at the Department, because I would very much want to work with her to ensure that her constituents get the service they have every right to expect from their landlord.

Question put and agreed to.

9.59 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 1 November 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prison Safety

1. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve safety in prisons. [906937]

2. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve safety in prisons. [906949]

3. Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve safety in prisons. [906954]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): Last week’s violence statistics show the very serious issues we have in our prisons, including a 43% rise in the number of attacks on officers. This is unacceptable, and I am determined to tackle it. I have already announced an investment of £14 million in 10 of our most challenging prisons, and I shall say more with the launch of our White Paper shortly.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we take the question, I am very pleased to announce that today we are joined by Lobsang Sangay, the Sikyong or Prime Minister of the Tibetan Government in exile. It is a pleasure and a privilege, Sir, to welcome you to the House of Commons.

Victoria Prentis: What an honour that is, Mr Speaker.

We welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to prison reform, but those sitting on the Justice Select Committee are very concerned about the recent statistics that she mentioned, not just in relation to the safety of prison workers, but in respect of vulnerable prisoners. What steps is she going to take to improve assessment and screening, so that those people can be identified at the beginning of their sentence?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am extremely concerned about the level of self-harm, which is particularly high in the women’s estate. We know that the first 24 hours are absolutely vital, and we are already taking steps to provide vulnerable prisoners with immediate mental health support. Next year, we will bring out a strategy on women offenders.

Maria Caulfield: Given the level of violence in Lewes prison over the weekend, will the Secretary of State update the House on what progress has been made to secure the prison, and what steps are being taken to increase staffing levels to prevent this from happening again?

Elizabeth Truss: The incident at HMP Lewes has been resolved and the prison remains secure with no threat to the public. The prisons Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), spoke to the governor, Jim Bourke, offering support for him and all his staff. We are going to make sure that we have sufficient staff in that prison. I shall have more to say about staffing when we launch the White Paper.

Helen Jones: The number of front-line prison officers has fallen by over 30% under this Government, and the Secretary of State’s own Department’s statistics show a correlation between those cuts and increased levels of violence in prisons. Does the right hon. Lady now accept that what she has announced goes no way towards solving these problems and that there needs to be a thorough investigation so that we can have the safe levels of staffing required in our prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: I have acknowledged that we have a serious issue. I think we have to recognise that there have been a number of causes. The prison and probation ombudsman said that the emergence of dangerous psychoactive substances was a game changer for prison security. We are taking measures to put in place proper testing for that, which we announced in September. I acknowledge that there is an issue with staffing, which is why I have already taken steps in 10 of the most challenging prisons to increase staffing levels, and why we are due to do more in the White Paper.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): In addition to the staffing cuts mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), there is the problem of prison officer retention. The 400 by which the right hon. Lady has said she is going to increase staff numbers are being lost because of the number of people who are leaving. Experienced staff are leaving, and experienced prisoners are now running prisons.

Elizabeth Truss: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we need to make sure that, as well as recruiting prison officers, we are also retaining our fantastic prison officers. At every prison I visit, I meet fantastic people who have come into the service to turn people’s lives around. I want to encourage more people to become prison officers, which is why we launched a programme to bring former armed service personnel into the service. We will announce more about recruitment shortly.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): As part of taking those important steps, will the Secretary of State revisit and act upon the Select Committee’s recommendation that we should be able transparently to measure the performance of the National Offender
Management Service by publishing and making available the key data on indicators of disorder; staffing and turnover, and the reasons for turnover; its performance ratings, including those for individual prisons; and activity—the amount of time each prisoner is out of cell or in cell, and what they are doing?

Elizabeth Truss: The Select Committee Chairman is absolutely right that we need clear and transparent data and metrics to be able to understand what is happening in our prison system. I will outline more detail on that issue when we launch the White Paper.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Suicides in prisons are at record levels, and self-harm and violence are soaring. The situation in women’s prisons is worse than it was a decade ago. The Government’s own statistics show that the rate of deaths in England and Wales has risen to almost one a day—a record high of 324 in the last 12 months. Does the Secretary of State recognise that cutting staff and prison budgets while the number of people behind bars grows unchecked has created a toxic mix of violence, death and human misery?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with the hon. Lady that we need to act on those very problematic statistics, and in particular to deal with the high levels of self-harm and suicide. One of the 10 prisons to which we have given additional money for staffing is a women’s prison. We are looking more widely at how we can ensure that women offenders are given the support that they need, because many come into prison with mental health issues and many have suffered abuse in the past. I want to ensure that those offenders have the support that will enable them to turn their lives around.

Yasmin Qureshi: I hear what the Secretary of State has to say about funding for the 10 prisons, but Pentonville, where only last week there was a stabbing and two people were injured, is not one of them, and the events that took place at Lewes prison at the weekend also underlined the problem of prison understaffing. John Attard, of the Prison Governors Association, has written that we need “more than the….400 extra officers in just 10 prisons.”

Will the Secretary of State listen to what is being said by that association, and by the Prison Officers Association, about the Ministry’s failings in respect of prison staffing?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with the hon. Lady that violence and levels of suicide are serious issues, and I am determined to address them. That is my No. 1 priority. I have made an immediate start in 10 of the most challenging prisons, and I will be outlining more in the White Paper. Let me, at this point, express my sincere condolences to the family of Jamal Mahmoud, who unfortunately died in Pentonville.

We all need to recognise that these are serious issues, which have numerous causes including the rise in psychoactive substances. It will take time to turn the situation around—it takes months to train prison officers—but we have developed and will be launching a comprehensive strategy. I want our prisons to be places of safety but also places of reform, where we address reoffending and make our society as a whole safer.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State. I call Fiona Mactaggart.

Deaths in Custody Suites

2. Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): How many deaths have occurred in (a) custody suites operated by G4S and (b) other custody suites in the last three years.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): G4S has not operated court custody suites in England and Wales since 2011.

Fiona Mactaggart: Very vulnerable people are held in custody suites, and many have committed suicide. That translates into the presence of such people in prisons, where, as the Secretary of State has just acknowledged, there have been more deaths in custody than there have been for many years. More women are killing themselves than at any time since the Corston report. When we know what has gone wrong from the reports of coroners’ courts or the Corston report, which have given us real advice on what ought to happen, why is it not happening? Has the Minister read those coroners’ reports?

Mr Speaker: Order. We really do need to make progress. This is very slow.

Mr Gyimah: All deaths in custody are a tragedy. They are fully investigated by the independent prisons and probation ombudsman and are subject to coroners’ inquests. As the Secretary of State pointed out, a number of women in prison have been victims of crime themselves and are incredibly vulnerable members of society. As well as modernising the women’s prison estate, we are looking into diversion tactics to ensure that those women do not end up in the criminal justice system in the first place.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which country in the world has the fewest deaths in custody, and what lessons are we learning from that country?

Mr Gyimah: I am afraid I cannot name the country but we in this country work to create decent and humane prisons, and we are a signatory to the relevant United Nations protocols. As the Secretary of State has rightly pointed out, the rise in the number of deaths in custody is too high, and for that reason we shall shortly be publishing a safety and reform plan in our White Paper.

HMP Chelmsford

3. Sir Simon Burns (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle bullying and drug abuse at HMP Chelmsford; and if she will make a statement.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): I share my right hon. Friend’s concerns about what has happened at HMP Chelmsford. I can confirm that it is one of the 10 prisons for which we are training up additional officers. This will provide a 30% increase in officer numbers to help tackle the scourges of bullying and drug abuse.
Sir Simon Burns: I welcome that answer. It is crucial that more is done to eliminate bullying in the prison. On drug abuse, can the Secretary of State confirm whether sniffer dogs are being used on a regular basis on not only the prison inmates but all types of people entering and leaving prison?

Elizabeth Truss: I can confirm that that is happening. We have trained 300 sniffer dogs to be able to detect new dangerous psychoactive substances, and that testing was being rolled out across the prison estate in September. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say very gently to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) that I am sure his constituency has many magnificent merits but it is a long way from Chelmsford.

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act

4. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): What steps she is taking to assess the effect of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 on access to justice. [906941]

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): The coalition Government promised to review parts 1 and 2 of the Act and we remain committed to undertaking that review.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the Minister for that reply, but I think he may want to take question 15 with question 4.

Sir Oliver Heald: I would be very happy to do that, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the right hon. and learned Gentleman the Minister to be willing to do what he asked me for permission to do; that is extraordinarily gracious of him.

15. Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the recent report by Amnesty International, which has found that insufficient resources for legal aid are creating a two-tier judicial system?

Sir Oliver Heald: It is important to recognise that housing cases where a person’s home is at risk fall within the scope of legal aid. The Law Society has raised concerns, as the hon. Gentleman will know. There are a lot of these cases in some parts of the country, but very few in other parts. What we have done is, through the Legal Aid Agency, taken active steps to ensure that there is adequate provision of housing advice around the country.

Rob Marris: Two!

Sir Oliver Heald: On the point about one or two providers, there are some places where one firm is providing a range of offices and functions across a number of clients, and other areas where the circumstances only really require that there should be something like a telephone hotline, which there is. The provision that is being made is what is needed.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): There seem to be conflicting reports on the Government’s position on raising the cost bar for personal injury claims from £1,000 to £5,000. I would be grateful to hear what the Government’s position is.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important point. The Government have been looking at this issue. I do not think we have made a formal announcement on it yet, and therefore I will write to him giving him the absolute latest position.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): What assessment has the Minister made of the recent report by Amnesty International, which has found that insufficient resources for legal aid are creating a two-tier judicial system?

Sir Oliver Heald: It is important that legal aid is available in the most serious cases, such as those in which life or liberty is involved, a person’s home is at risk, domestic violence is involved, or children are being taken away from their families. That is the legal aid provision that we have here. The hon. Lady claims that that is a two-tier system, but we claim that it is one that is targeted on need.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I should declare an indirect interest, in that my wife is a legal aid solicitor and part-time judge. The previous Lord Chancellor promised a review of LASPO. The legislation has not worked. It is a complete and utter shambles, and it urgently needs a review. When will it be properly reviewed?
Sir Oliver Heald: As the hon. Gentleman knows, a promise was made that the Act would be reviewed within three years and five years of implementation—

[Interruption.] Yes, within the period starting at three years and going up to five years. That period has just started, and an announcement will be made in due course.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Exceptional case funding was introduced as part of LASPO with the aim of ensuring that out-of-scope cases with exceptional circumstances would have access to legal aid. Between 2013 and 2016, 4,032 applications were made but, due to the stringency of the criteria, a staggering 3,081 of those applications were not granted. Will the Minister commit to broadening the criteria for exceptional case funding to allow more people to become eligible for this safety net and to increase access to justice for those who need it most?

Sir Oliver Heald: The hon. Lady raises an important point. The number of cases being applied for and granted is rising, but there is also the question of ensuring that people who might need this funding are aware of it. That is an important part of the picture. Exceptional needs funding is a vital part of the picture and we will certainly keep it under review. If she wants to raise a detailed point with me about how it is operating, I would be more than happy either to discuss it with her or to enter into correspondence about it.

Human Rights Act

5. Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): What recent progress has been made on the Government’s plans to replace the Human Rights Act 1998?

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): We will set out our proposals for a Bill of Rights in due course. We will consult fully on our proposals.

Mr Speaker: This question is to be taken with No. 7. There is something missing from the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s briefing today.

Sir Oliver Heald: I am so sorry, Mr Speaker. Perhaps with your leave I could also answer question 7 in the same way.

7. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent progress has been made on the Government’s plans to replace the Human Rights Act 1998?

Steven Paterson: We are no closer to a timeframe, a plan or a common theme in regard to how the Human Rights Act is to be replaced. Earlier this year, Nils Muiznieks, the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights, said that the “repeatedly delayed launch of the consultation process” was “creating an atmosphere of anxiety and concern in civil society and within the devolved administrations”.

Will the Minister tell us exactly when the consultation on this matter will be brought forward?

Sir Oliver Heald: The Government were elected with a mandate to reform and modernise the UK human rights framework, and there are good reasons for that. We have a proud tradition in respect of human rights. The Government are also considering the overall constitutional landscape and how this will fit it following Brexit, but this is something that we are committed to.

Martyn Day: The Council of Europe commissioner for human rights has also said of the consultation on the Human Rights Act:

“My impression is that the debate over the HRA in Westminster is not a true reflection of concerns outside England”.

Does the Minister appreciate that there is no support in Scotland for the plans, and that the impact of any attempt to repeal the Act would be to provoke a constitutional crisis?

Sir Oliver Heald: The issue of human rights is important in all parts of the United Kingdom, and we accept that. We will fully engage with the devolved Administrations on this question. Many people feel that there is a need for a British jurisprudence to emerge on the European convention on human rights and a need to assert certain ancient rights that we have in Britain, such as that relating to jury trial.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I welcome that statement from my right hon. and learned Friend, but I urge him to look particularly hard at the military aspects. The efforts of those who currently risk their lives for us on operations are being overshadowed by what is going on with IHAT—the Iraq Historic Allegations Team—and the pursuit of human rights cases under British law by people who were our enemies.

Sir Oliver Heald: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He will be aware of the announcement about derogation. Previously, there have been occasions when industrial-scale allegations could be made, many of which were later proved to be false, but that will change once the derogation process is in place.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): It has been reported that 28 terrorists have used the Human Rights Act to avoid deportation—no doubt using legal aid as well. Is it not time to scrap the Act and to start thinking less about the human rights of terrorists and foreign-born criminals and more about the human rights of law-abiding members of the British public?

Sir Oliver Heald: The House will be aware that there are concerns among the British public about the barriers to the deportation of criminals that should not have been there. There is also a need for British conditions and British jurisprudence in this area, something which the Conservative party has been calling for over many years and which the Government are alive to.

Justice System: Women

6. Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to address the specific needs of women in the justice system.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): Crime is falling and fewer women are entering the justice system, and the female prison population is now consistently under 4,000. Women who commit
crimes are often some of the most vulnerable in our society, which is why we are developing a strategy for women to be set out in the new year. We want to see fewer women in custody and to promote a greater focus on early intervention, diversion and multi-agency approaches to ensure that the justice system can take proper account of the specific needs of women.

Mr Burrowes: There are many victims of domestic violence within the justice system with multiple complex needs—mostly women. What are the Government doing to address the concerns of Women’s Aid about the perverse impact of gender-neutral commissioning cutting women-only specialist services?

Dr Lee: I am committed to ensuring that victims of crime get the support they need. Specialist services for victims of domestic abuse are commissioned both locally by police and crime commissioners and nationally. It is important that a range of provisions are in place to meet the diverse needs of domestic abuse victims. The Government’s new strategy on ending violence against women and girls sets out an ambition that by the end of 2020 they have to wear uniforms at school. Both men and women for Justice ashamed of the figures? Will he now commit to ensure that paying for crime in this country will never mean paying with one’s life?

Dr Lee: I recall answering the hon. Lady’s question at the last Justice Question Time, and my point was that the cause of this is very complex. I am very much aware of the suicide list, and we know that we have had an increase in the number of suicides this year, particularly in the women’s system. One case in the north-east, that of Michelle Barnes, is particularly shocking. The hon. Lady can be assured that I am looking closely at it, but there have been others. In dealing with this, I am not only trying to work on a women’s strategy that can be brought forward in the new year, but looking at offender mental health across the entire prisons system.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the Minister commit to work with devolved Governments to ensure funding for third sector organisations such as the North Wales Women’s Centre, which supports women in the criminal justice system as an alternative to prison?

Dr Lee: I have already met Claire Sugden, Northern Ireland’s Justice Minister, and I intend to meet Justice Ministers from the other devolved regions. I am very happy to discuss those issues with them.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): The continued cuts to legal aid funding mean that there is a rising number of litigants in person. Many women have to face their abusive partner in court, with no assistance on how to navigate the complexities of the law. More needs to be done to protect women during the legal process. What steps is the Minister taking to increase legal assistance for women and ensure that justice can truly be done?

Dr Lee: Women do need additional support, not just in going through the legal process, but in housing and on many different issues, before, during and after their time in prison. I have already visited the Pause project in Hackney, where I was struck by how effective its approach has been in helping these vulnerable women. On the specific questions, we are working on this, but I would be happy to write to the hon. Lady with a more detailed response.

Access to Justice

8. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to improve access to justice. [906945]

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): The Government’s reform programme is intended to deliver a simpler, fairer justice system that works for everyone. We are reforming our courts to make them more modern, open, swift and accountable. Since January 2015, we have invested £3.5 million to provide more support to litigants in person.

Stuart C. McDonald: The Government have utterly undermined access to justice for EU citizens and other migrants with their incredible 500% increase in immigration tribunal fees. Will the Minister at least closely monitor the drastic impact that that ridiculous increase is going
to have and respond accordingly when everything the Government were warned about during their consultation actually comes to pass?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** The Government take a markedly different view from the hon. Gentleman about this. The fact is that these tribunals cost money and there are people making applications to them who are not in the category of needing help with fees. Where people need help with fees, we of course have a remissions scheme, but where they do not need help, how can it be wrong that they should pay for the costs of the system? It is only right that they do so.

21. [900960] **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): As the Minister has mentioned, an important element of improving access to justice is reform of the courts system. Would he like to say a little more about the modernisation of that system and, in particular, whether Lord Justice Briggs’s concept of an online court will be introduced?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** Lord Justice Briggs has prepared a report that has been not only revolutionary, but extremely helpful in the modernisation process, and I pay tribute to his work. We do intend to introduce a new online procedure for lower-value civil money claims. This procedure will be a mix of new technology, conciliation and judicial resolution, and will provide a simple dispute resolution process. We intend also to create a new rules committee to design the simpler rules this will require.

**Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister says that the Government take a “markedly different” view on tribunal fees from my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald). However, when the Justice Committee published its review of court and tribunal fees earlier this year, its excellent chairperson, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill)—a Government Back Bencher—stated:

“Where there is conflict between the objectives of achieving full cost recovery and preserving access to justice, the latter must prevail.” Does the Minister agree with that statement?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** Yes, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) for the work that he does, chairing the Committee so ably. There is no question but that we do need a mitigation system, as we have for fees, but having said that I welcome the Justice Committee’s report, which goes into a wide range of issues and we will respond to it shortly.

**Joanna Cherry:** Employment tribunal fees are an additional pressure on people who have been relieved of their employment in inappropriate circumstances, and they create a very real restriction on access to justice for those who are vulnerable. The group Maternity Action has said that, since the introduction of employment tribunal fees, there has been a 40% drop in claims for pregnancy-related detriment or dismissal. Why do the Government not follow the example of the Scottish Government and commit to scrapping employment tribunal fees?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** The principle should be that if someone cannot pay and mitigation is required, then there should be a system of mitigation of fees. If someone is able to pay, given that this costs the country a huge amount of money, why should they not make a contribution if they are using these facilities?

**Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): In our country, it is a cornerstone of access to justice that there should be equality of arms in court. I was therefore shocked last week to hear the Minister of State for Courts and Justice tell us in an Adjournment debate on the Birmingham pub bombings that only “an element of equality of arms”—[Official Report, 26 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 400].—is necessary. Will the Minister come to the Dispatch Box and either reassure us that this was a mere slip of his well-trained legal tongue, or, alternatively, admit that his Government are reducing, not defending, access to justice?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** That is a bit rich when, at that debate, I was able to announce that the families had got a legal aid certificate through the Legal Aid Agency. The hon. Gentleman is now talking semantics. I was saying that the element that was needed of equality of arms was being met in accordance with the rules of the agency. When it comes to Labour politicians talking about cuts and concerns about legal aid, it is worth remembering why it was necessary to make those cuts—it was because of the mismanagement of the economy, which the Government inherited in 2010.

**Richard Burgon:** On the subject of that Adjournment debate of last Wednesday, Lynn Bennett died—[Interruption.] I will not give it up. Lynn Bennett died aged 18 in the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974. Her father, Stanley Bennett, and her sister, Claire Luckman, are still searching for the truth. On principle, they refuse to fill in means-testing forms for legal aid representation in the inquest into Lynn’s death. They believe that the state is forcing them effectively to beg for access to justice. Will the Justice Secretary today agree to go back to the Home Secretary and ask her to reconsider this, so that Stanley and Claire can have access to justice on behalf of Lynn?

**Sir Oliver Heald:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Legal Aid Agency, which is independent, has considered two applications for legal aid. One has been granted, and on the other, as was pointed out in the debate, a way has been described and set out in which it would be possible for those families to have legal aid, too. There is no question but that the families can be, and will be, represented. I accept that the Birmingham pub bombings were the most dreadful incident of a generation. I said in the debate that I remembered, as a young student, the powerful effect on the whole country of the worst bombing incident since the second world war, in which 21 people died and 222 were injured. All our thoughts in this House are with the families, their loved ones, and those who had their lives affected. On how we deal with these very difficult inquests in a very special category of cases, I made it clear in the debate that the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice are working on that matter, looking at the precedents of what happened with
Hillsborough and waiting for Bishop James Jones’s report. We will also look at all the matters that were discussed in that debate.

Released Offenders: Employment

9. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help offenders find employment on release.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): We know that getting prisoners into employment is key to reducing reoffending. While there are some excellent initiatives in the Prison Service, there is still no coherent system that links work inside with education and training, and employment opportunities on the outside. That is why I will be bringing forward a plan, early in the new year, to boost offender employment.

Maggie Throup: Despite undergoing training in prison, some offenders are still struggling to secure employment on their release, as highlighted recently by one of my constituents. What more is being done, and can be done, to ensure that the qualifications undertaken by inmates while in prison are both relevant and acceptable to potential employers?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend describes a situation that is all too familiar in our Prison Service where prisoners undertake courses in prison that bear no relation to the outside world or the ability to get a job. In our White Paper, which will be published shortly, we will be saying how we can improve that education system—we have already accepted the reforms announced by Dame Sally Coates in her review—and how we can help governors work with prisoners in the local labour market to boost employment for inmates.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): There is a well-established link between unemployment and reoffending, and we are now five years on from the Government’s rehabilitation revolution. Will the Minister let us know whether the latest reoffending statistics show an increase or a decrease in reoffending rates?

Mr Gyimah: It is still the case, as it has been for decades in the UK, that roughly a third of people who leave our prison system reoffend. The hon. Lady mentions the Government’s record. I do not recollect the last Labour Government ever talking about rehabilitation and reform in our prisons. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will introduce plans that will give governors real power on the frontline, so that they can act as the ringmasters working locally to deliver real reform.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Will the Minister agree to visit Jobs, Friends & Houses, which not only gets ex-offenders into construction jobs, but helps to find them somewhere to live, gets them off drugs and provides them with a supportive group of friends. That is such a good project; I am hoping to set it up in Bedfordshire as well.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend the former Minister mentions an excellent scheme that I definitely support, along with a number of other schemes that are going on in the Prison Service and with some great employers such as Timpson’s, Greggs and Halfords. In our employment strategy, we will make sure that that works throughout the system, rather than having a few bright spots here and there.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): An important follow-on to that is the impediment that insurance premiums caused for employers who wished to engage somebody who had left prison. The former Minister, the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), was seized of the issue and pursuing good work in that regard. Will the Minister give an update on the progress with insurers and continue the hon. Gentleman’s good work?

Mr Gyimah: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there are a number of barriers for employers in taking ex-offenders—some around trust, some around stigma—and some real hard issues such as insurance. We will be looking at all those issues and reducing those barriers, so that employers are incentivised to take on ex-offenders. Interestingly, those who do so, such as Timpson’s, say that some of their most loyal employees are those who have come out of the prison system. We want that to continue.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Some 15% of young people in custody are autistic. With yesterday’s publication of the Government’s excellent Green Paper on halving the disability employment gap and the recognition that autistic people need specific personal help, what contribution will the Department make to ensuring that autistic offenders find employment on release?

Mr Gyimah: The issue is not just autistic offenders. We know that many people in the youth justice system, as well as in the prison population as a whole, have special educational needs and low levels of literacy. A key step that the Government have taken is moving the relevant education budgets from the Department for Education to the Ministry of Justice. We will be delegating those budgets to prison governors, so that they can spend appropriately on the needs of each prisoner to help them to get the right education so they can get employment.

HMP Maghaberry

10. Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the future of the separated prison regime at HMP Maghaberry.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I have had no such discussions on this issue. Prisons are a devolved matter and responsibility for HMP Maghaberry lies with the Northern Ireland Department of Justice.

Danny Kinahan: I was hoping that we would not hear about devolved matters now that we are all pulling together more as a Union. This is a vital matter and we must move on. Will the Minister discuss with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Justice Minister how we achieve a level playing field, change the present system and, more importantly, make sure that there are no on-the-run letters in the system?
Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman refers to on-the-run letters, which is a vital issue. This is normally an issue for the Northern Ireland Office, and as the previous Secretary of State for Northern Ireland set out in her statement to the Commons in 2014, the so-called on-the-run administrative scheme established by the previous Labour Government is at an end.

**Criminal Driving Offences**

11. **Greg Mulholland** (Leeds North West) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of sentencing policy for criminal driving offences. [906948]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Dr Phillip Lee): The Government are very much aware of the concerns expressed about sentencing for driving offences. We are committed to making sure that the courts have sufficient powers to deal with driving offences appropriately and proportionately. We will consult by the end of the year on those offences and penalties.

Greg Mulholland: Members across the House have supported families who have lost family members to the most reckless criminal driving. Members have also had to support such families through the reality of being failed by our justice system. The Department announced a review two and a half years ago, which should have concluded by now. Three Secretaries of State later, we are told again that there will be consultation this year. It is not good enough. Can the Minister give the House a clear date when the review will finally be published and there will be more justice for victims of criminal driving?

Dr Lee: I am aware that a constituent of the hon. Gentleman was recently knocked down and killed by a driver over the drink-drive limit, and I offer my deepest condolences to the family of that constituent. Parliament sets the maximum penalties for road traffic offences, and we intend to consult by the end of the year on driving offences and penalties for the most serious cases that result in death or serious injury.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s comments, but will he reassure me that part of the review will consider whether greater use can be made of the charge of manslaughter, so that those who have behaved so recklessly and caused someone’s death get the same type of penalty for doing that with their car as they would if they had done it with anything else?

Dr Lee: The Crown Prosecution Service can and will charge a person with manslaughter where the evidence supports that charge, it is in the public interest to do so and there is a reasonable prospect of a conviction. In many driving cases, however, the offending behaviour, which may be highly irresponsible, does not suggest that the vehicle was intentionally used as a weapon to kill or commit grievous bodily harm or that the standard of driving was grossly negligent.

Pardons for Gay and Bisexual Men (Northern Ireland)

13. **Tom Elliott** (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): What discussions she has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on pardons for gay and bisexual men convicted of offences which have subsequently been abolished. [906951]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am aware that Lord Lexden has tabled amendments seeking to extend to Northern Ireland the provisions tabled by Lord Sharkey in respect of England and Wales on this issue. Northern Ireland has legislative powers over matters relating to justice and policing. This is a devolved matter.

Tom Elliott: Given the unique equality legislation in Northern Ireland, does the Minister see a problem in any attempt to introduce such a measure in the Province?

Mr Gyimah: If legislation is to be introduced extending the Turing pardon and a disregard process to Northern Ireland, that is a decision for the Northern Ireland Assembly to take. Were the provisions to be extended to Northern Ireland, a legislative consent motion would, by convention, be required.

**Leaving the EU: Departmental Responsibilities**

14. **Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the implications for her departmental responsibilities of the UK leaving the EU. [906952]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): The Ministry of Justice is leading work on future arrangements with the EU for civil, family and commercial law. We are also working closely with the Home Office on EU criminal justice measures. I am determined to make sure that UK legal services, which contribute £26 billion a year to our economy, continue to thrive once we leave the EU.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Official figures show that between 2010 and 2015 the UK made 1,424 requests to EU members under the European arrest warrant, as a result of which 916 successful arrests were made. Will access to the system continue when the UK leaves the EU?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, the Home Office is leading on criminal justice matters. We are working very closely with the Home Office, and we want to preserve those beneficial policies where we can deal with criminal and civil justice matters, so that we can make sure that we have the best possible legal services in the world.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): English law—particularly English commercial law—is respected around the world for its quality. Will the Secretary of State confirm that her Department will use Brexit as an opportunity to spread its use around the world, working with our international law firms?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who has a background in commercial law in one of the top City firms. I had a roundtable with the magic circle and the silver circle to talk about how we can promote those legal areas, as well as all the practices right through the UK, including those practising in Scots law. We have a big opportunity to promote this more widely, and we are using the GREAT campaign as a vehicle to do that.
Topical Questions

T1. [906927] John Pugh (Southport) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): First, I would like to express my deepest sympathy for the family and friends of Jamal Mahmoud, who, sadly, died at HMP Pentonville on 18 October. We need to address the major issue of violence in our prisons, and that is why I have been conducting a comprehensive review of the system. I will shortly be launching a White Paper on how I plan to transform prisons into places of safety and reform. I have announced immediate investment of £14 million to increase staffing levels in 10 of the most challenging prisons.

John Pugh: I thank the Minister for that, but may I change the subject slightly, to domestic violence? Incidents are sharply up, successful Crown Prosecution Service prosecutions are up, which is good, but references to the CPS are, puzzlingly, down. What is the Minister’s take on this anomaly, and do we need some positive feedback from the courts to the police?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We have put in extra measures—particularly the law on coercive behaviour, which has been very important. What I am determined to do is make sure our courts system treats vulnerable witnesses and victims as well as possible to encourage more people to come forward.

T3. [906930] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can smuggling into prisons by drones be stopped?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): A very pithy question. The new threat from drones is a game-changer, not just for prisons but for other parts of the Government. That is why I am working with Ministers across the Government to engage with drone manufacturers to find a solution to this problem. I am keeping a close eye on what is happening internationally, particularly in Holland, where eagles are used to stop drones. I am sure that we will find a solution in the UK that will take off.

Mr Gyimah: The Government are intent on delivering on their historic manifesto commitment to grant a pardon to all those convicted under archaic gay laws. The Scottish Government have announced their plans, but I note that, even in those plans, they are talking about a disregard process in just the same way as the UK Government. Our disregard process will ensure that people who are guilty of crimes that are still a crime do not accidentally get pardoned. That is absolutely right: to have an appropriate safeguard, we do not right a wrong by creating another injustice.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor, in her role as head of the judiciary, has oversight of all legal action that continues in our country. Today there is an abuse of power whereby soldiers are facing, in effect, double jeopardy through the work of the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. Although I understand that the Ministry of Defence is leading on this, will she, as the chief judicial officer of this land, please comment?

Mr Gyimah: The Secretary of State is aware that the Scottish Government are going to grant a pardon to men who served in the armed forces, but not to any serving members. I understand that the Ministry of Defence is leading on this, and I am sure that the Ministry of Defence will ensure that there is a proper investigation into all allegations.

Elizabeth Truss: Plans to rebuild Sunderland’s courts complex have been on hold since 2010. Despite raising this issue on numerous occasions with the Courts and Justice Minister’s predecessors, we still have not had a decision. Will the current Minister meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) as a matter of priority to see whether we can make any progress?

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Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Given that 20% of the prison population have spent some time in care, what steps are the Government taking to prevent children in care from ending up in the prison system?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are working very closely with the Department for Education, and we will shortly produce our paper on youth offenders, which will talk about how we intervene earlier before people end up with custodial sentences.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My constituent, Mrs Fleeting, tragically lost her son, Robert, when he was serving honourably on an English base. The family cannot gain closure, as there is no automatic inquest by jury, and they are understandably distraught. Will the Minister meet Mrs Fleeting and me to discuss the case and access to justice for the late Robert Fleeting?

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes, I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady and her constituent.

Elizabeth Truss: I commend my hon. Friend for his work as a Minister in the Department to promote legal links with India; I am pleased to say that those are being taken forward. The Prime Minister will visit India this month to pave the way for UK lawyers to practise there, helping to improve our international business and trade. English law is a massive asset that we can leverage for wider business negotiation.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): How many of the inquest reports on self-inflicted deaths in custody has the Minister read, and what actions has he taken as a result of the recommendations of inquests that have caused real distress to families?

Mr Gyimah: Every death in custody is a tragic event. As the Minister with responsibility for prisons—I have been in the role for four months—I take every one of them seriously. I look at all the reports and I sign many of the responses to those reports where, for example, the independent monitoring board is involved. We have plans to make sure that we deliver on them.

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that we need bold reform to cut reoffending and that that must mean giving prison governors the powers and the accountability to innovate, especially when it comes to skills training and drugs rehabilitation in the prisons that they run?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is nothing but bold. I absolutely agree with him that we need to change the way we are doing things, because the fact is that we have had a persistently high reoffending rate. Almost half the people in prison will reoffend within a year, and that is not acceptable. We need to give governors the power to turn lives around, to get people off drugs and to get them into work.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The Ministry’s review into the care and management of transgender offenders was due to be concluded in the spring, but almost a year since the review was first announced, a report is yet to be published. Can the Secretary of State update the House today on when we can expect to see that report?

Mr Gyimah: I commend my hon. Friend for his invitation to a joint visit to Ranby. I am pleased to say that those are being worked as a Minister in the Department to promote legal links with India; I am pleased to say that those are being taken forward. The Prime Minister will visit India this month to pave the way for UK lawyers to practise there, helping to improve our international business and trade. English law is a massive asset that we can leverage for wider business negotiation.

Dr Lee: The Government are firmly committed to ensuring that transgender offenders are treated fairly, lawfully and decently and that their rights are respected. A Ministry of Justice-led review of the care and management of transgender offenders concluded that treating offenders in the gender with which they identify is the most effective starting point for safety and reducing reoffending, where an assessment of all known risks can be considered alongside the offender’s views.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Mary—not her real name—a constituent of mine, went to Benidorm on a hen do. Her drink was spiked by a British man known to one of the group, and then she was raped by the man. It is now six months since the offence, and the Spanish police seem no closer to taking the case seriously. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the ability to bring to trial in this country a case involving a sexual assault...
offence against a Briton overseas is vital for justice when the country in which the offence occurred does not take it seriously?

Sir Oliver Heald: Yes, I do agree. The Istanbul convention, which the UK signed in June 2012, requires ratifying states to assume jurisdiction over offences of this sort when committed by our nationals overseas. But we need to make changes to primary legislation to introduce this, because the existing law applies only where the rape involves a person under 18 years of age.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will Ministers update the House on progress with the Missing Persons Guardianship Bill? It is of great interest to my constituents Mr and Mrs Lawrence; they are the parents of Claudia, who went missing seven long years ago.

Sir Oliver Heald: I will write to my hon. Friend, because this is a subject on which we will be saying something shortly.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The illicit use of mobile phones in prisons is a pernicious issue that must be tackled. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what more the Government are doing to make sure that we use a technology solution to deal with that?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is right. Technology is the problem here, and we believe that technology is the answer. We are working very closely with mobile network operators to develop a solution to stop the illegal use of mobile phones in our prisons.

Mr Speaker: Finally, the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice, Mr Robert Neill.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does the Secretary of State share my concern at the 40% increase in suicides in 2015-16 among offenders undergoing supervision in the community? Will she therefore expedite the Department’s review of the effectiveness of the transforming rehabilitation programme?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the Committee Chairman for his question, and I share his concern about this issue. We recognise that there are benefits from the transforming rehabilitation programme: for example, 45,000 people with sentences of less than a year who previously were not being supervised are now being supervised. However, the Minister is conducting a review, as we do with all new legislation, to check how it is working. That is one of the aspects that he will be looking at.
12.34 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the process she went through and the papers she considered before reaching her decision not to proceed with an inquiry into the events at Orgreave in June 1984.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): The Home Secretary announced her decision in a written ministerial statement yesterday, in which she explained her main reasons for deciding against instigating either a statutory inquiry into or an independent review of the events at Orgreave coking plant. She has also written to the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign setting out the detailed reasons for her decision, and she answered a number of questions in the House yesterday in response to an oral parliamentary question on this subject.

In determining whether to establish a statutory inquiry or other review, the Home Secretary considered a number of factors, reviewed a wide range of documents and spoke to members of the campaign. She came to the view that neither an inquiry nor a review was required to allay public concern at this stage, more than 30 years after the events in question. In so doing, she noted the following factors. Despite the forceful accounts and arguments provided by the campaigners about the effect that these events had on them, ultimately there were no deaths or wrongful convictions. In addition, the policing landscape and the wider criminal justice system have changed fundamentally since 1984, with significant changes in the oversight of policing at every level, including major reforms to criminal procedure, changes to public order policing and practice, stronger external scrutiny and greater local accountability. There are few lessons to be learned from a review of the events and practices of three decades ago. This is a very important consideration when looking at the necessity for an inquiry or independent review.

Taking these considerations into account, we do not believe that establishing any kind of inquiry is required in the wider public interest or for any other reason.

Andy Burnham: The now Prime Minister invited Orgreave campaigners to submit a bid for an inquiry and she entered Downing Street talking about fighting burning injustices, so the House will understand why so many people feel bitterly betrayed today. Orgreave is one of the most divisive events in British social history. Given that there is evidence of unlawful conduct by the police in relation to it, is it not simply staggering that the Home Secretary has brushed aside an inquiry as not necessary? Is it not even more revealing that she was not prepared to come to this House today to justify her decision?

I want to focus very specifically on her decision-making process, and I expect direct answers from the Minister. Before making her decision, did the Home Secretary recall files held by South Yorkshire police and review them personally? I am told they never left Sheffield. Is that true? Did she consider in detail the new testimony that has emerged from police officers, particularly in relation to police statements? Did she review all relevant Cabinet papers, such as the minutes—stamped “SECRET”—of the meeting between Margaret Thatcher and Leon Brittan, in which the then Home Secretary said he wanted “to increase the rate of prosecutions” of miners? If the Home Secretary did not do each and every one of these crucial things, will not many people conclude that the decision-making process was incomplete and therefore unsound?

Yesterday, the Home Secretary promised to release the operational order. Will the Minister make sure that that happens immediately? She also dismissed the link with Hillsborough. In doing so, is she dismissing the words of Margaret Aspinall, who believes that if the police had been properly held to account for their misdeeds in 1985, the Hillsborough cover-up may never have happened? Are we to conclude that from now on, under this Home Secretary, all manner of misdeeds will be left uninvestigated as long as there are “no deaths”?

The Minister attended a positive meeting with campaigners in early September. We left the meeting with the clear impression that it was not a question of whether there would be an inquiry, but of what form the inquiry would take. Indeed, the next day The Times reported on its front page that Whitehall sources had said there would be an inquiry. Did the Home Secretary or her advisers authorise this briefing, and what changed after it was given? In retrospect, does the Minister now concede that it was utterly cruel to give those campaigners false hope in that way?

Yesterday, we were hit with a bombshell, but today we dust ourselves down and we give notice to this Government that we will never give up this fight.

Brandon Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman will know full well from the meeting with campaigners that he came to, and I was also at, that we were very clear, as the Home Secretary has been throughout the process, that she would make a decision by the end of October and would take into account a wide range of factors. She considered a number of factors when making her decision. She reviewed a wide range of documents, carefully considered the arguments contained in the campaign’s submission and spoke to the campaign leaders and supporters, as she did yesterday, when she personally spoke to Barbara Jackson and to the right hon. Gentleman, among others, and I spoke to the police and crime commissioner.

The right hon. Gentleman commented on the links with Hillsborough. I know he will be aware that work is still ongoing on Hillsborough, with the Independent Police Complaints Commission still looking at the issues, and there could still be criminal proceedings.

When the right hon. Gentleman looks at the decision he should remember that, as the Home Secretary rightly pointed out yesterday, we fully appreciate that we disagree on this, but that does not mean that the Home Secretary’s decision is wrong.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I very much support the Home Secretary’s decision. Unlike most of the people bleating on the Labour Benches, I actually lived in South Yorkshire in a mining community during the time of the miners strike and saw at first hand the
bullying and intimidation from the miners that went on. People who did not contribute to the strike fund had their windows done in.

These people were trying to bring down the democratically elected Government of the time. They lost, and they need to get over it. Anyone only has to look at the TV pictures—[Interruption.]

_Brandon Lewis_: The hon. Lady was here yesterday. We on the Labour Benches have noted that the Home Secretary has not bothered to come before the House on this occasion to explain her decision.

_Brandon Lewis_: My hon. Friend makes an impassioned point. I would not for a moment want to put words in the mouth of the right hon. Member. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) from the Dispatch Box. I am sure he will be able to explain the actions he took or did not take during that period. For us, this has not been a political decision. The Home Secretary said yesterday that it is about looking at what is right in terms of the wider public interest and in the light of the substantial changes to and reforms of the police service there have been. All of us, across the House, should get behind the continued driving through of future reforms of the police service through the Policing and Crime Bill.

_Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab):_ We on the Labour Benches have noted that the Home Secretary has not bothered to come before the House on this occasion to explain her decision.

_Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab):_ Most people in this House remember the miners strike, and what happened at Orgreave was totemic. Most people in the House also remember what Lord Stockton—Harold Macmillan—said in his maiden speech in the House of Lords about the miners strike: “it breaks my heart to see what is happening in our country today. A terrible strike...by the best men in the world. They beat the Kaiser’s army and they beat Hitler’s army. They never gave in.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 13 November 1984; Vol. 457, c. 240.]

Does the Minister understand that the Home Secretary’s decision is a slap in the face to the best men in the world and their friends and supporters? Does he understand that the Orgreave campaigners feel that they have been led up the garden path by the Home Secretary? And does he understand that the Home Secretary’s proposition is that because there were no deaths and no convictions—and the cases only collapsed because the collusion by South Yorkshire police officers was revealed—injustice must stand? The Opposition say to Ministers that we will not let this issue go and that injustice will not be allowed to stand.

_Brandon Lewis_: The hon. Lady was here yesterday when the Home Secretary was here, having already made a written ministerial statement, to answer questions on this matter during oral questions. I am here today because this issue forms part of the portfolio I cover for the Home Office.

The Government have stood up and brought forward inquiries before. We have not been afraid to address matters to correct the wrongs of the past. We have had to consider the wider public interest, which includes what lessons need to be learned and how we change police behaviour based on what happened 30 years ago. Bear in mind that since that time we have had not only the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 but a range of other reforms, not least the delivery of local accountability through police and crime commissioners and changes in police practice. Looking at what lessons could be learned, what the benefits would be and what outcomes we are looking for from a public inquiry, the Home Secretary’s decision, although the hon. Lady disagrees with it, is absolutely right.

I would just make a further point to the hon. Lady. In looking at the wider public interest, the Home Office considers a wide range of matters, including differences with previous cases where there were a substantial number of tragic deaths. In this case there were none and there were no convictions, so what we are looking at with a public inquiry is whether other lessons could be learned. As I said yesterday, if the hon. Lady looks at the changes in police practice over 30 years, she will see there would be no benefit from proceeding with a public inquiry.

_Ana Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con):_ Some of us did not read accounts of the miners’ strike in The Guardian, with the benefit of living in London. Some of us—as I was, reporting for Central Television—were there on a daily basis. I totally agree with the Home Secretary’s very sensible decision. If we were to have an inquiry, does my right hon. Friend agree that it might be into the funding and activities of the National Union of Mineworkers, which on an almost daily basis bussed thousands of their members into the county of Nottinghamshire to not only bring down a democratically elected Government, but to thwart the democratic decision of the Nottinghamshire miners to work?

_Brandon Lewis_: My right hon. Friend highlights the very strong feelings on all sides about Orgreave. We totally understand that. The Home Secretary outlined that here yesterday and in the meeting with Orgreave campaigners that I and other MPs also attended. As the Home Secretary outlined yesterday, we appreciate that the campaigners will be disappointed with the decision she has made, but we have to make a decision about what is in the wider public interest, and an inquiry is not.

_Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP):_ I listened very carefully to what the Home Secretary had to say yesterday, but, as has already been indicated, her argument that there were no wrongful convictions does not hold water when one realises that the cases collapsed when a decent lawyer revealed collusion on the part of the police.

The absence of deaths at Orgreave is also a red herring. Is not the real issue here as follows: when the redactions to the June 2015 IPCC report were revealed, they showed striking similarities between the personnel...
Brandon Lewis: No, and with all due respect, I think the hon. Lady is using an unfortunate interpretation of what I said. I have been clear, as was the Home Secretary yesterday, that there is a wide range of issues surrounding the public interest in having an inquiry. There were no wrongful convictions, and there were no deaths, but a key question is—I stress it again—what lessons are we looking to learn from an incident that happened 30 years ago? In the period from the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 right through to the Policing and Crime Bill that is going through the House today, there has been a substantial and dramatic change in the system and structure of policing in this country. Things are very different today, so there is no wider public interest in having an inquiry at this time.

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Does the Minister agree that far and away the worst atrocity in South Yorkshire feel that they have been sold down the river by this Government—and this cannot stand. I absolutely understand the strength of their feeling and why they feel as they do, but we have to look at the wider public interest. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) refers from a sedentary position to other issues around South Yorkshire, but they are separate issues. This is a decision specifically about Orgreave, not the wider issues for South Yorkshire. We may disagree with it, but the Home Secretary has made the decision—the right decision—that there is no benefit from having a public inquiry on this issue.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Minister’s statement today reflects what the Home Secretary said in her written ministerial statement yesterday, which is that somehow there can be no inquiry because South Yorkshire policing has moved on. I have to tell the right hon. Gentleman that this is a new principle of truth and justice—that it can be denied, in the face of serious allegations, because of the dubious claim that lessons have been learned. That is why families and communities in South Yorkshire feel that they have been sold down the river by this Government—and this cannot stand.

Brandon Lewis: As I said earlier, this has to be looked at in the context of this particular case. Under this Government, the Prime Minister and Home Secretary have stood up to take on independent reviews and inquiries over a range of very difficult issues over the last six years, looking at what happened in the past. Despite what Opposition Members might wish to make of it, this is not a political decision; it is a decision based on looking at the particular case of Orgreave and at what is in the wider public interest. As I have outlined, a public inquiry will not serve that interest.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the Minister agree that far and away the worst atrocity in those terrible events was the murder of the taxi driver, David Wilkie? Is my right hon. Friend as amazed as I was looking forward to working with them to develop and new membership in that police force, and I said that the force is determined to build a new relationship with the people of South Yorkshire. There is new leadership and new membership in that police force, and I said that I was looking forward to working with them to develop a new approach from what existed some 30 years ago. They acknowledge that they have a piece of work to do to rebuild engagement with the community, and we will stand with them in support.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I find it painful that Members are rehashing discredited, 30-year-old smears, which does nothing for community cohesion. Both the Home Secretary yesterday and the Minister now seem to be saying that we are not having this inquiry because nobody died. Is that the new bar that this Government are levying on justice?
am that his death has not been mentioned once by Opposition Members? Does he agree that if we are to have a public inquiry, it should be into what the former leader of the Labour party called the lies, the violence and the lack of a ballot by those strike-breakers?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend highlights the strength of feeling that exists on all sides of the debate about the activities that happened many years ago. On the point he raised about what would happen if there were a public inquiry, there will not be one. The decision of the Home Secretary and the Government is that the wider public interest is not served by having an Orgreave inquiry.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Why is it that 31 years is too long for an inquiry, yet 31 years is not too long for this Government to carry on hiding the Cabinet papers on the strike and to refuse to release them? Why is it so long, when we know that the Thatcher Government were going to close 75 pits and not 20? The truth is that this nasty party has now become the nasty Government, who are more concerned about preserving the Thatcher legacy than they are fighting for truth and justice.

Brandon Lewis: Again, the hon. Gentleman misinterprets what I have said this afternoon. What I have said very clearly is that the decision not to have a public inquiry is based on looking at the wider public interest. Included in that are the facts that there were no wrongful convictions and no deaths and, importantly, that police structure and behaviour has changed. This was seen partly under the last Labour Government, but predominantly under this Government. I ask the hon. Gentleman to support and join us in carrying out the further work to continue those reforms and to work with the South Yorkshire police to improve their relationship with people as we go forward. I have spoken to the police and crime commissioner of South Yorkshire, and I know that he is very keen to be transparent and to deliver more. He has employed an archivist to try to ensure that South Yorkshire employed an archivist to try to ensure that South Yorkshire police will continue and be delivered?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The synthetic indignation from Labour Members cannot mask the fact that in 13 years of a Labour Government, the issue of Orgreave was completely neglected and forgotten. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, notwithstanding the absence of an inquiry—I concur wholeheartedly with the Home Secretary’s decision—the clear and necessary changes in governance and mind-set required within the South Yorkshire police will continue and be delivered?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good and important point. It is very important that we continue to reform the police service for the future. Some reforms are outlined in the Policing and Crime Bill, and there are others that the former Home Secretary, now our Prime Minister, has taken on, and that the Home Secretary is determined to deliver. It is part of the task of changing how the police work from how they used to work some 30 years ago. I spoke to Dr Alan Billings, the police and crime commissioner for South Yorkshire yesterday afternoon. I am determined to work with him and his chief constable to make sure that they get a good relationship with the people of South Yorkshire in the future. We want to ensure that the police service delivers on the work that the police do every single day—policing by consent.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I have represented Orgreave in this House since 1983. I well remember the events of the miners’ strike at that time. I called for a public inquiry to review the policing of the miners’ strike in 1985—and it was denied at that time as it has been denied now. The Minister says that the IPCC is still looking at these issues, but he must know that the IPCC deals with serving police officers. If they are still serving in South Yorkshire, they would have been about 16 at the time, so this is not an answer to the problem. He says that the Home Secretary is looking at the papers, but we need an independent individual to look at them. If we cannot have a full public inquiry, we should surely be able to have someone of an independent nature to look at what happened to see if any lessons can be learned from the policing of the miners’ strike in 1984–85.

Brandon Lewis: I think the fact that the IPCC is involved in work on Hillsborough that could lead to criminal proceedings shows that it is prepared to deal with these issues appropriately. After all, it is an independent organisation. As I said earlier, I met its chair yesterday, and he confirmed again—as the IPCC has already confirmed publicly—that if new evidence appears, it will look at that evidence. I assume from the right hon. Gentleman’s comments that he will fully support the work that we are doing to reform and update the IPCC to ensure that officers who have left the police force can still be involved in investigations and prosecuted by the organisation.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I was a serving police officer at the time, and I well remember the situation as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). Does the Minister agree that policing has moved on significantly in the last few decades, that there are sufficient safeguards against a repetition of an episode like Orgreave and that there is no useful purpose in an inquiry?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has made a very good point. As I have said, the changes made by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act and Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, the criminal justice changes, and other reforms—not least the introduction of local accountability through police and crime commissioners—have led to a dramatic change in policing practices in the last few decades. I welcome that, but we all need to work to ensure that it continues.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I note that the Minister has failed to answer a single one of the questions asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham). I feel sorry for the Minister, because the Home Secretary bottled it yesterday and she has bottled it again today. He knows that she did not review the documents on the basis of which the IPCC reached its decision. Does he honestly believe that she can honestly say that there is no link with Hillsborough and that there are no lessons to be learnt today?
Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady should have another look at what I said in response to the right hon. Gentleman’s question. Although I fully appreciate that both she and he may not agree with or like what I said, that does not mean that I did not answer the question, and it does not mean that the Home Secretary’s decision is wrong. A number of factors were taken into account in the making of that decision. It involved looking at a wide range of documents, and, indeed, meeting the Orgreave campaigners themselves, as the Home Secretary, the hon. Lady and I did in September. I suggest that the hon. Lady look again at my answers to questions, including my answers to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I wonder whether the Minister agrees with David Blunkett, the former Labour Home Secretary, who reportedly said that he “would take some convincing that another agonising internal inquiry would shed more light than is already known.”

Brandon Lewis: I saw that quotation as well, and I think it underlines and highlights the fact that this was a difficult decision. No one has said that it was easy. As the Home Secretary herself said, in the House yesterday—and she was here yesterday, answering questions on this matter—and also during previous appearances in the House and when meeting the campaigners, a difficult decision had to be made and many factors weighed up. Ultimately, however, we had to make a decision about what was in the wider public interest, and this decision is in the wider public interest.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): May I ask the Minister a very simple question? Will the Home Secretary meet members of the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign to discuss this matter further?

Brandon Lewis: The Home Secretary has met the Orgreave campaigners, and she spoke to Barbara Jackson yesterday. She has also written to the campaigners, and I think that they need time to digest her letter. I know that they made a statement shortly before I came into the House today, but we shall have to await their response to the Home Secretary and take matters from there.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): A few moments ago, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) mentioned the 1983 election. May I invite the Minister to consider improvements that have been made in police codes of conduct in the past 30 years by, for example, the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, which came into force on 1 January 1986? Given the apparent strength of feeling on the Opposition Benches, is it not strange that successive Labour Governments failed to conduct a review of, or inquiry into, what had happened at Orgreave?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has made a couple of points. I will let others draw their own conclusions about the actions of those other than ourselves in the Home Office, but I will say that he is absolutely right about the changes that have taken place. We have had PACE, the Public Order Act 1986, the changes at HMIC, and the police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy inspections. The Association of Chief Police Officers has now become the National Police Chiefs Council and has its own codes of conduct. Furthermore, we have the Policing and Crime Bill, and we have the police and crime commissioner reforms that were introduced in the House by the present Prime Minister. Policing has changed dramatically, but we want the reforms to continue, and I urge all members to support that work.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I was elected to the House in 1984, in the middle of the miners strike. I spoke about the strike in my maiden speech, and I stood on the picket lines and saw what happened. I saw the brutality and the intimidation. I saw a pregnant woman kicked in the stomach. There was a lot of violence. That was in the Cynon valley, and people in the Cynon valley still feel very strongly about this issue. They believe that unless the Government have something to hide, they should agree to an inquiry. We are fully behind the people who call for the inquiry; people never forget, and certainly they will never forget the experiences of the miners strike.

Brandon Lewis: As I said earlier, the decision that we have had to make—the decision that the Home Secretary has made—involved looking at a range of issues relating to the specific case of Orgreave and considering whether it was in the wider public interest to hold an inquiry. It was decided that it was not.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) on being granted the urgent question, but does the Minister agree that if there is to be an inquiry of this kind, it should take place as soon as possible after the event? Did the Home Secretary take account of the fact that Prime Minister Brown and Prime Minister Blair did not hold such an inquiry? Is not the danger now that all that would happen is that a lot of lawyers would become even richer, and we would not gain any more knowledge?

Brandon Lewis: The Home Secretary’s decision involved looking at a wide range of documents and considering a wide range of factors. Ultimately, however, the core of the decision was the question of what was in the wider public interest, and we have decided that an inquiry is not in the wider public interest.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Home Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and encouraged me to present the evidence that I had been given by one of my local councillors, Mike Freeman. He was a serving officer in Greater Manchester police whose whistleblowing about the corrupt practices in South Yorkshire featured in an edition of the Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme. This Government did not have Mike’s back. Would the Minister like to apologise for the personal cost that he has suffered?

Brandon Lewis: As I have said, the Home Secretary looked at a wide range of documents and considered a wide range of factors, and that included meeting the campaigners. We are determined to ensure that whistleblowers are properly protected, which is why we are seeking to increase their protections. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will support that, along with the Police and Crime Bill and our work with the IPCC.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Does it not strike the Minister as odd that Labour Members are using part of their Opposition day tomorrow to debate police officers’ safety? They seem to have forgotten that
32 years ago individual police officers from up and down the country, including Northamptonshire, faced an unprecedented wave of picket-line violence from jobs, led by trade unions, without the protective equipment that police officers have today. Yes, it was ugly; yes, it was violence, and those unfortunate events happened on both sides. However, to spend millions of pounds on investigating events of 32 years ago when things have moved on would be a waste of time.

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has raised the important issue of the safety and security of our police, which we will debate tomorrow. It is right for people to appreciate that our forces police by consent, which is why I think that the reforms that have taken place over the past few decades are so important, and why I think that we must continue those reforms. We want a police force that we can continue to be proud of and continue to rate as the best in the world, and we want to make sure that our police officers are safe as well. That does not detract from the fact that both the Home Secretary and I fully appreciate the strength of feeling on all sides of the debate. Nevertheless, the decision about Orgreave had to be about what was in the wider public interest. That is the decision that the Home Secretary has made, and rightly so.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign is supported by people throughout the United Kingdom, including many of my constituents. Yesterday’s decision ultimately means that South Yorkshire police will not be held to account for their actions and required to answer the serious allegation that they were deliberately trying to create circumstances in which riot charges would stick, a narrative that was briefed to the then Prime Minister and her Cabinet. In the absence of an inquiry or an independent review, how do the Government intend to deal with that very serious allegation?

Brandon Lewis: If there are allegations and new evidence, the IPCC chair repeated to me yesterday what it has said publicly; it will look at any new evidence and take it into account in any decisions it makes moving forward. In particular, there are still ongoing investigations and potential criminal proceedings linked to Hillsborough. This is also why it is important that we not only continue to deliver the reforms outlined over the last 30 years, and in particular the last five or six years, but we continue the reform of the police service, especially working with South Yorkshire police on its relationships with its local community.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I was very young during the miners strike but I do know Nottinghamshire’s former coalfield communities today; I represent some of them. Those communities are still suffering in many respects from the miners strike. They are suffering from ill health, low levels of employment, addiction and many other problems. As so little is to be gained from having this inquiry, would it not be better if we all now concentrate on the present and the future?

Brandon Lewis: There is an important point here as this highlights why the Prime Minister is right to state that we as a Government need to work to ensure we deliver a country that works for everybody, so everyone in those communities—communities I worked in myself a decade or more ago—has the chance to succeed in life. We must always learn the lessons of the past. That is why the reforms over the last three decades and the reforms going forward are so important in making sure we continue to have a first-class police force in this country.

Mr Clive Bette (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The police and crime commissioner in South Yorkshire, Dr Alan Billings, has made it absolutely clear that he does not want to begin the process of building a new future for South Yorkshire police by sweeping under the carpet the problems of the past. Will the Minister specifically say whether he and the Home Secretary have looked at the evidence of masonic links involved in the cover-up at Orgreave and whether they are the same masonic links that were evident in the cover-up at Hillsborough?

Brandon Lewis: I repeat what I said earlier this afternoon: the Home Secretary has considered a number of factors in the decision, including a wide range of documents and arguments put forward in the campaign submission. Members on the Opposition Front Bench are saying this has already been said, but that might be because I am being asked the same question in effect time and again. No matter how many times I am asked, I will be clear to Opposition Members that the Home Secretary has looked at a wide range of issues in making her decision. [Interruption.] I say specifically on the hon. Gentleman’s point about the PCC, if Opposition Front Benchers will allow him to hear what I am saying, that Dr Alan Billings makes an important point about wanting to move forward with a fresh start for the new leadership of South Yorkshire police. My hon. Friends have made that point, and when I spoke to the PCC yesterday he was clear about his determination to have transparency and to have an archivist work through the archives to get as much as possible out into the public domain to help us move forward. The relationship with the public of South Yorkshire is important.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does the Minister agree that, although there was of course a tragedy at Orgreave and there were abuses almost certainly on both sides, justice delayed is justice denied, and it would have been better to have had this inquiry 15 years after the event rather than waiting 31 years, when so many people are retired or have died, and it would be inappropriate to have it now?

Brandon Lewis: I understand my hon. Friend’s point, but the reasoning behind the Home Secretary’s decision comes from looking at the wider public interest. There were no wrongful convictions and no deaths and, importantly, the changes in policing over the last three decades mean policing has moved on, and we need to continue those reforms.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that there were no wrongful convictions because the case the police fabricated against those 95 miners collapsed because of the fabricated evidence? Does he not accept that there was then no accountability for the senior officers in South Yorkshire police, including the chief constable at the time, who led that arrangement
Brandon Lewis: The hon. Lady has in effect outlined why it has been so important to have those reforms in how policing works and that local accountability over the last three decades. Her point about Hillsborough is right, and criminal proceedings may well come out of that with the IPCC, but that is because the reforms and changes through the IPCC and further reforms in the Policing and Crime Bill and the PCCs have changed the landscape of policing. It has changed dramatically in the last 30 years, and that forms a part of the Home Secretary’s right decision that it is not in the public interest to have a public inquiry.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): In 1984 I sat on these Benches representing the coalmining communities of Cannock and Burntwood. At that time my constituents working at Lea Hall and Littleton collieries were being subjected to the kind of intimidation that my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has mentioned, including the throwing of bags of urine by striking south Wales miners as my constituents attempted to go to work. So does my hon. Friend the Minister accept that Orgreave was in fact a violent attempt to prevent the British Steel Corporation from going about its lawful business and furthermore a naked political attempt to bring down the Government of Margaret Thatcher, and that since then trade union relations and industrial relations have been transformed out of all recognition, to the betterment of this country?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend highlights the strength of feeling on both sides about issues that happened decades ago, and also highlights again that, hugely importantly, the police have reformed. There are still reforms going forward that we need to see through, and I hope we will all be working together in the years ahead to deliver them.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): The jobs of ordinary police officers, many of whom came from mining families, were made difficult for many years after the miners strike precisely because of the misuse of police by the state. Is that not the fundamental issue here? Zimbabwe, China and Venezuela are three countries that have recently used the police to undermine individual rights and freedoms. How do we know that senior politicians were not involved, as the Cabinet papers have not been revealed and there is no longer going to be an inquiry? When will we know, for better or for worse, what senior politicians did and what pressure they brought to bear on the police?

Brandon Lewis: A large number of historical files on Orgreave and the miners strike are already publicly available through the National Archives. Also, as I have said, the PCC for South Yorkshire is employing an archivist to look at publishing even more from its archives, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will take a great interest in that. He should also work with us and endorse the reforms to the police service that will lead to that key important result that Members have mentioned: that the new leadership of South Yorkshire police is able to find a way to build a new relationship with the people of South Yorkshire and to continue the work the police do every day, policing by consent.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is with great sadness that I hear Conservative Members saying that an inquiry is neither justified nor needed. I wonder how many said the same prior to the Hillsborough inquiry. We on this side of the House will continue our fight for justice and truth for those affected in Orgreave.

Brandon Lewis: I would just draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the inquiries and work that this Government have done to bring injustice to the surface. We have a good track record of making sure we unearth things but ultimately always making a decision that is in the wider public interest.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): The Prime Minister’s own chief of staff, Nick Timothy, is on record as saying: “If the police pre-planned a mass, unlawful assault on the miners at Orgreave and then sought to cover up what they did and arrest people on trumped up charges, we need to know.”

He is absolutely right. Why are the Government stopping us knowing?

Brandon Lewis: I suggest the hon. Gentleman read through the evidence that is out there—that is published in the National Archives and being published by South Yorkshire police—and reads the full IPCC report on its investigation as well as the paperwork from the campaigners themselves. These are all part of the wide range of sources that we and the Home Secretary have looked at in making a decision on what is in the wider public interest.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): It is incumbent on every Member of the House to fight for truth and justice when lies and injustice have been exposed. The Home Secretary is denying us a public inquiry into the Orgreave tragedy, and the Scottish Government are denying us an inquiry in Scotland on the policing and convictions relating to the injustices that happened there during the miners strike. Can the public of this country therefore conclude that the Governments that are democratically elected to represent them here and in Scotland are no longer interested in fighting for justice even when new information becomes available?

Brandon Lewis: As I have said, if new information becomes available, the IPCC will look into investigating it. I had that conversation with the chairman of the IPCC yesterday, and I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments I made on that earlier this afternoon. I would also like to think that the public will look at the track record of the Government, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister in taking on vested interests and making difficult decisions. This has been a difficult
decision. The Home Secretary has made a decision that we believe is in the wider public interest, and it is the right decision.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Trust is crucial to policing, and the image of mounted police officers cantering towards the striking miners is seared on the imagination of everyone who has seen it. This is a huge issue of public interest, as are the allegations of political interference in policing in our country. Does the Minister not recognise the damage that the Secretary of State’s failure to hold an investigation and to stand up for justice is having on public confidence in her Department?

Brandon Lewis: The IPCC has held an investigation, and if there is new evidence, it will look at the potential for further investigations. That is a matter for the IPCC, which is, by definition, independent. The hon. Lady also touched on the point that our police forces police by consent in this country. That is a two-way thing. In fact, we will be debating that subject tomorrow. It is important that the police and crime commissioner and the new leadership of the South Yorkshire police look at how they build that relationship with the public. It is also important that we and the public respect the police, as they continue to police us by consent. No doubt that will be part of the debate tomorrow afternoon.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): It is not good enough for the Minister to say that there should have been an inquiry earlier, because papers on Orgreave were still being released up to Christmas 2015. Those papers prompted calls for an inquiry because they showed an abuse of power in South Yorkshire police and the concocting of statements. Yes, no one was killed at Orgreave but lives were ruined and innocent people were sent to jail on remand. More importantly, in the mining areas that I know well—I am the direct descendant of generations of miners—trust in the police was completely destroyed in communities where children were previously brought up to trust and support the police. Until there is an inquiry, those wrongs cannot be righted. How can the Minister possibly keep denying us one?

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Lady looks at what I have said this afternoon, she will see that I have not commented on what the previous Government did or did not do. I have stated specifically that that is a matter for those who were members of that Government to comment on, not for me. Our decision is about the Orgreave case, based on the facts that the Home Secretary and I have looked at and the meetings with the families. The hon. Lady talked about the public’s view of South Yorkshire police, and of the police in general, and it is important that we continue with the reforms and ensure that South Yorkshire police have the support they need to rebuild those relationships with the public. That is the outcome that should be right for people across the country. We should continue with the reforms and I hope that she will support us in doing so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The miners from the Rhondda at Orgreave were dressed in T-shirts and placards, and they were batted aside like flies by what felt like a paramilitary operation under political instruction. There are very real questions that the community in the Rhondda is still asking. Who gave those instructions? Has the present Home Secretary seen the operational instructions of the day? Why will she not publish them? Who told the police officers to fabricate evidence and to perjure themselves? The Home Secretary says that there has been no miscarriage of justice, but the people of the Rhondda will conclude that without a proper investigation and full publication, the miscarriage of justice is being done in this House by this Government. [Interruption.]

Brandon Lewis: The point that the Home Secretary was making—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is so much yelling from each side of the Chamber that it was difficult for me to hear the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who should be heard by the House—and, indeed, by the world. I also need to hear the response from the Minister, which should also be widely heard. I say to Members on both sides: please, hold your noise.

Brandon Lewis: The point that the Home Secretary was making, and that I have made today, is that we have looked at a whole range of factors. The comparison has been made with Hillsborough, but unlike at Hillsborough, there were no deaths or wrongful convictions as a result of Orgreave. Also, policing has changed dramatically in the years since then. That is why the Home Secretary’s decision, which had to be made in the wider public interest, is the right one, despite the fact that there is disagreement on it.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Today’s exchanges show that what the Minister has described as the Home Secretary’s “difficult decision” is hardly going to be received as an independent consideration. He has said a lot today about the public interest. Will he tell us which public interest would be compromised or undermined by a demonstrably independent and cost-effective review of these signal events?

Brandon Lewis: That is a very good question. This reminds me of a question I asked when I met the campaigners. I asked what they were hoping an inquiry would achieve. There were no wrongful convictions to correct, and there were no deaths to investigate. There was, however, a question about police behaviour. We can learn the lessons of the past and look at the behaviour, performance, structures and working of the police for the future. Things have changed dramatically in the past three decades, from the reforms in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 right through to the ones that we are introducing today. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman to support us in our work on continuing with these important reforms.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Many of those campaigning for an inquiry into Orgreave drew hope from the result of the Hillsborough inquiry. Is the real reason that no inquiry will be allowed in this instance the fact that the Government fear that it would show that, unlike at Hillsborough, the police conspired in advance and initiated the confrontations, which would undoubtedly lead to questions about Government involvement?

Brandon Lewis: As I have said, there are considerable differences between the two situations. The basis on which the Government’s decision on an inquiry into Orgreave was made was whether it would be in the wider public interest.
Press Matters

1.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on matters relating to the Leveson inquiry. A free press is an essential component of a fully functioning democracy, which is why it was a manifesto commitment of this Government to defend a free press. The press should tell the truth without fear or favour and hold the powerful to account. However, we now know that that freedom has in the past been abused. We know that some parts of the press have ignored their own code of practice and the law. I have met victims of illegal and improper press intrusion, some of whom have suffered immense distress.

In July 2011, the coalition Government announced an inquiry into the role of the press and the police in phone hacking and other illegal practices in the British press. Lord Justice Leveson—now Sir Brian Leveson—was appointed chair of the inquiry. Part 1 of the inquiry examined the culture, practices and ethics of the press. It considered such matters as whether the press needed a different form of regulation and how the press interacted with the public, the police and politicians. Sir Brian Leveson heard evidence from more than 300 people, including some of those who had been affected by the most egregious press behaviour. On 29 November 2012, the Leveson inquiry published its report on part 1. It contained 92 recommendations, the majority of which have been acted on and are being delivered. Part 2 of the inquiry, which has not yet begun, would further examine wrongdoing in the press and the police.

Following a cross-party agreement, a royal charter established the Press Recognition Panel, which began operating in November 2014. As stated on its website, the panel’s purpose is to ensure that any press self-regulator is “independent, properly funded and able to protect the public, while recognising the important role carried out by the press”.

Since September 2015, the panel has been taking applications from regulators that are seeking recognition. Alongside the royal charter, section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 was designed to incentivise newspapers to join a recognised self-regulator. Section 40 has passed into law but remains unimplemented. It is one of two incentives. The other, relating to exemplary damages, came into effect on 3 November 2015. A self-regulator applying for recognition must meet the specific criteria set out in the royal charter, including providing a system of low-cost arbitration to replace the need for court action. Section 40 contains two presumptions: that if a publisher who is a member of a recognised self-regulator loses a relevant media case in court, they would have to pay the losing side’s costs; and that if a publisher who is not a member of a recognised self-regulator wins such a case in court, they would have to pay the losing side’s costs as well as their own. Each element was intended to encourage the press to join a recognised self-regulator through a legitimate rebalancing of the normal rules on costs.

It has hitherto been the view of Government that as we wait for a number of elements of the new self-regulatory regime to settle in—the exemplary damages provisions of the 2013 Act, the press developing an effective form of voluntary self-regulation, and self-regulators applying for recognition—the time has not been right to commence section 40. However, the panel recently recognised its first self-regulator, the independent monitor for the press or IMPRESS, which currently has around 50 members. Meanwhile, the Independent Press Standards Organisation, known as IPSO, regulates more than 2,500 publications but has been clear that it will not seek recognition from the panel. We think the time is right to consider section 40 further.

It has also become apparent that the final criminal case relating to the Leveson inquiry is entering its final stages. We therefore think it is an appropriate time to start to consider the next steps on part 2 of the inquiry. Many of the issues that part 2 would have covered have been addressed over the past five years. Three police investigations—Operations Elveden, Tuleta and Weeting—have investigated a wide range of offences. A clear message has been sent to all police officers and public officials that receiving payments for confidential information will not be tolerated and will be dealt with robustly. The Metropolitan Police Service has introduced new policies on whistleblowing, gifts and hospitality, and media relations.

There was also a degree of subject matter overlap between parts 1 and 2 of the Leveson inquiry. For example, the inquiry reviewed the MPS’s initial investigation into phone hacking and the role of politicians and public servants regarding any failure to investigate wrongdoing in News International. Part 1 made numerous recommendations which, where they relate to them, are being addressed by the police. Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, the Independent Police Complaints Commission and the College of Policing. Given the extent of the criminal investigations, the implementation of the recommendations from part 1 of the Leveson inquiry and the cost to the taxpayer of the investigations and part 1—£43.7 million and £5.4 million respectively—the Government are considering whether undertaking part 2 is still in the public interest.

We are keen to take stock and seek the views of the public and interested parties—not least those who have been the victims of press abuse. We will also formally consult Sir Brian Leveson, in his role as inquiry chair, on the question of part 2 at the appropriate time. I can announce that today we are launching a public consultation, inviting comments on both section 40 and part 2 of the Leveson inquiry from organisations that are affected by it and from the public. It will run for 10 weeks from today—1 November—until 10 January 2017. It is laid out in a consultation document entitled, “Consultation on the Leveson Inquiry and its implementation”, published on gov.uk. I am also depositing it in the Libraries of both Houses.

I have met Sir Brian Leveson, and spoke to him again this morning. I will write to him formally as well. I am extremely grateful for all the work that he and his team have done to get us this far. The Government are determined that a balance is struck between press freedom and the freedom of the individual. Those who are treated improperly must have redress. Likewise, politicians must not seek to muzzle the press or prevent it from doing legitimate work, such as holding us to account. The police must take seriously their role in protecting not only their own reputation, but also those people they are meant to serve. That is the balance that we wish
to strike, and the consultation is the most appropriate and fairest way of doing so. I commend this statement to the House.

1.35 pm

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): What a sad day this is. I am at least grateful to the Secretary of State for giving me an advance copy of her statement an hour ago—947 days after all parties reached an agreement to implement in full the recommendations of the Levenson inquiry.

The Prime Minister herself set the test for the process on 14 June 2012 when she said to the inquiry:

“I will never forget meeting with the Dowler family in Downing Street to run through the terms of this Inquiry with them and to hear what they had been through and how it had redoubled, trebled the pain and agony they’d been through over losing Milly.”

She went on to say that the test should be

“are we really protecting people who have been caught up and absolutely thrown to the wolves by this process. That’s what the test is.”

The Government reassured victims that if they spoke out at Levenson, the Government would act on his recommendations. Today, the Culture Secretary has announced that we must wait another 10 weeks while the reforms are discussed all over again in the context of a wider consultation on the press. The Opposition believe that they have been discussed and debated enough and should have been implemented years ago. The victims of press intrusion cannot wait a day longer for this Government to honour David Cameron’s promises to pass the then Home Secretary’s self-defined test. For the Culture Secretary to stand here today and announce a consultation into the press nearly 1,000 days after those reforms were agreed by party leaders is deeply regrettable.

As the Culture Secretary said, it is more than five years since the previous Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box and announced an inquiry into press practices and ethics. A lot has happened since then. We have had the Hillsborough inquiry and its findings on misleading police statements to Government officials and subsequently newspapers. We had the urgent question on Orgreave just this morning. We have had the case of Mazher Mahmood, the fake sheikh who perverted the course of justice to secure his scoops and in so doing he opens up the Executive to accusations that they have succumbed to the vested interests of media barons—it is an age-old story and she is carrying the can.

I am afraid that the Secretary of State leaves us no choice but to ask her some searching questions. First, did the Prime Minister discuss the Levenson process at her private meeting with Rupert Murdoch in New York last month? Secondly, when the Secretary of State spoke to Lord Levenson earlier today, did he approve this hurried consultation? Does he agree with her analysis? Will she allow him to make a public statement? Finally, has she spoken to the parents of Milly Dowler and to other victims of press intrusion? What is their view of these proposals? Do they think this passes the Prime Minister’s test? Are we really protecting people who have been caught up and absolutely thrown to the wolves?

Karen Bradley: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Dispatch Box, but I disagree with much of what he has just said. Let me start by being clear about victims of press intrusion: the first people I met in this job regarding press regulation were the victims of phone hacking—I did so with Hacked Off. I have been determined throughout my time in this role to make sure that I meet as many victims as possible; I did the same in my previous role in the Home Office and I continue to do it, because if we do not listen to people and what they have been through, we cannot possibly imagine it and legislate in an appropriate way. But what is clear to me, and I think to him, is that we all want effective, robust press regulation, so we have to look at the situation we find ourselves in today, not five years ago, to make sure we can achieve that. In his list of things that had happened, he actually set out all the reasons why we need to take a step back and to consider the position, so I invite responses from all interested bodies—from all people affected by this. I am sure that we will get many, many responses to the consultation and I welcome them. We need to look at this in terms of the situation and the press regulation we have today, to make sure we get the right, appropriate, robust, effective press regulation, so that, as he said, we do all we can to protect people.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s intention to continue to listen very carefully on these matters. Will she confirm that in considering how best to proceed, she will take account of the significant deterioration in the economic health of traditional media, which has taken place even since Levenson and is still leading to the closure of titles at both national and local level? Will she bear in mind that the real media giants of today, such as Facebook and Google, are outside the scope of legislation and regulation altogether?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend, who was my predecessor in this role, sets out important arguments, which we need to consider. He rightly says that we need
to make sure that this regulation affects the whole of the press, not just the print media that are on our high streets and that are produced locally, but those global players on the internet.

**John Nicolson** (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): As the House knows, section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 was passed to implement the recommendations made by the Leveson inquiry that any new regulator set up should be accredited as independent and effective. The purpose of that section is to provide costs protection for claimants and Leveson-regulated newspaper publishers. Section 40 extends to England and Wales only. Regulation of print media is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, which has provided cross-party support for the UK Government's actions to implement the royal charter. Does the Secretary of State understand the difficulties that local newspapers face and recognise that the majority of the press, especially the regional press in Scotland, was not involved in the sort of malpractice that prompted the Leveson recommendations?

It is important that we balance respect for the freedom of the press and the public desire for high standards, accuracy and transparency. That said, does the Secretary of State agree that the protection afforded by section 40 would be available to Scottish litigants who chose to sue newspapers based in England and Wales in the event that section 40 was enacted? In the meantime, Scottish National party MPs will support the House of Lords amendment to the Investigatory Powers Bill that will introduce a new clause 9, on the back of clause 8, which was introduced as an SNP amendment.

**Karen Bradley**: The hon. Gentleman raises the issues regarding the devolution of regulation of the press. As he will know, part 2 of Leveson will cover the whole United Kingdom but, as he said, section 40 covers England and Wales. I am due to speak to Fiona Hyslop this afternoon to discuss exactly how we make sure it works across the whole country. He makes the point strongly that many good local newspapers were not involved in any form of press abuse or intrusion, and we need to make sure that we do press regulation in a way that protects a free, vibrant local press.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I declare an interest, in that I have had four successful defamation actions against newspapers. I say to my right hon. Friend that having an effective, robust press is even more important than having effective, robust press regulation. If we have 2,500 newspapers, including all those—or nearly all those—represented by the Society of Editors, and we have a pretty pathetic list in IMPRESS, most of which do not have a circulation of more than 200, 300 or 1,000, we must not introduce section 40 and we ought to find a way in which the IPSO people cannot be forced into the Press Recognition Panel but can be recognised as representing newspapers, with a proper way of redress?

**Karen Bradley**: My hon. Friend sums up the dilemma that faces the Government today: we have more than 2,500 newspapers and other publications that have not signed up and never will sign up to a recognised regulator.

We have to make this work in that climate and with that situation, and I urge all interested parties to respond to the consultation, so that we can hear all those views.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): I thought I was going to welcome the Secretary of State's statement, because she explained in clear detail why the incentives contained in section 40 are essential to the Leveson recommendations, which this House approved overwhelmingly in the royal charter and which, as she said, are already in law—and we now have a recognised regulator. But she went on to say that, rather than commencing section 40, the Government were just going to consider it further. Why does she not just do the right thing by the victims and commence the legislation that this House and the House of Lords have already passed?

**Karen Bradley**: What I said is that we are going to consult; it is a 10-week consultation, and it is very clearly about part 2 of the Leveson inquiry and the commencement of section 40. I want to hear all views in that consultation.

**Mr Edward Vaizey** (Wantage) (Con): I was struck by an article in this weekend's *Observer* by the former editor of *The Guardian*, Peter Preston, who calls for section 40 to be mothballed and suggests that the Government could “seek a fresh, more collegiate start.” I would not expect the Secretary of State to take such an extreme position as the ex-editor of *The Guardian*, but does she agree that this consultation is exactly the right way forward and that it is an opportunity to take stock of where we are, to involve all interested parties and to see whether we can move on in a more consensual fashion?

**Karen Bradley**: I read that same article, and I should read out what Peter Preston says:

“It doesn't make sense any longer. Blanket bitterness stuck in a time warp. Most editors, like most politicians, with a soupçon of perspective, would know what to say about such impasses. Time to dismantle the barricades. Time to move on.”

**Paul Farrell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Secretary of State has a very easy way out of her dilemma, which is to name a future date for the commencement of section 40. She will then get plenty of movement, because there will be plenty of incentive. We have all been circulated things by local newspapers, at the behest of national newspaper owners, but does the Secretary of State agree that that lobbying tells only half the truth? Section 40 gives protection for serious journalism from the chilling effect of deep-pocketed vexatious litigants, because such people would first have to go through a low-cost arbitration system and not to the courts? In that sense, it protects hard-pressed local newspapers in particular, whose investigations have, sadly, not been of the calibre that we have been used to.

**Karen Bradley**: The hon. Gentleman and I discussed that at the Select Committee last week. We share a local paper in the *Stoke Sentinel*, which has communicated with both of us, but he must recognise that the *Stoke Sentinel* and others have signed up to IPSO, which does not have recognition under the Press Recognition Panel. We need to ensure that we get this right, which is why we
need to take stock, listen to all views and consider the position based on the fact that we are now five years on from the original date of the inquiry.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Questions are rather long. Perhaps we can get pithiness from a classicist and a philosopher. I call Sir Oliver Letwin.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for that equivocal introduction.

I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Does she agree that the members of IPSO—the press—could spare us a lot of grief and move the matter on if they were to enforce, through IPSO, a genuinely Leveson-compliant regime, including the provision of a low-cost arbitration service?

Karen Bradley: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the role that he has played in developing the cross-party agreement. Those are exactly the kind of comments that we want to hear through the consultation.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I rather agree with the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) that that is precisely what IPSO could do, but this is now a matter of keeping faith. David Foulkes was killed in the 7 July bombings in Edgware Road. His father, Graham, said:

“We were in a very dark place. You think that it is as dark as it can get, and then you realise that there’s someone out there who can make it darker.”

The right hon. Gentleman made promises to Mr Foulkes, as did the Prime Minister at the time and the present Prime Minister. The right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) also made promises to Mr Foulkes and to so many others that, first, the commencement would start immediately, and secondly—no ifs, no buts—that there would be Leveson 2. Why on earth is the right hon. Lady reneging on all those promises made to the victims?

Karen Bradley: Nobody is reneging on any promises. We are having a consultation. We want to hear from all sides, and we will make a decision after that.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State bear most in mind the weakening and poor health of local and national newspapers, as set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), and make sure that they will always be protected in being able to expose people in authority? They should be protected from rich bullies who, by the very threat of legal action against them, may force newspapers not to print stories that would be in the public interest. Not doing that may suit many people in this House, but it would do a gross disservice to the public at large.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right. We all know of instances when local newspapers have perhaps printed something with which we did not necessarily agree, but I defend the right for them to do so.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I feel so let down and disappointed by the Secretary of State’s statement. She could have come here and announced the commencement of section 40, which would have been the right and proper thing to do. I do not know what she thinks more talking will do after the months and months of Leveson, but I want to ask this specific question: has she met the families and the victims of the lack of press regulation—not on the day that she took office, but today or yesterday—to say that there was going to be more delay and more consultation and to explain what she was coming here to announce today?

Karen Bradley: As I told the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), I have met victims and I will continue to meet them. I will ensure that I have correspondence and engagement with all, but I wanted to come to the House and make this announcement because Parliament needs to hear it first.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I suppose I had better begin by declaring a hereditary interest rather than a direct one.

I want to commend my right hon. Friend for her excellent statement. She is clearly right to be reviewing this, because the system cannot be working when IMPRESS, funded by a degenerate libertine who was embarrassed by free newspapers a few years ago, has only 50 subscribers, and IPSO, representing the vast swathe of the press, has 2,500 subscribers. She is quite right to review that, and also right to defend the freedom of the press, which is more important than the press being responsible.

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. That is why we are having a consultation. I want to hear all responses, and I want to look at this in the light of today, not of five, 10 or 15 years ago.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): One common thread that runs between the injustices uncovered in recent years is an unhealthy, collusive relationship between police and the press. Part 2 of the Leveson inquiry was intended to examine that in detail. It is seen as essential by Hillsborough campaigners to bring a form of accountability, and yet the Secretary of State, if I heard her correctly, has effectively announced today that she is consulting on a decision to reject it. Can she not see that that will leave campaigners feeling bitterly let down? Does it not sound for all the world like the second Government cover-up in just two days?

Karen Bradley: I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman for whom I have enormous respect. In this case, he is simply wrong. We are consulting on what is the right thing to do today. He must recognise that there have been significant changes in the way in which the police behave and are accountable, much of which was uncovered during the inquiry on Hillsborough. I want to look at the position today to get the right result for those who have been victims of press intrusion in the past and to make sure that people in the future have the appropriate regulation and the appropriate redress.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I really welcome the comments of my right hon. Friend about effective and robust regulation. It is crystal clear that IPSO does neither of those. Will she do all she can to ensure that low-cost arbitration is on the top of her list?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We do want to see all people, no matter what their background, being able to get appropriate redress and arbitration that is effective and works.
Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that she wants to come up to date with what is going on now and not just look back at the tragedies of 10 years ago. Well, she needs only to look at the case of Fatima Manji to see that the same people being complained about were the judges and the jury in the regulator, IPSO. That is the problem.

Karen Bradley: I do not want to comment on individual cases that have been brought to any regulator. What I want to see is robust regulation.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that, regardless of her consultation, the current status quo is not acceptable, because we have yet to see the establishment of a robust industry-funded system of arbitration, which gives access to justice—one of Leveson’s key recommendations?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, makes a very good and important point, and one that I want to hear more about during the consultation.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Press Recognition Panel set up in the wake of the phone-hacking scandal stated that urgent action is required if the post-Leveson system of independent regulation is to be given a chance to survive. Surely today’s procrastination is tantamount to political interference by the Government.

Karen Bradley: I do not accept that point. We have commenced the exemplary damages point. We now have a recognised regulator. Now is the time to take stock and look at what further work needs to be done.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): As a former journalist of some 17 years, I was shocked when only 14 of us in this House voted against the Royal Charter all those years ago, and I questioned whether democracy was at risk. May I remind Opposition Members and perhaps one or two Government Members that phone hacking is already illegal and a person will go to jail if they commit that offence? Finally, local newspapers, which had nothing to do with the scandal that occurred in a very small majority of the major newspapers, fear that if they have to pay costs despite even winning their case, they will have to close down and they will not be able to challenge those who should be challenged.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. This is why we are consulting and taking stock.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that press regulation is failing, but let us not forget that this Government set up this system, which is now failing. Is it not the case that this Government have been engaging in political gymnastics on this issue since the beginning to arrive at the very point that we are at today where section 40 and part 2 are going to be scrapped? It has always been the Government’s intention to pay lip service to this issue and not to consider the victims.

Karen Bradley: This is a full, open consultation on which no decisions have been taken.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to stand up for independence, regulation and arbitration, but the consultation she has announced today will of course delay, at best, section 40. Does she not agree, therefore, that it would be reasonable to accept Baroness Hollins’s amendments to clause 8 of the Investigatory Powers Bill?

Karen Bradley: I do not agree with that point. The Investigatory Powers Bill is a matter of national security and nothing should get in the way of us passing it to establish an Act of Parliament to ensure that we have the right powers for our law enforcement to keep us all safe.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Section 40 needs to be implemented now—not just because it is in statute and part of Leveson, but because it is necessary to address part 2 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. The effect of that Act, which was introduced by the previous coalition Government, is that it is not possible for victims easily to sue people, so will they not continue to be vilified and humiliated?

Karen Bradley: I would welcome comments on that particular issue in the consultation.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend, I believe in a free press, but I also believe in a responsible press. Does she not agree that a great virtue of the Leveson inquiry was that it took this whole contentious issue out of the hands of politicians; that by going for this consultation, which she will respond to, she is in danger of embroiling politicians in the issue again; and that low-cost arbitration has to be part of the solution?

Karen Bradley: The very fact that we are having a debate about section 40—tied up with the matter of national security, which is the Investigatory Powers Bill—means that we need to take stock and work out exactly what is the best thing to do.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Academic research has shown conclusively that the false lies printed on a daily basis on most of the front pages of our newspapers against migrants and minority communities have led to the rise of violence and prejudice towards those people. When complaints are made, all we get is a two-line correction at the bottom of the page. Has not IPSO singularly failed to deal with that?

Karen Bradley: Those are the points that I would like to hear in the consultation, so that we can make a decision based on the evidence.

Mr Speaker: Bob Stewart.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Oh! Sorry. Thank you, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman does not have to look quite so surprised. He was standing. Therefore, I did think he wanted to contribute. It is not surprising, if he then rises to his feet, that I call him.

Bob Stewart: I was just surprised that I was called so early. I am normally further down the list.

Mr Speaker: Order. I must say that the capacity of right hon. and hon. Members for misguided self-pity is unlimited.

Bob Stewart: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will get to it now.

We in the House unanimously agreed to support Leveson part 1. Well, most of us agreed. Is the consultation, therefore, simply a tactic to get the press on board?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is usually at the top of my list. I want to assure him that this is an open, frank consultation where we want to hear all views so we can make a decision based on the situation we find ourselves in today to get the effective, robust regulation that we all want.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State deliberately refused to answer the precise questions that my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) put to her from the Front Bench. Will she now say, having spoken to Lord Leveson, what are Lord Leveson’s views on the statement she has made today and whether she will allow him to speak publicly about his views?

Karen Bradley: I apologise if the hon. Gentleman does not think that I answered the question. but, to be clear, I discussed the matter with the hon. Member for West Bromwich East earlier. The conversation I had with Lord Leveson is private and I am not going to comment on it in public.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I should declare that I spent 15 years as a journalist at The Daily Telegraph. We all feel profound sympathy for the victims in this situation, but, overall, is not the real prize that a good, free, robust and boisterous press holds the Government to account regionally, locally and nationally? If we get that wrong by allowing it to become either unsustainable or impractically regulated, we will lose far more than we are talking about today.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend makes the point very well. We want a robust, free, strong press that holds us to account. We will not like it when the press holds us to account, but it should have the right to do so.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My local, family-owned newspaper, the Newark Advertiser, knows what it is like to be vexatiously sued by a politician. When Harold Laski sued the newspaper to try to ruin a local family, the Parlbys, he lost. That is now one of the leading cases in this area of law. Of course, had these rules been in place, the family would still have been ruined and my local newspaper would still have been put out of business.

In the consultation, will the Secretary of State pay particular attention to local newspapers and, above all, to independent titles such as the Newark Advertiser?

Karen Bradley: I can confirm that we will.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State, like me, will be amazed by the spectacle of a Parliament in which it is the Opposition who are demanding more restrictions on the press. Will she reassure me that we will balance any future system against the needs of the local media, particularly in an era when, sometimes, update lists via email run by Members of the House have a larger circulation?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend touches on the point alluded to by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale): we are in a news world entirely different from what we have ever had before. We have digital media, global players and local players who can get to people through social media and the internet in a way that is totally unregulated. We need to ensure that we look at all those matters and get the right regulation.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many marks out of 10 would my right hon. Friend give IPSO?

Karen Bradley: I have not yet been asked to give IPSO a mark out of 10, so I will restrain myself from doing so at this stage.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Believing that my right hon. Friend’s heart is in the right place, I wonder whether the irony in her repeated statement that this is the right thing to do for today was intended or unintended. What assurance can she give me that she will commence section 40 if there is no other way to get to low-cost arbitration?

Karen Bradley: I can assure my hon. Friend that I will look at all the consultation responses and will make a decision based on the evidence.

Mr Watson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: We will come to the hon. Gentleman in a moment. The wine will mature. Do not worry.

BILL PRESENTED

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE (NATIONAL DATA GUARDIAN) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Jo Churchill, supported by Alistair Burt, Maria Caulfield, Jeremy Lefroy, Ben Howlett, Will Quince, Rebecca Pow, George Freeman, Nick Thomas-Symonds, Karin Smyth and Liz McInnes, presented a Bill to make provision relating to the National Data Guardian for Health and Social Care; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 2 December, and to be printed (Bill 84).
Points of Order

2.2 pm

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I misattributed a quote earlier. I was in error about which Prime Minister’s promise to the Dowlers is not being kept. It is David Cameron’s promise that is not being kept, not the current Prime Minister’s. I have put that right as early as I could.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as will the House be. The matter is now firmly on the record.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Thursday, the chief executive of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs gave evidence to the Treasury Committee in which he said that never again would HMRC outsource to a private contractor anything to do with tax credits. That represents a significant U-turn in Government policy. Do you think it would have been appropriate for a Minister to come to the House to make a statement, not least because that was the day after we had had a full Opposition day debate on Concentrix? Several questions remain outstanding on Concentrix, the contract that is in place and whether compensation will be received for the early release that the Minister said is being negotiated. Will you find a way to encourage the Minister to come back before the House to give a full statement on Concentrix and the outstanding questions that remain, but also on the decision no longer to outsource in relation to tax credits?

Mr Speaker: I do not think it would be right for me to engage in public exhortation, and certainly it is for Ministers to decide when to make an oral statement and when to make a written statement. That said, the hon. Lady has made her point with her usual force and eloquence and it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench. At this stage, I say let us await the development of events.

There are no further points of order now, although I have a feeling that one is brewing and we will hear it, at some point in the near future. Member in question thinks apposite in relation to upcoming business. Before we get to that, we have a ten-minute rule Bill.

School Admissions
(Special Educational Needs)

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

2.10 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the access to education, school admissions and support for special educational needs, with particular reference to children diagnosed with autism; and for connected purposes.

The Equality Act 2010 exists to protect people of all ages from discrimination. It should prevent disabled people from being treated unfairly because of their disability, but in some respects, sadly, there is still a long way to go. Like every other Member, I suspect, I have had parents of disabled children visit my surgery. Like all parents, they want the best for their children, but as a result of the barriers that they have to overcome, they are even more driven and determined than most, too often, the system makes it difficult to ensure that their children get the very best, particularly when it comes to education.

It is an irony that the Equality Act is being used to discriminate against children with autism. The National Autistic Society believes that too many schools do not fully understand their duties towards children and young people with this condition. The law requires them to make reasonable adjustments for their disabled pupils, so that they may achieve their full potential. “Reasonable adjustment” means ensuring that a disabled child can do what their non-disabled peers do.

There appears to be a loophole in the law that does not consider challenging behaviour linked to a child’s disability as an impairment. If their disability could result in aggressive behaviour towards others in the school, the law on disability discrimination does not help them, and some governing bodies use “tendency to physical abuse of others” as a reason not to meet the needs of an autistic child and to exclude them. Of course, governors have a duty to others in the school, but it can sometimes be easier to refuse admission than to facilitate a solution.

Let me give a specific example from my constituency. Mr and Mrs Chase of Healing in north-east Lincolnshire took the decision to remove their son from his second maintained mainstream primary school owing to the lack of appropriate provision and a lack of advice and support for the school and themselves with regard to the types of provision that could be put into a mainstream school. Explaining their decision to withdraw their son, Mr and Mrs Chase said in their email to me:

“Our decision was the last straw and a very hard decision to make. However we could no longer sit back and watch our son’s lack of education continue. So throughout the summer holidays we pushed the LEA and SEN Assessment Team for an out of area specialist school placement for our son and due to the fact there is nothing else in the area for our son, his placement was agreed and he started at an independent family run school in Brigg that provided a specialist setting for boys on the autistic spectrum.

Although this may be difficult to replicate on a wider scale, it is not impossible.

Mr and Mrs Chase continued:

“The first two weeks went very well, but we experienced some blips as this setting is very different to a mainstream school and our son is still trying to become familiar with the differences in
moving straight to exclusion of pupils with challenging behaviour, “were concerned that the exclusion had resulted in schools Section 501 of the report states that those organisations Advice and also by the Alliance for Inclusive Education.

the charity Independent Parental Special Education report evaluating the impact of the Act on disabled school in my constituency .

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premature decision on permanent exclusion and asked it to reconsider , but the independent panel had no power to reinstate their son.

Mr and Mrs Chase said:

“Our main worry as parents of a disabled child with some very challenging behaviours caused by his disabilities is that with regulation 4(1)” — of the Equality Act —

“disabled children are being villainised, they are being made out to be the bad guys particularly in disability discrimination cases . . . Our children’s rights to an education and also special educational needs provision due to their disabilities are being washed away by this regulation. Schools are getting away with poor special educational needs provision for disabled children and most probably poor allocation of the additional monies allocated to special needs children. Schools have been given a loophole in law to out difficult disabled children that are their responsibility to educate”, due to regulation 4(1).

I appreciate that this is emotive language, but I ask Members to put themselves in the shoes of parents who find barriers placed in front of them. They want to prevent their children from being discriminated against. That must surely have been the intention of the Equality Act. In fairness I must emphasise that I recognise that some schools and local authorities make far better provision than others. Teaching assistants are often allocated to work with autistic children. Indeed, my own daughter has performed this task at a primary school in my constituency.

In March this year, the House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and Disability published a report evaluating the impact of the Act on disabled people. Evidence was presented to the Committee by the charity Independent Parental Special Education Advice and also by the Alliance for Inclusive Education. Section 501 of the report states that those organisations “were concerned that the exclusion had resulted in schools moving straight to exclusion of pupils with challenging behaviour, without first considering whether reasonable adjustments could prevent it.”

The report continued by pointing out that challenging behaviour results because reasonable adjustments have not been made.

Recommendation 503 of the report states:

“Schools should be encouraged and supported to make the kinds of adjustments that can help to address the educational inequalities faced by disabled children and young people, including those whose disability gives rise to challenging behaviour. This is Under Regulation 4(1) of the Equality Act 2010 (Disability) Regulations 2010, and we recommend that the Regulations are amended so that a tendency to physical abuse of other persons ceases to be treated as not amounting to an impairment for the purposes of the definition of ‘disability’.”

The Government responded as follows:

“Our Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice makes it clear that teachers should look beyond disruptive or challenging behaviours to determine whether there are underlying issues or disabilities and put appropriate support in place. . . The department’s exclusion guidance also sets out that early intervention measures should include an assessment of whether appropriate provision is in place to support any SEN or disability that a pupil may have. It makes clear that schools should consider the use of a multi-agency assessment for pupils who display persistent disruptive behaviour, which could include pupils who have unidentified SEN. Schools should arrange such assessments when concerns arise rather than waiting for a specific trigger.

Although there remain strong public policy reasons behind the excluded behaviours, the Government has listened to the issues raised by the Committee and will consider how the exemption around ‘a tendency to physical abuse of other persons’ applies to those under 18 in an education context.”

As we all know, guidance and what actually happens can sometimes be very different. I recognise that much good work takes place, but parents of autistic children can sometimes have an uphill task to ensure that a full and comprehensive education is made available. Society has made great strides in recent years in how we educate and care for the disabled, whether that disability be mental or physical, but there is still some way to go. My Bill seeks to remedy one of the loopholes, and I hope that the Minister, who I know cares deeply about these issues, will work with me and the various charities and support groups to ensure that the difficulties faced by my constituents and thousands of others is minimised and eventually eliminated.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Martin Vickers, Mrs Cheryl Gillan, Jim Shannon, Fiona Bruce, Mr Barry Sheerman, Melanie Onn, Kit Malthouse, Mr David Nuttall, Mr David Burrowes, Justin Tomlinson and Rehman Chishti present the Bill.

Martin Vickers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 December, and to be printed (Bill 85).
INVESTIGATORY POWERS BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Investigatory Powers Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 15 March 2016 in the last Session of Parliament (Investigatory Powers Bill (Programme)) and the Order of 6 June 2016 (Investigatory Powers Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall be taken at this day’s sitting in the order shown in the first column of the following Table.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lords Amendments</th>
<th>Time for conclusion of proceedings</th>
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<tr>
<td>Nos. 11 to 15, 338 and 339</td>
<td>90 minutes after the commencement of proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nos. 1 to 10, 16 to 337 and 340 to 377</td>
<td>The moment of interruption</td>
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Subsequent stages

(3) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(4) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

Investigatory Powers Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the first group of amendments, may I say that, as the House knows, there are 377 Lords amendments to the Investigatory Powers Bill, which were passed to this House yesterday evening? I must inform the House that none of the Lords amendments is certified—it says here “are certified”, but that is quite wrong; “none” takes the singular—under the EVEL Standing Orders. The Scottish Parliament passed a legislative consent motion on 6 October, copies of which are available with the Bill documents online and in the Vote Office. I must also inform the House that two of the Lords amendments—270 and 271—engage Commons financial privilege. If they are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the Journal.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have made reference to the Sewel convention and to the legislative consent motion being available in the Vote Office. The legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament is dated 6 October. Amendment 15—one of the most important amendments we will consider today—was passed on 11 October and deals with a matter referred to by the noble Lord Howe as being outside the ordinary ambit of the Bill and a considerable advance from what was in the rest of the text. I am concerned, therefore, that amendment 15 by their lordships is not approved by the Sewel convention or covered by the legislative consent motion that we have received from the Scottish Parliament. I know that, strictly speaking, this is a matter for the Government, not the House of Commons itself, but I fear that the House would be doing a discourtesy to the Scottish Parliament if we were to proceed to legislate on a devolved matter, which media policy is. It would be helpful to have your guidance, and perhaps ruling, on where we should go with the Sewel convention, and perhaps for the Government to clarify their position.

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for advance notice of his point of order. Might I just mention in passing that his exegesis of the legislation, and his courtesy and regard for the principle of courtesy in respect of other Parliaments, are impeccable, as is invariably the case.

As the hon. Gentleman will know—I welcome this opportunity to clarify the position, and it does require clarification—section 2 of the Scotland Act 2016 enshrined in legislation the statement that:

"the Parliament of the United Kingdom will not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters without the consent of the Scottish Parliament."

That does not prevent the House from considering amendments that the Scottish Parliament has not consented to.

We are just about to come to the first debate on a group of Lords amendments that, as the hon. Gentleman rightly observes, includes Lords amendment 15, and it is, I believe, with that that he is overwhelmingly concerned. The Government have given notice of their intention to disagree with Lords amendment 15, among others. We will have to wait to learn from the debate why the Minister takes that view. I am giving due notice that the
House will certainly expect an explanation on that matter—whether the House as a whole does, I feel absolutely certain that the hon. Member for North East Somerset will.

If the hon. Gentleman’s thought about Scottish consent had not already occurred to Ministers, or those advising them, I surmise from the attentive attitudes of right hon. and hon. Members on the Front Bench, including much nodding of heads and expressions of sagacity, that it will have done so now. I hope that will do at least for now. I thank the hon. Member for North East Somerset because he has done the House a service. These conventions matter, and he has reminded us of that point.

Clause 8

Civil liability for certain unlawful interceptions

2.25 pm

The Minister for Security (Mr Ben Wallace): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 11.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Lords amendment 12, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 13, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 14, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 15, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 338, and Government motion to disagree.
Lords amendment 339, and Government motion to disagree.

Mr Wallace: The Investigatory Powers Bill will provide a world-leading framework for the use of investigatory powers by law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies. It will strengthen the safeguards for the use of those powers, including through the introduction of a double lock for the most intrusive powers, and it will create a powerful new body responsible for oversight of them. This is the most important piece of legislation this Government will bring before the House.

I will turn first to the amendments tabled in the other place by Baroness Hollins. As we have just heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the Government will hold a landmark public consultation relating to the governance of the press and its relationship with the public, police and politicians. This consultation will give everyone with an interest in these matters an opportunity to have their say on this vital issue, which affects each and every one of us in the country. I hope the whole House will welcome the announcement, which shows the Government’s commitment to addressing the issues and recommendations set out in the Leveson report in the most appropriate way.

This is an emotive subject for Members, in both this House and the other place, where Earl Howe set out the Government’s position in relation to this issue during the debate on Report. I hope the House will indulge me while I set out the key points. As I said at the start of my remarks, the Investigatory Powers Bill is one of the most important pieces of legislation the Government will bring forward. It will provide a world-leading framework for the use of investigatory powers by law enforcement and security agencies and, in doing so, protect this nation from some of the most serious crimes and threats. We should not forget that the Bill will also strengthen the safeguards for the use of those powers, and it will create a powerful new body responsible for that oversight.

We heard yesterday in the Lords from peers on all sides about the importance of the Bill and the careful cross-party scrutiny that has got it into the very good shape that it comes back to the House in today. The Bill will provide vital tools for our law enforcement, security and intelligence agencies. It is not, and never was, intended to provide for the regulation of the press.

Whatever the merits of the provisions introduced by Baroness Hollins, this is not the place for them. Their inclusion is a distraction from the very important aims of the Bill. Moreover, they threaten to undermine an important provision in the Bill.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): While I entirely accept that this is not the place to deal with those matters, I hope the Minister will recognise that there is very strong feeling on these Benches that the issues in relation to Leveson do need to be dealt with as a matter of some urgency. While I agree that we should not, therefore, accept the amendment, I very much hope that he and other Ministers will ensure that these matters are brought to the House at the earliest possible opportunity, so that they can be fully and properly dealt with.

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I do, of course, recognise the strength of feeling about press regulation, but I also recognise the strength of feeling about making sure we give our security services and our police forces the tools to tackle the paedophiles, the serious and organised criminals and the terrorists who threaten the state and my constituents.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am wholly in favour of most of the other provisions of the Bill, but that is not the point we are debating now; we are debating why the Government are reneging on their promise, made on 18 March 2013 as part of a package, that we would commence section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. Does the Minister not realise that if we keep getting statements such as the one we just had from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, suggesting that the Government intend to kick this issue down the road yet further, their lordships are simply going to send the proposals back again, and again, and again, with probably even larger majorities?

Mr Wallace: I know that the hon. Gentleman is an impatient individual, but 10 weeks is not a long time to wait in engaging in a consultation. [Interruption.] He says, “Three and a half years”, but what is 10 weeks on top of that?

2.30 pm

Prior to Baroness Hollins’s amendments on Report in the Lords, clause 8 provided a basis for individuals to bring civil claims in relation to the misuse of private telecommunications systems. That might include, for example, an employer misusing a corporate network to
spy on his or her employees. That is an important safeguard, which was argued for forcefully and convincingly by a number of Members of this House, including the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). It was in large part on the basis of her arguments that the Government amended the Bill to include this provision.

Let me address the point of order raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg). One of the Government’s contentions on why this amendment should be rejected is that it goes against the grain of legislating over and above the will of the Scottish Parliament. As a former Member of the Scottish Parliament, I recognise the importance of the Sewel motion. I urge SNP Members to join us in voting down the amendment, because they cannot pick and choose when devolution is or is not appropriate. Do they wish to go through the procedures of the legislative consent motion and give the Scottish Parliament the courtesy it deserves, or are they saying that they accept in principle that there are some occasions when we could legislate without a legislative consent motion in the Scottish Parliament? I look forward to the reply from the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes a crucially important point. If SNP Members do not require the Sewel consent to be given, then implicitly, as we have an unwritten constitution and operate by convention, they would be giving media policy back to the United Kingdom Parliament.

Mr Wallace: This is a very important point of principle.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Minister asked me a question. I can only remind him of what Mr Speaker said when he was in the Chair: that legislative consent is not required until the Bill has been amended, as the Minister will know very well. Legislative consent to those aspects of the Bill that require it is not amended, as the Minister will know very well. Legislative consent to those aspects of the Bill that require it is not requested from the Scottish Government until the Bill has passed through this House. He is therefore setting a false trap. He will remember a phrase from the Scottish Parliament, “My head does not zip up the back.” My head does not zip up the back, and I will not fall into his false trap, but SNP Members will give their support to the Lords amendment on this occasion.

Mr Wallace: I think we can debate Zippy another time.

This is about an important issue of principle. Throughout all the Bills I have ever been involved in, we in this House have gone out of our way to make sure that we seek the up-front approval of the Scottish Parliament in an LCM before we start down the path of picking and choosing what we do or do not support.

Mr Rees-Mogg: What the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said may well be true, but this is our last opportunity to approve or reject the amendment. If it goes back to the House of Lords, and all the other amendments that we make are agreed to, there will be no further opportunity to amend the Bill, so legislating now, without consent, would make the law.

Mr Wallace: Not for the first time, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is the last opportunity to amend this Bill—there will be no going back. Should the hon. and learned Lady wish to go back, then we shall hear her options.

Joanna Cherry: The Minister is in a slightly unfair position because he did not pilot the Bill through the Bill Committee, but I did serve on the Committee, and he can check what happened with his ministerial colleagues. The Government accepted clause 8, on the back of which this amendment rides, as a result of an SNP amendment to reintroduce the tort—or, to use the Scots word, delict—in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. This further Lords amendment rides on the back of an amendment that arose from the historic event of the Government actually accepting an SNP suggestion. I was absolutely delighted about that and will mention it at every opportunity.

Mr Wallace: In the words of the hon. and learned Lady, my head does not zip up the back either. This is an amendment to an accepted amendment. That does not mean that the amendment is accepted in relation to an LCM—we cannot make that assumption. We should reflect on Mr Speaker’s point that this House does not usually legislate on policy that is not agreed to by the Scottish Parliament in advance.

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have developed a fascinating constitutional suggestion that amendments made by SNP Members of this House are senior to legislative consent motions given by the Scottish Parliament. SNP Members seem to be raising their status.

Mr Wallace: I am keen to move on, but merely say that how SNP Members vote today will certainly be a clear sign of whether they are embracing a new principle on how we should choose to legislate on issues in Scotland.

As I said, this clause was never intended to provide a basis for claims against newspapers for voicemail interception—so-called phone hacking. Civil claims can already be brought in respect of such activity. In any case, the Bill makes such activity a criminal offence, as is surely right for such egregious interferences with privacy.

If there is a problem to be addressed, this is not the way to do it, and this is not the Bill in which to do it. This is the wrong amendment in the wrong Bill at the wrong time. Governance of the press is an important issue, and it is right that such an issue is subject to full consultation and dedicated scrutiny and consideration. It should not just be tacked on to one of the most important cross-party Bills that this House has debated. This Bill is about the security of the nation. It is a Bill to keep all our constituents safe. Members should ask themselves whether it is appropriate to jeopardise this Bill for the sake of opportunism in the other place.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The solution, of course, would be for the Government to accept Baroness Hollins’s amendments, and then the Bill would be secured, since all of us in this place are broadly supportive of its stated intentions. Many of us have sat through these debates at great length for a very long time.
Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Hear, hear!

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is right to say so.

Does the Minister accept that the only objection to this measure that the Government are putting forward is that it is in the wrong place? That appears to be a fairly slim argument. Can he assure people like me who are perhaps wavering on this matter that the terms of reference of the consultation that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced earlier will be sufficiently robust and give a steer on the Government’s good intentions on section 40, because then we might be tempted to be a little more patient in the hope that that consultation will result in an outcome that makes Baroness Hollins’s amendments redundant?

Mr Wallace: I hear my hon. Friend’s comments, but this is like saying, “Because we’re being blackmailed, we should give in to the blackmail.” The Bill will give powers to our security services and our police to deal with some horrendous crimes and threats to the security of the nation. That does not mean that because someone has tacked an amendment on to the Bill that is not really anything to do with it, we should just give in. We should say, “Let us have the debate about press regulation in the proper forum.” My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has brought forward a 10-week consultation period. As the House will know, the Government have been put on notice that, at the end of that period, they will need to listen to and engage with everyone’s concerns and to come up with a position. That is not necessarily the end of this matter in Parliament—there will be plenty of other times when pieces of legislation that may be more appropriate come through.

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I thank the Minister for that reassurance. I welcome the Government’s approach, particularly in addressing the critical question of the Bill—the balance between security and privacy—and in accepting many of the recommendations on safeguards proposed by the Intelligence and Security Committee, whose Chairman, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), is in his place. May I urge the Government not to allow the Bill, which is fundamentally about national security, to be conflated with, or held up by, the very different and much wider question of media regulation, as urged on us by the other place?

Mr Wallace: The whole House will hear my hon. Friend’s comments. He is a dedicated campaigner on privacy—in fact, on both parts of the Bill—in terms of what he believes in, and he has been consistent throughout. The House should listen when he says that he wants to make sure that a Bill with good oversight is passed correctly, giving us the freedom then to move on to debate and shape press regulation in, rightly, a different forum.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Wallace: No, I am sorry.

On that basis, I urge this House to reject the Lords amendments in relation to clauses 8, 9 and 273.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I rise to speak to the group of amendments and to Lords amendment 15 in particular. I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who did so much work, on a cross-party basis, to bring the Bill to its current position. However, we still need to investigate unfinished business concerning the relationship between various authorities and the media. That is why the Labour party fully supports the Lords amendments, particularly Lords amendment 15.

The Minister has told us about his landmark consultation, but we are baffled as to why it is needed when we already have the Leveson report, which had so much time, effort and expertise poured into it. It seems to me that the Minister’s vaunted landmark consultation is merely a stalling exercise.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Lady is new to her position, as is the Minister. I served on the Bill Committee and she is right to point to the work that the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) did to build cross-party consensus on what could have been a difficult Bill to land. If the Lords amendments are ultimately rejected by this place and the other place caves in, will the Opposition continue to support the Bill, or will the hon. Lady use that as a crutch on which to base the withdrawal of their support?

Ms Abbott: We are not in the habit of artifice or crutches. Let us see what Members in the other place do with the Bill, and then we will make our position clear.

The Opposition have consistently called for the Leveson recommendations to be implemented in full. The public have waited long enough. In 2013, following extensive consultation with victims of press intrusion, a new system of independent self-regulation was agreed by what were then the three main political parties. It is therefore disappointing that Members in the other place have had to table an amendment, and that we have to debate it, to get the Government to honour their promises. It is disappointing also that the Minister calls legitimate amendments, which have been passed in good faith in the other place, blackmail. What kind of way is that to talk about our friends in the other place?

Chris Bryant: Is not the point that the amendments almost exactly replicate legislation that was introduced by Conservatives in another Act? It would be bizarre in the extreme for the Government to say that they should not become law. If the Government want their Bill, they can have it today. All they have to do is say, “Yes, we agree to all the amendments.”

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making an important intervention. Nobody is trying to hold up or halt the Bill. If the Government wish to have it, all they have to do is agree to the amendments.

Mr Wallace: In that spirit, perhaps the hon. Lady could answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare): should the Bill not contain Baroness Hollins’s amendment, would the hon. Lady support it?
Ms Abbott: I do not deal in supposition. Let us see what Members in the other place do with the Bill, and at that point we will debate it and the House will hear Her Majesty’s Opposition’s position.

Simon Hoare: I have heard the hon. Lady say in other places what a future Labour Government would deliver. That, surely, is a supposition. She should deal with the supposition in question.

Ms Abbott: When the hon. Gentleman heard me say those things, I was not yet shadow Home Secretary. There were concerns when section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 was not commenced in summer 2015. The right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, was asked about it by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, but he refused to be drawn on it. He said at the Society of Editors conference in October 2015 that he was not minded to commence section 40. We believe that that is a breach of the cross-party agreement and that it breaks the promises made to the House and, perhaps even more importantly, those made to victims.

2.45 pm

Just last week, the Press Recognition Panel produced its first annual report, which stated that the Leveson system has not even been brought into effect. Only after section 40 is commenced will the system be in place. The PRP was highly critical of the Government’s failure on section 40 and described its non-commencement as an interference in the freedom of the press, because it allowed the Government to hold section 40 commencement as a sword of Damocles over the press.

Just last Monday, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport indicated that she had no intention of commencing section 40. The following day, newspapers ran stories saying that the Government had ditched section 40, crediting a Government source. The Minister ran stories saying that the Government had ditched section 40. The following day, newspapers and their families.

Mr Raab: For all the differences between me and the hon. Lady, I totally understand the importance that she attaches to section 40 and the issue of costs. I join her in wanting to see investigative journalism, but for the worst journalistic excesses.

Ms Abbott: We are not attempting to hold up the Bill; all the Government have to do is accept the amendments.

Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act remains unimplemented, despite widespread support in principle from Members on both sides of the House, including Front Benchers. The amendment, which the Government want to vote down, was tabled in the Lords by a Cross Bencher, Baroness Hollins, and overwhelmingly passed by 282 votes to 180. That is one of the reasons that I am shocked that the Minister regards it as blackmail. It would implement, as my colleagues have said, the same provisions as those contained in section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act in relation to claims against media organisations over phone hacking and other unlawful interception.

The amendment goes further. Unlike section 40, it would not require ministerial approval, which we regard as an improvement, so it would automatically implement section 40 in relation to phone hacking claims. That would restate the very clear intention of Parliament previously expressed in 2013. I repeat that the amendment would not be necessary if the Government had fulfilled their stated commitment to implementing section 40.

Part 2 of the Levenson inquiry sought to investigate the original police investigation and corrupt payments to police officers and to consider the implications for the relationships between journalists, politicians and the police. We are therefore going to have to undergo further weeks of consultation. Previously, Ministers had said that part 2 would begin after the criminal cases relating to phone hacking had concluded. Then they said that they would make a decision on whether it would begin once all the criminal cases had concluded.

If we look at the provisions affecting journalists and the press in this Bill, we will see that there is no protection of journalistic sources. Law Officers may act on their own cognisance to access data, collect and retain them for 12 months, and share them with other bodies, including overseas agencies. It would be a simple matter to establish the identity of a whistleblower in any public or other body by trawling the journalist’s internet history. That would be detrimental to all of society and to fundamental press freedoms. The contradiction here is that there is a free-for-all in ignoring the thinking behind Leveson, and yet there is a failure to implement section 40. Some of the most irresponsible practices of the press go unchecked, and there is no recourse for anyone except the ultra-rich and those who can afford libel lawyers.

To function properly, the press should be able to hold all who are in power to account and unearth important wrongdoing. That is wholly in the public interest. But the Government stand accused of allowing muckraking, savage attacks on the vulnerable and the defamation of those who cannot afford to defend themselves legally, while proper journalism in the public interest—holding the powerful to account, giving an outlet to whistleblowers and investigating matters in the public interest—is to be fatally undermined. The proposals, in their current shape, run the risk of being seen as a charter against valuable and public interest journalism, but for the worst journalistic excesses.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I want to focus on several aspects of Lords amendment 15. First, I want to focus on what it is designed to do, in which I think it is fundamentally wrong-headed. It provides for an increase in the penalty that will be applied to newspapers where an accusation of phone hacking is made in a case that is brought against them. That is difficult, because in the ordinary course of events, a newspaper will want to protect its sources. A newspaper would want to ensure that its source for a story would not be able to prove the negative that phone hacking had not been involved, even when it had not been.
The immediate risk will be that newspapers will be reluctant to print investigative stories because they will be unable to avoid the double penalty of extra costs, even in the event that their story was true. The particular outrage of amendment 15 is that the press could report a story accurately, fairly and honestly but still find that, if they were taken to court by an aggressive litigant, they would have to pay the litigant's costs. That is an absolute charter for the very rich to bully the press into not publishing stories about them. It will not help the poorest in society, who will not be able to afford the initial fees to get a case going, but anybody with any funds will be able to use it as an opportunity to bully the press into not printing anything disagreeable about them.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as always. Does he agree that the regional press, which does not have the necessary resources, will be particularly vulnerable to such claims by the people he has described?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The regional press and local newspapers will simply not be able to print stories that are critical of almost anybody. Perhaps MPs do not want any critical stories to be printed about them. We would be able to bully the local papers in our constituencies by saying, “We will bring a court action against you, and, by the way, we think that you might have been hacking our telephone,” and they would risk double costs. That is absolutely ruinous to a free press at a local and national level, because such costs run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. Even the biggest newspaper groups find that level of cost very difficult to absorb. The amendment will therefore get rid of the free press. Our press will be afraid to go after the rich and the powerful. It will be afraid to go after leading politicians whose friends can lend them the money to start a case off. It will be a supine press.

Dr Murrison: As ever, I am listening to my hon. Friend’s comments with a great deal of interest. I fear, however, that he may be over-egging things a little bit. There are, of course, very large organisations behind the apparently small media outlets that he refers to. He probably received a note this morning, as I did, from News Media Association, pressing the case of smaller newspapers. In truth, it represents a smokescreen for the interests of larger press organisations. Does he not share my concern that we need to disentangle the very rich from a journalistic perspective, I humbly submit that they are working in an enormous environment with oodles of cash swimming about the place. This will have a chilling effect across national, local and regional media.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right. Although some newspapers are part of bigger media groups, those media groups will not be willing to fund indefinitely loss-making newspapers. The journalism that is the core of not only the print media but most of what people get online, which is not covered by the measure anyway, comes from a narrowly profitable print media. If that ceases to have any chance of being profitable, where will all the internet content that people read for nothing come from? Where are the resources to provide us with investigations into wrongdoing? Wrongdoing—not only of politicians, but of institutions—is revealed year in, year out. Great footballing institutions were investigated by The Sunday Times. How will the newspaper be able to do that if it gets sued and has to pay double damages on merely the allegation that hacking has taken place? This is a real threat to press freedom.

Press freedom is of the greatest possible value, and it is one of the reasons why the United Kingdom is such a stable polity. The press shines a light on corruption, on criminality and on wrongdoing. It holds people to account. It brings them to book. Why do we give an absolute protection to whatever is said in the House, so that it cannot be contested in any court outside Parliament? We give ourselves that protection because we do value freedom of speech. We should be extending that protection as widely as possible—not holding it narrowly to ourselves, but allowing the country at large to enjoy the same benefit.

The chippy speeches made by those in the other place, and unfortunately in this House too, who have come under the spotlight of the press and had a rude story printed about them that they did not like—about a big scandal, a little scandal, something that caused offence or something that upset their spouse—ought not to be used to take away a fundamental constitutional protection of the greatest importance. That should not be done by the back door, by tacking something on to a completely different Bill in a hasty fit because the Secretary of State has not done it under existing legislation. That is quite a wrong way to proceed.

That brings me on to the second part of what I want to say. The first part is of overwhelming importance: the freedom of the press is an absolute, and it is much, much better to have a free and irresponsible press than it is to have a responsible but Government-controlled press. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) would like me to say, the principle of England free rather than England sober should be at the heart of our understanding of the press.

The constitutional aspects of how we legislate are also important, however. In this House we have very strict rules, which are implemented fairly by the Clerks and the Speaker, about the scope of Bills, and we cannot tack on random things that we feel it would be nice to have. The House of Lords, being a self-governing House, can tack things on. Its Members have lost the self-restraint that they used to have of following constitutional norms in relation to legislation. They showed that in the last Session of Parliament in relation
to boundaries, and they are doing so again now. I am concerned that the SNP is not more worried about the Sewel convention.

**Joanna Cherry:** I hesitate to give the hon. Gentleman a lecture on constitutional procedure, but I can give him full comfort on the points he has raised if he cares to consult the devolution guidance note 10. It states:

“During the passage of legislation, departments should approach the Scottish Executive about Government amendments changing or introducing provisions...or any other such amendments which the Government is minded to accept...No consultation is required for other amendments tabled. Ministers resisting non-Government amendments should not rest solely on the argument that they lack the consent of the Scottish Parliament unless there is advice to that effect from the Scottish Executive.”

The note goes on to explain what happens in such a situation:

“The Scottish Executive can be expected to deal swiftly with issues which arise during the passage of a Bill”.

With great humility, I want to say that on this occasion the hon. Gentleman is mistaken.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing):** Order. The hon. and learned Lady will very shortly have an opportunity to make her speech in full. I must urge hon. Members to make short interventions as we have only 55 minutes left for this debate.

3 pm

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I will cover that point, and then swiftly come to a conclusion. The amendment was passed on 11 October, but there has been no response to it, and this is the very last opportunity to decide whether this provision should pass into law. If it passes into law, the Scottish Parliament will have had no opportunity to give its consent to what, in effect, is the repatriation of a power from the Scottish Parliament to the UK Parliament. It is quite right that the Government have not asked for consent at a very late stage in the proceedings, perhaps even as an amendment to a Lords amendment, and such an amendment will go through, with the Sewel convention brushed aside. If SNP Members say that that is perfectly all right and that is the way to do it, that will leave such conventions in disrepute and will lead to rows between the constituent Parliaments. Basically, disrespect will be shown by one Parliament of another, which will become very serious constitutionally. For a one-day win, they may be risking a constitutional imbroglio.

**Joanna Cherry:** I rise to give the Scottish National party’s support to this group of Lords amendments.

Much was promised of the Lords when the Bill left this House—many Members had deep concerns about the Bill’s intrusion on civil liberties and about the security of data—but I regret, although I am not surprised, to say that the Lords amendments as a whole have not lived up to the expectations that some of us had. Although there have undoubtedly been some improvements in the safeguards afforded by the Bill, which we intend to support later—they are the result of Government amendments in the Lords that largely arose from suggestions made by the opposition and the Intelligence and Security Committee—we do not think those Lords amendment go far enough, and I will give specific examples of that later.

At the moment, we are dealing with the group of Lords amendments that some people, for convenience, have called the Leveson amendments. I want to knock firmly on the head any suggestion that Scottish National party Members or the Scottish Government are making any concessions in relation to the Sewel convention. Hon. Members would no doubt be very surprised if we did, but we are not doing so. Unlike the Minister, we are following the proper procedure, as laid down in devolution guidance note 10 on “Post-Devolution Primary Legislation affecting Scotland”. As I have already said, the note specifically comments on such amendments. In paragraphs 18 and 19, which I will read in full because this is very important, the note states:

“During the passage of legislation, departments should approach the Scottish Executive”—or the Scottish Government, as they now are—“about Government amendments changing or introducing provisions requiring consent, or any other such amendments which the Government is minded to accept.”

Clearly, Lords amendment 15 is not a Government amendment, and the Government are not minded to accept it. In such a situation, paragraph 18 says:

“It will be for the Scottish Executive to indicate the view of the Scottish Parliament.”

Very importantly, it goes on:

“No consultation is required for other amendments tabled.”

It is not therefore incumbent on the UK Government to consult the Scottish Government about opposition amendments. It goes on:

“Ministers resisting non-Government amendments should not rest solely on the argument that they lack the consent of the Scottish Parliament unless there is advice to that effect from the Scottish Executive.”

I know as a matter of fact that there is no advice to that effect from the Scottish Government, because I spoke to the Minister concerned about that at the weekend. Paragraph 19 says:
“The Scottish Executive can be expected to deal swiftly with issues which arise during the passage of a Bill, and to recognise the exigencies of legislative timetables (eg when forced to consider accepting amendments at short notice). Nevertheless since the last opportunity for amendment is at Third Reading in the Lords or Report Stage in the Commons the absence of consent should not be a bar to proceeding with the Bill in the interim.”

That is what the guidance note states, so the point made by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is fallacious. This is not a Government amendment or an amendment that the Government are minded to accept; it is an opposition amendment. It is perfectly open to SNP Members to support the Lords amendment at this stage without making any concession. Only in the event that the amendment is passed by this House will it be incumbent on the Government to go to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to get a legislative consent motion. This point is a complete red herring.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** In the event that such a legislative consent motion were refused, would the hon. and learned Lady expect the Queen to refuse to give Royal Assent to the Bill, because that would be the only way to stop the Bill becoming law?

**Joanna Cherry:** I assure the hon. Gentleman that it would not come to that, because if the amendment is passed by the House, the Scottish Government will grant a legislative consent motion. The SNP, which is in opposition in Westminster and the Government in Scotland, has discussed this issue in detail over the weekend—I discussed it with the Scottish Government Minister—and we have a position on Lords amendment 15. I will now set out our position, but I am very conscious of the time, so I will be as brief as possible.

As I said earlier, Lords amendment 15 rides on the back of clause 8, and I am very proud to say that it arose from an SNP suggestion in Committee for such an amendment. We have heard about the effect of the Lords amendment. In my respectful submission, the effect will be good: no newspaper should be involved in phone hacking, and if one is, it should face the consequences. I want to make the SNP position clear.

Section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act, about which we have heard much today, was passed in March 2013. It was part of implementing the Leveson inquiry recommendation that any new regulator set up by the press should be accredited as independent and effective. The purpose of section 40 is to provide costs protection for claimants and Leveson-regulated news publishers. It was passed in this House with cross-party agreement, including the support of SNP MPs. There were rather fewer SNP MPs then than there are now, but my colleagues supported the then Bill. As has already been said, the UK Government have reneged on implementing section 40 on many occasions. Today’s announcement of a consultation kicks its implementation further into the long grass.

As has correctly been said, section 40 extends to England and Wales only, because the regulation of print media is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament has provided cross-party support for the UK Government’s actions to implement the royal charter. The Scottish Government will continue to monitor the current press regulations and work with other parties in Scotland and at Westminster to ensure effective regulation of the media on a non-political basis.

The majority of the press, and in particular the regional press in Scotland, were not involved in the sort of malpractice that prompted the Leveson recommendations. It is therefore the view of the Scottish Government and the Scottish National party that any policy in this area in Scotland must be proportionate and must balance the freedom of the press with the public desire for high standards, accuracy and transparency.

That said, the protection afforded by section 40 when brought into force would be available to Scottish litigants who chose to sue newspapers based in England and Wales. Regrettably, a number of major newspapers based in England were involved in the sort of malpractice that prompted Leveson, and it is therefore right that such protection should be afforded. The limited amendments that we are discussing will not affect small or regional newspapers adversely at all, because they have not been involved in phone hacking, and, I assume, do not have any plans to become involved in it.

Scottish National party MPs are going to support the Lords amendments to provide costs protection across the UK for claimants and Leveson-regulated news publishers in claims for unlawful interception of communications, including phone hacking. I hope that as a result of the amendments some good, at least, will come of this Bill’s passage through Parliament, in the event that this House is minded to support them. I will be crystal clear that nothing I have said involves any concession whatever about the primacy and importance of the Sewel convention, which is now enshrined in legislation. If anyone is in any doubt on that, they should go away and read carefully the guidance note from which I have quoted at some length this afternoon.

**Mr Wallace:** On memorandum 10, to which the hon. and learned Lady refers, is she saying that she is happy to accept the principle that in future when amendments come forward that are not Government amendments nor amendments that the Government are minded to accept, whether from a friendly Back Bencher or an unfriendly one, we do not have to consult the Scottish Government for a legislative consent motion?

**Joanna Cherry:** The hon. Gentleman is no doubt aware of what I did for a career before I came here. I have no intention of making any concession that goes beyond the four walls of what I have already said.

**Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con):** I will be as brief as possible. First, let me say how much I have enjoyed this afternoon’s debate. For the past six years, as a Minister, having been locked up—

**Chris Bryant:** You should be.

**Mr Vaizey:** Yes, I should be. But being locked up as a Minister, I did not have the benefit of hearing the wise constitutional pronouncements of my now prone hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg)—very few hon. Friends will be able to see him as he is sunbathing at the moment. I have found myself in an “Alice in Wonderland” world, where the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)
was praising the House of Lords from the Labour Front Bench, and my hon. Friend was attacking it. I really did not know where to turn. That is the first thing that has interested me in the debate.

The second is the extraordinarily complex constitutional argument going on about the various powers of the Westminster Parliament and the Scottish Parliament. I think we have come to the clear conclusion and have constitutional clarity that this House can now amend legislation that then goes into force in Scotland without waiting for a legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament. That is a welcome, if interesting, concession from the Scottish National party.

**Joanna Cherry:** The right hon. Gentleman should try very hard not to misrepresent what I have said. I have not made any concessions. I have quoted from the established procedures that are already laid down.

**Mr Vaizey:** As my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset pointed out, the Scottish Parliament has had plenty of time to let this House know its views on the amendment, but has not done so, and the hon. and learned Lady is now going to support it. She cannot answer the question put by the Minister, namely what would be the constitutional position if, having passed this amendment, the Scottish Parliament then refused the legislative consent motion. That question was also put by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for North East Somerset; it was at that point I knew I was on to something, because I was going to ask her exactly the same question.

**Joanna Cherry rose—**

**Mr Vaizey:** The hon. and learned Lady did not answer either of them, so she would not answer me and I will not take her intervention.

3.15 pm

The third interesting thing about the debate is that we have spent the entirety of it talking about the regulation of the press, when we are debating a Bill that is called the Investigatory Powers Bill and is about regulating the work of the security services. That work is very important. The Bill needs to be passed, as I understand it, by the end of the year.

I will not support Lords amendment 15. I will support the Government, for four clear reasons. First, as the Minister put it—I could not put it any better—it is the wrong amendment, to the wrong Bill, at the wrong time. This is not a Bill on press regulation. [Interrupt.] I do not know where the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington is getting her instructions from, but clearly having taken the phone call for which she has left the Chamber she will come back and no doubt elucidate the complex issue of Scottish and Westminster relations for us.

**Dr Murrison:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is some help for us in this extremely big Bill at clause 232, on review of the operation of the Act? Although we cannot tell what the consultation on Leveson will come up with, there are four options in the document I have just read—we can come back in five years’ time and, if we are concerned about the implementation of section 40 of the 2013 Act, in our review of the Act this Bill will become we might be able to revisit a Baroness Hollins-type amendment from the other place.

**Mr Vaizey:** No. I have read the Bill, and in particular spent some time pondering whether clause 232 could help us in these circumstances, and came to the conclusion that it could not. A five-year review of an amendment, passed in the other place, that has nothing to do with the Bill did not strike me as something the Bill’s drafters had in mind—I am sure the Minister will clarify that for us—when they put in place the five-year review. They want that review to be of the very important measures in the Bill that govern the operation of the security services and how they are able to carry out their investigations.

Regardless of one’s views on the implementation of section 40, this amendment is absolutely the wrong way to do it. It is, to coin a phrase, opening up a back door to implement section 40 when it should be for the Government to have a debate in this House on whether that is appropriate.

That brings me to my next point, which is of course about the statement made earlier in the house by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who made it clear that there will be a consultation on the implementation of section 40. Now, to quote a former editor of The Guardian once in the Chamber is bad enough; to quote him twice may be a misfortune. But I remind the House that he wrote on Sunday in The Observer that he would like to see section 40 “mothballed”. As I said earlier, that may perhaps go too far, but the tone of his very thoughtful article was that the position we have come to on potential regulation of the press has been circumscript and perhaps tactical rather than strategic. Going forward, this House has an opportunity to talk about a regime that actually works. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) said during the statement earlier, the current system of press regulation itself does not take into account wholly unregulated arenas such as Facebook and so on, where so many people go to get their news.

That brings me to my third point, which is a more general one on press regulation, as that is what we are debating because of this Lords amendment. We should give IPSO time to settle down. It is introducing a system of arbitration. It has something like 2,500 members. It could take into account the issue of how so much of the information we now get is available in the unregulated sphere that is the internet.

My fourth point echoes the excellent points made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset on the impact on newspapers. I said many times as a Minister that our newspapers, and our local and regional newspapers in particular, faced a perfect storm, with both their readership and the classified advertisements that were their revenue migrating on to the internet.

I take issue here with the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). She is quite right that regional newspapers were not affected by the phone hacking scandal, as they did not participate in phone hacking. But it is also right to say that they are the ones that have been contacting Members to point out how section 40 could have an impact on them. That is why my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State’s consultation on section 40 is so welcome.
Dr Murrison: Will my right hon. Friend explain how small press outlets will be impacted by the Hollins amendments? As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) rightly pointed out, small papers do not hack.

Mr Vaizey: That is precisely the point. I was intrigued by what the hon. and learned Lady said. She said that they had not hacked and would therefore not be affected. This is not some retrospective legislation that will impose costs on newspapers that have hacked; it is legislation that will impose costs on newspapers in the future. Again, I hate to sound utterly feeble in holding on to the coat tails of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for North East Somerset, but I could not put the argument better than he did. The key point about the clause—I would probably oppose it even if it was in the right Bill—is that it gives anyone who wants to “try it on”, to use a phrase that is perhaps slightly casual for this Chamber, the opportunity to do so with a newspaper that wants to protect its source. The claimant can allege that information has come to the newspaper by means of phone hacking or interception of email. It is then, as my hon. Friend said, up to the newspaper to prove a negative. Common sense dictates that the only way it can do that is to, effectively, give up its source.

In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), it is precisely the regional newspapers which could be hit by this measure. A small claim, one in the tens of thousands of pounds rather than in the hundreds of thousands, can still cause them immense financial damage. As MPs, we all know that our regional papers have been through a torrid time. Ten years ago when I started as the MP for Wantage, every one of the four major towns in my constituency had their own dedicated reporter. I have seen the decimation of journalism in my constituency, although I praise my local newspapers for holding on as much as they can to their journalists.

I will not be supporting the amendment. I will support the Government in the Lobby.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I was struck by the Minister—well, not physically—I was struck by the Minister’s accusation that I was an impatient man. That felt just a little bit patronising. It reminded me of the time I was in the theatre and the couple in front of me, as the curtain was about to rise, were having a terrible row. The woman said, “The worst of it is that you are so blasted patronising.” The man kissed her on the forehead and said, “It’s ‘patronising’, dear.” [Laughter.] I don’t know how Hansard will write that up.

The Minister’s only argument was that this is the wrong Bill—that was his only argument. Interestingly, the Minister in the House of Lords, when those Lords amendments were carried, said that a clear message had been sent by the debate, which would not be lost on her right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport as she considered these matters. Well, that was then. Today, we have seen that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has no interest whatever in what their lordships have to say on this matter, even though this was a Cross-Bench Lords amendment carried by a majority of very nearly 100. She has decided today to effectively try to unwind the whole of the Leveson provisions. That is the problem we face.

Let me take the House back to 18 March 2013. It was an extraordinary day. Lord Justice Leveson had produced his report on 29 November 2012. For the first time in our history, the Prime Minister came to the House to seek a Standing Order No. 24 motion, so that we could urgently debate the regulation of the press and the royal charter that had been agreed over the weekend in 48 hours of negotiations in the Leader of the Opposition’s office. The royal charter, which can be amended only by a two-thirds majority in this House and a two-thirds majority in the House of Lords—it is here to stay, I would suggest—would set up a press recognition panel. Accompanying that was to be an amendment to the then Crime and Courts Bill. Why do those who argue that the Investigatory Powers Bill is the wrong Bill because it does not relate to press regulation think it was right to amend the Crime and Courts Bill on the matter of press regulation, something the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) advocated?

Simon Hoare: Is the hon. Gentleman not—I dare say inadvertently—making the point that underscores, rather than undermines, the Minister’s position? He is drawing attention to the fact that when this place acts in haste in response to an event, as heinous as it might be, it very often gets it wrong. That is why the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport today, now that a passage of time has elapsed since all the brouhaha about it and we will have the 10-week consultation, is the proper way to deal with what is a serious issue to which the hon. Gentleman has drawn the attention of the House—not to tack something on to the end of a Bill.

Chris Bryant: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) cannot give way and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) does not have to tell him to give way. I recognise the sarcasm. What he meant was that the intervention was too long. The hon. Member for North Dorset will have the opportunity to make a really long speech if he would like to, but please we must have short interventions.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Chris Bryant: Well, I do not think the hon. Gentleman will be allowed to make a very long speech, as we do not have much more time. He is completely and utterly wrong. He has dragged himself into a hermeneutic circle and he will never get out of it.

When the amendment—which was carried by 530 votes to 13 to become section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013—was tabled, the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said:

“Today marks a turning point. We can move on from simply talking about Lord Justice Leveson’s report to start acting on it, with a new package... The package includes a new royal charter, as announced by the Prime Minister earlier; a new costs and damages package that seeks to maximise incentives for relevant publishers to be part of the new press self-regulator; and one short clause reinforcing the point that politicians cannot tamper with the new press royal charter, which is the subject of debate in the other place.”—[Official Report, 18 March 2013; Vol. 560, c. 698.]
Why was there an all-party deal? Because the Leveson inquiry exposed real failings both in the press and in the regulatory system. Many of us felt that we, the elected politicians of this country, had failed. Whether out of partisan ambition, deference, cowardice or a genuine determination to do everything in our power to protect the freedom of the press, we had nonetheless failed. We had developed relationships with the press and the media that were so cosy that the people no longer trusted us to make the best decisions on these issues in the national interest. We were on trial as much as the press itself. That is why we all agreed that we had to find a better way forward.

Above all, we knew there had to be a genuinely independent system of redress. I do not often agree with the hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), but he said that it could not just be “an updated version of the Press Complaints Commission. God forbid that it is”—[Official Report, 18 March 2013; Vol. 560, c. 662].

because that would be doomed to failure. But without the commencement of section 40, that is precisely what we have got. IPSO is the Press Complaints Commission in all but name. It is not independent in terms of its finances, the membership of its board or the decisions it makes. It is entirely compromised, as recent decisions have shown. The press marks its own homework and, surprise, surprise, it always gives itself gold stars. Five hundred and thirty Members wanted it to be independent of government and independent of the press, too.

Mr Rees-Mogg: If the hon. Gentleman does not like IPSO, how can he think that IMPRESS is any better? It is approved by the state, and it is funded by one irritated politician.

Chris Bryant: It is not my business to decide which of the two is better. The whole point is that we set up—a royal charter that can be changed only by a two thirds majority here and a two thirds majority in the other place—a body that would take the decision at arm’s length from us. My anxiety about today’s decision by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is that she is bringing this matter right back into her inbox, which I think is wholly mistaken. The press would be best advised not to encourage that.

Since that day in 2013, Conservative Ministers have repeated their commitment to the package time and again: the right hon. Member for Basingstoke on 18 March 2013; David Cameron and Viscount Younger of Leckie on that same day; the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on 10 April 2013; the right hon. Member for Basingstoke again, six times, on 16 April 2013; the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on 16 April 2013; the right hon. Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright), now the Attorney General, on 25 April 2013; Lord Gardiner of Kimble on 3 July 2013; the right hon. Member for Wantage—again—on 4 December 2013; David Cameron in The Spectator on Boxing day 2013—a nice little Christmas present. Lord Gardiner himself again on 2 April 2014; the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, now the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, on 20 January 2015; and indeed, the Government did so as late as 26 June 2015. All these people constantly reaffirmed that they were in favour of the commencement of section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. No wonder, then, that some Members in this House are impatient; no wonder there are Members in the House of Lords who are impatient and want the Government to get on with it. That is precisely why the amendments were tabled.

3.30 pm

To be honest, this is a question of keeping faith. Promises were made to the victims of phone hacking and press intrusion: people such as the family of the murdered schoolgirl, Millie Dowler, whose voicemail messages were hacked by the News of the World, giving her family the desperate false hope that their daughter was still alive; people such as the family of Madeleine McCann, whose mother Kate said she felt mentally raped by her treatment at the hands of the press.

All that means that we must have Leveson 2. It was never meant to be that there would be a decision on whether Leveson 2 would happen once the legal cases were complete; it was meant to be that Leveson 2 would happen once those cases were out of the way. Commencement of section 40 was also intended. There is no earthly reason why it could not have been commenced already. What everybody wants is redress—true redress—because when it comes to privacy and correction, it is phenomenally difficult to get “no win, no fee” agreements with lawyers. The awards that might come at the end are relatively minor, and lawyers simply do not want to take the risk.

There is a real danger now, even more than there was five years ago, that those intruded upon—ordinary members of the public and the victims of crime—will become the victims of intrusion all the more, without ever having had any opportunity for redress. People have said to me many times, “You can always go to the courts, if you have been labelled,” but the victims of Hillsborough—both those who died and the groups that were treated to calumny by the press—had no opportunity to go to the courts to seek redress. That is why we needed change.

I want a robust, naughty, scabrous and vibrant press. I even expect it to break the law on occasion when it is chasing down corruption and wrongdoing—as long as it really is in the interests of the public. I also want ordinary members of the public to get a real right of redress, provided impartially, independently and at minimal cost to them. The only incentive we have to persuade IPSO to become a better and more independent body that actually provides that right of redress is section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013. The Government have shown themselves repeatedly determined not to commence it, so of course the House of Lords is tweaking the Government’s nose and saying, “Come on, get on with it”. Conservatives promised it—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sure that in addition to the things that the hon. Gentleman says that he wants, he will also want a full debate this afternoon and he will not want to stop other Members from speaking. I am sure that he is going to conclude very soon.
Chris Bryant: I would have finished already if you had not interrupted me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I do not think that the hon. Gentleman meant that quite the way it sounded to the Chair.

Chris Bryant: I had one sentence left to say: the Conservatives promised it; the two Houses voted for it; it is time the Government commenced it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): We now need brevity from everyone.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful to be called to speak in this important debate. The changes that the Lords have brought before this House are significant because they adulterate what is fundamentally an essential Bill. The Investigatory Powers Bill, which has been brought here after the careful, bipartisan—in fact, multi-partisan—work of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when she was in her former post, is one of the most important Bills that we have brought forward. It has been brought forward with very little trouble or argument because of the efforts put in beforehand. To find ourselves in the House of Commons today debating an amendment that does not even belong in the Bill because Members of the House of Lords have misunderstood its purpose is deeply unhelpful.

Moreover, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), the ability to shoehorn amendments into Bills starts to take us into the pork-barrel politics of the United States. I think that that would be a great error not only for our country but for the conduct of government, because it would lead us to our seeking to add the bridge, the road or the school to the back of a Finance Bill—or, indeed, an Investigatory Powers Bill.

The Bill matters fundamentally, particularly today. I do not like to bring up the subject of The Guardian too often—after all, the only reason we had it in the officers’ mess was to dust it for prints—but now that it has been mentioned a few times, I think it wise for us to read what appears on the front page today. The head of MI5 himself has given an interview to The Guardian, presumably—well, I will stop there, but his warning is very clear: Russian activity in this country has now become a threat to our nation and with which his organisation must now deal. I am delighted that the Bill is back in the House of Commons, because we now have an opportunity to cut the barnacles off the boat and get rid of this amendment.

The Leveson legislation was introduced in the last Parliament, when I was not here and nor were many of my colleagues. I hope you will forgive me, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I express some dissatisfaction about the speed with which the last Parliament debated the legislation. I also hope you will accept that some of us who are new to this place are deeply uncomfortable with state authority over a free press. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) have already spoken eloquently, so I will not go over the same ground, but I feel very uncomfortable when I am asked to set up a regulator to govern who governs me, and I feel deeply uncomfortable when I am asked to say who is the judge who can hold me to account.

Joanna Cherry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Tugendhat: I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not, for reasons of time.

Having been brought up at the foot of a judge who did indeed hold me to account—very actively—I now realise that the judiciary works better when it is appointed without the control of the House and the Government. I will therefore not encourage the Government to invoke section 40 of the Crime and Courts Act 2013, and I will speak against it during the investigation that is to be conducted by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport over the next 10 weeks.

Members have asked how on earth this measure could possibly bully the regional press. We all know that a free press is the lifeblood of democracy, but the troubles experienced in borough and county councils across our land are partly due to the fact that our regional presses are being silenced. Too many are closing, and too few now have regular reporters in the county council offices, the borough council rooms or the district council rooms to follow what elected members are saying. I think that what we are doing here will increase the pressure still further. Forcing organisations to join IMPRESS, for example, imposes a cost that many cannot bear.

Other Members have mentioned the unlikelihood of any regional paper or regional organisation hacking a telephone, and it is indeed deeply unlikely. Of course, we all thought it was deeply unlikely that a national paper would do that, and then we found that one had; but that does not matter, because clause 8 does not tell us whether it is likely or unlikely. It merely sets out the penalty, and in doing so, effectively holds all those organisations to ransom. It forces them into organisations like IMPRESS, to which they must pay an extra tax.

Given the parlous economic situation of so many regional media outlets—in my own wonderful county of Kent, many papers have lost their correspondents from various towns—I cannot possibly support the amendment. It would be bad for the regional press and for a free press, and it would therefore be bad for our democracy and for us. Furthermore, it would act as a brake on an essential piece of legislation—a piece of legislation that we need to keep us safe, and to ensure that the safety of all those whom we are here to represent is also guaranteed.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I always listen very carefully to the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), and I noted that he said he was not a Member of the House when these measures became law. I was; I was in fact deputy Chief Whip of the coalition Government when the Leveson committee was set up, when it then reported and when these measures were put through Parliament. I saw rather more of the machinations surrounding this than was perhaps healthy for anyone, but it is disappointing and more than a little depressing that we are back here again debating it today.

I remember the Thursday afternoon when these amendments were tabled. It was the point when collective responsibility had broken down. There was no agreement between my party and the Conservatives and in fact I
was up in the Public Bill Office ready with the amendments to be tabled subject to agreement with other parties, and to get that agreement more time was necessary. Spurious points of order were raised, there was a somewhat spurious Division on the House sitting in private, and I think the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who was then in the Opposition Whips Office, went to extraordinary lengths to ensure the Lobbies were not cleared; I will be no more specific than that.

I remember that over the course of the following weekend there was a change of heart by the then Prime Minister, and I remember then the way in which matters proceeded on the basis of an all-party deal. I thought that would be the end of the matter, and I am afraid to say that I see the fact that it is not the end of the matter and we are back here today as something of a breach of good faith on the part of the Conservative party.

But more than all the parliamentary and intra-Government shenanigans at the time, the thing I remember most clearly, and will never forget, is meeting the parents of Milly Dowler at the time when we set up the Leveson inquiry and giving them the solemn pledge that whatever Leveson said was necessary, we as a Parliament would do. We set up Leveson for a reason, and we implemented it for a reason. The reason was, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has said, that it was necessary to take this place out of press regulation, and that is what pains me more than anything else about what we have heard from the Treasury Bench today, both from the Minister and earlier from the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. The time for action is long overdue; there can be no more delay and no more obfuscation.

If we do continue and if we do revisit this, as the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling suggested, we will not just be breaching faith between ourselves as political parties; we will be breaching the acts of good faith and the commitments we made to the parents of Milly Dowler, and I am never going to be part of that.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): There will be Members who feel that section 40 should be implemented immediately and others who feel that it should never be implemented, and certainly persistent questions have been asked—including by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which I chair, last week when the Secretary of State gave evidence to us—about when this will happen and when a decision will be made. The Secretary of State has now set out a clear timetable that says there will be a consultation, at the end of which a decision will be made.

The one clear question that must be answered from that consultation is, if the Government are minded, in response to the responses they receive to the consultation, not to implement section 40, what will be done instead. As I said when the Secretary of State made her statement earlier today, the current status quo is not acceptable; we do not yet have a robust system of arbitration and redress for the press.

That is the spirit of section 40. People may debate its wording and its consequences, but at its heart was one simple idea: that innocent victims—people who have never courted the media and never wanted to be personalities who have, through no fault of their own, got caught up in a major press story and had their lives trashed by it—should have some mechanism for redress that does not involve the expense of going through the courts, which is beyond the means of ordinary people. That is the spirit of section 40.

IPSO could go further in its pilot and reduce the cost of access to arbitration. It could also do as Sir Joseph Pilling suggested in his review of IPSO, by establishing proper guidelines for newspapers on the redress available when they have been ruled against or found against. No such guidelines currently exist. The industry could do a lot to make IPSO better. The outcome of the consultation and the review cannot be to maintain the status quo. We have to make a decision, and we have to ensure that however it is delivered, fair redress and arbitration are available for victims of the press.

3.45 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am honoured to be called to speak in the debate, and I rise to talk about Lords amendment 15. I understand that I have two and a half minutes to speak, to allow my other colleague time to speak. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) has pointed out, it is extraordinary that we are talking about the press when the Bill is actually about the security of our country. Lords amendment 15 is clearly in the wrong Bill. In the six years that I have had the privilege of representing South Dorset, I have noticed that the decisions made in this place are often knee-jerk decisions made to satisfy a public reaction that has nowadays often been fed by Facebook or Twitter, to which too many of us react too quickly.

I suspect that, over a period of time, many sensible people in this place—the majority of people here are sensible—have come to think that we cannot use the state to interfere with the freedom of the press in this country. It is mainly Opposition Members who are making this point, and I remind them again that phone hacking is already illegal. It is a criminal offence and people who commit that offence go to jail. I worked in the press for 17 years, including at national level, in radio and for local newspapers. Never once in that time was I influenced by a producer or asked to concoct a story in any way other than honestly and accurately. That includes my nine years working with the BBC. My point is that the offences that so many Members are almost ranting about are being committed by a tiny minority of the press, and that punishing everyone—as the House is thinking of doing—would be totally and utterly wrong.

Matt Warman: This short, impassioned debate about the freedom of the press has surely proved that a 90-minute debate on a Lords amendment shoehorned into a Bill about national security cannot be the right place to make a decision as important as this one. This Bill is supposed to regulate hacking, yet the Lords are seeking to hack the Bill by putting in something completely irrelevant to the vital matters of national security that it covers. As the previous Prime Minister and the present one have said, this is one of the most important—if not the most important—pieces of legislation in this Parliament.

If I were to dare criticise either of them, I would contend that the freedom of the press is even more important than some aspects of the Bill. It is absurd for anyone seriously to suggest that we can deal with this matter in 90 minutes.
I have a great deal of sympathy with the view of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) that the chilling effect of the proposals in section 40 would have a hugely negative impact across not only the national media but the regional and local media. Over hundreds of years, we have seen the good that a vibrant, boisterous and scabrous press can do, as other Members have said, and we need to preserve that. We do not need to damn it in a 90-minute debate. I hope that Members of all parties can see that this is not the right place to take such a momentous decision.

**Mr Wallace**: Every morning I go into my office and I open a number of documents. They are not nice reading. They usually focus on those people that want to kill us, want to rob us, want to corrupt our country or want to spy on us. This is not a subject to take lightly. This is not a subject to which to politically attach something to settle a score elsewhere. The Bill is about giving our brave men and women in the security services and the police forces up and down the country the powers to do their job, to make sure that we put away those people that pose a threat to this country.

Those men and women are watching this debate today. Instead of seeing this House debate the hundreds of amendments that this Parliament has collectively produced to reach a consensus to make the Bill something to go forward with, they see political opportunism being played out on another subject: press regulation. They do not see us discussing how we are going to protect them and society. We should not forget that.

What is important is that this Bill is not like any other Bill. This Bill is here because we have to bring it forward to replace the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014. DRIPA has a sunset clause and will expire on 31 December. The irony of that is that if DRIPA expires, we lose the requirement that we can place on internet companies and CSPs to retain data—data that we need to catch phone hackers, to catch child killers, to put away paedophiles. That is the risk that hon. Members are taking, with amendment 15. That is what they are putting before us and focus on the good things in the Bill and what it has done to strengthen and protect our security forces to ensure that we put away the right people. We should not play politics in this House or the other place.

*Lords amendment 11 disagreed to.*

*Lords amendments 12 to 14 disagreed to.*

**After Clause 8**

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 15.—(Mr Ben Wallace.)*

*The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 261.*

**Division No. 74**

[3.52 pm]

**AYES**

Adams, Nigel  
Afriyie, Adam  
Aldous, Peter  
Allan, Lucy  
Andrew, Stuart  
Ansell, Caroline  
Argar, Edward  
Atkins, Victoria  
Beresford, Sir Paul  
Berry, Jake  
Berry, James  
Bingham, Andrew  
Blackman, Bob  
Blackwood, Nicola  
Bone, Mr Peter  
Borwick, Victoria  
Bottomley, Sir Peter  
Bradley, rh Karen  
Brady, Mr Graham  
Brazier, Mr Julian  
Bridgen, Andrew  
Brookshire, rh James  
Bruce, Fiona  
Buckland, Robert  
Burns, Conor  
Bums, rh Sir Simon  
Burrowes, Mr David  
Burt, rh Alistair  
Caimns, rh Alun  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Carmichael, Neil  
Carlridge, James  
Caulfield, Maria  
Chalk, Alex  
Chishti, Rehman  
Churchill, Jo  
Clark, rh Greg  
Cleverly, James  
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey  
Coffey, Dr Thérèse  
Collins, Damian  
Colville, Oliver  
Costa, Alberto  
Courts, Robert  
Cox, Mr Geoffrey  
Crabb, rh Stephen  
Crouch, Tracey  
Davies, Byron  
Davies, Chris  
Davies, David T. C.  
Davies, Glyn  
Davies, Dr James  
Davies, Mims  
Davies, Philip  
Davis, rh Mr David  
Dinnenage, Caroline  
Djohogly, Mr Jonathan  
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel  
Donelan, Michelle  
Double, Steve  
Downen, Oliver  
Dowden, Oliver  
Doyly-Price, Jackie  
Drax, Richard  
Drummond, Mrs Flick  
Duddridge, James  
Duncan, rh Sir Alan  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Dunne, Mr Philip  
Elliott, Tom  
Ellis, Michael  
Ellison, Jane  
Ellwood, Mr Tobias  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Eustice, George  
Evans, Graham  
Evans, Mr Nigel  
Evennett, rh David  
Fabricant, Michael  
Fallon, rh Sir Michael  
Fernandes, Suella  
Field, rh Mark  
Foster, Kevin  
Francos, rh Mr Mark  
Frazer, Lucy  
Freeman, George  
Freer, Mike  
Fuller, Richard  
Fysh, Marcus  
Gaile, Sir Roger  
Garnier, rh Sir Edward  
Garnier, Mark  
Gauke, rh Mr David  
Ghani, Nusrat  
Gibb, Mr Nick  
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl  
Glen, John  
Gale, William  
Gove, rh Michael  
Graham, Richard  
Gray, Mr James  
Grayling, rh Chris  
Green, Chris  
Green, rh Damian  
Greening, rh Justine  
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic  
Griffiths, Andrew  
Gymah, Mr Sam  
Halfon, rh Robert  
Hall, Luke  
Hammond, Stephen  
Hancock, rh Matt  
Hands, rh Greg  
Harper, rh Mr Mark  
Harrington, Richard  
Harris, Rebecca  
Hart, Simon  
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan  
Hayes, rh Mr John  
Heald, rh Sir Oliver  
Heappey, James  
Heaton-Harris, Chris  
Heaton-Jones, Peter  
Henderson, Gordon  
Herbert, rh Nick  
Hinds, Damian  
Hoare, Simon  
Hollingbery, George  
Hollinrake, Kevin  
Hollobone, Mr Philip  
Hopkins, Kris  
Howell, John  
Huddleston, Nigel  
Hunter, rh Mr Jeremy  
Hurd, Mr Nick  
Jackson, rh Mr Stewart  
James, Margot  
Javid, rh Sajid  
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil  
Jenkin, Mr Bernard  
Jenrick, Robert  
Johnson, rh Boris  
Johnson, Gareth  
Johnson, Joseph  
Jones, Andrew  
Jones, rh Mr David  
Jones, Mr Marcus  
Kawczynski, Daniel  
Kennedy, Seema  
Kinahan, Danny  
Kirby, Simon  
Knight, rh Sir Greg  
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Sir David
Liley, rh Mr Peter
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mathias, Dr Tania
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Millling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milon, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Patel, rh Prith
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Daniel
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary

Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shebrosse, Alec
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Stephenson, Andrew
Stephenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaiazy, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Robert
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Steve Brine and
Mark Spencer

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed-Shiekh, Ms Tasmina
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Ali-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Mr David
Arkless, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Philip
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brahe, rh Tom
Brean, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgen, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Champion, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Debono, Baines
Dochter-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dromey, Jack
Durkan, Mark

NOES
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Ferris, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Flin, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glass, Pat
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendy, Drew
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Heron, Lady
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma

Clause 1

OVERVIEW OF ACT

Mr Wallace: I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With this we may take Lords amendments 2 to 10, 16 to 337 and 340 to 377.

Mr Wallace: The Investigatory Powers Bill will ensure that the police and the security and intelligence agencies have the vital powers they need at a time of changing threats and rapidly evolving technology. It will place those powers on a clear statutory footing and achieve world-leading oversight. It will leave no doubt about how seriously we value privacy and individual rights in this country.

Let us not forget why those powers are so important. Every day, our law enforcement and security and intelligence agencies use those powers to investigate serious crime and collect evidence to convict offenders. They are particularly crucial in combating human trafficking and child exploitation. For example, in January 2009, Operation Retriever, an organised crime investigation in Derby, uncovered one of the most serious cases of child sexual abuse in recent times, involving multiple offenders and multiple victims.

During the investigation, officers uncovered an elaborate and hideous campaign of sexual exploitation directed against teenage girls who were groomed by people they thought they could trust and were driven around the midlands to houses, hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, where they were raped, often violently. One of the officers involved in the investigation described it as “a campaign of rape against children”.

The investigation team used a combination of covert policing and communications data, such as mobile phone records, to link group members and their victims to each other, to phone handsets and to downloaded images and videos of sexual abuse taking place. In that investigation alone, 27 female victims aged between 12 and 18 were identified. Communications data evidence helped to secure the convictions of nine defendants. One of the offenders is serving at least 11 years for rape, sexual assault, sexual activity with a child, perverting the course of justice, aiding and abetting rape, false imprisonment and making child pornography. Another is serving at least eight years for rape, sexual assault, sexual activity with a child, perverting the course of justice, aiding and abetting rape, false imprisonment and making child pornography. Another is serving at least eight years for rape, sexual assault and other sexual activity. Yet another is serving three years for the supply of cocaine.

Those men could still be on our streets, exploiting innocent children, without the police having access to the important intelligence that communications data provide. It is essential that we give the police the tools they need to investigate and prevent awful crimes such as these. That is what this Bill will do.

I am pleased that the Bill has commanded cross-party support, and I am grateful to all those who helped, in the spirit of consensus, to produce the Bill that we have before us. On Report, the former shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham), set out his party’s position:

“We have supported the principle of a modern legal framework governing the use of investigatory powers, recognising that as

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 15 disagreed to.
Lords amendments 338 and 339 disagreed to.
communications have migrated online, the police and security services have lost capability". —[Official Report, 6 June 2016; Vol. 611, c. 952.]

On Third Reading, the right hon. Gentleman went on to say:

“The police and security services do incredibly difficult work on our behalf and we thank them for it. Their job has got harder as both the level of the threat has risen and the nature of communication has changed in the modern world. To fail to respond to that would be a dereliction of our duties to them; it would also fail our constituents. The Bill is ultimately about their safety, the safety of their families and their privacy. I think we can look ourselves in the mirror tomorrow and say we have done our level best to maximise both.” —[Official Report, 7 June 2016; Vol. 611, c. 1148.]

The right hon. Gentleman was right. This has been a truly collaborative effort, of which both we and the Opposition can be proud. I note that the Government’s approach has attracted support from some of the Liberal Democrats in the Lords, although Liberal Democrat Members are not present here.

We have before us today a substantial number of changes agreed in the other place—evidence of constructive engagement from all sides to further improve this landmark legislation. Let me list the main changes. Responding to concerns raised by the former shadow Home Secretary, we have replicated changes agreed in this House throughout other parts of the Bill, including protections for trade union activity and amendments to the test applied by judicial commissioners when reviewing warrants, notices and authorisations under the Bill.

We commissioned an independent review by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, David Anderson QC, that comprehensively endorsed the necessity of the bulk powers. As a consequence of that review, we have included provision for a technical advisory panel to advise the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and the Secretary of State on the impact of changes in technology. We have added a sentencing threshold for access to internet connection records, so that they could not be used to investigate minor crimes. We have added extra protections and safeguards for journalists, lawyers and parliamentarians.

We have addressed issues raised by the Intelligence and Security Committee by giving the Committee the right to refer matters to the Investigatory Powers Commissioner to investigate on behalf of this House; adding a requirement for the commissioner to report on thematic warrants and operational purposes; introducing a criminal offence for the misuse of bulk powers; bolstering safeguards surrounding the modification and renewal of warrants; and clarifying provisions relating to class BPD warrants, improving safeguards, and prohibiting the retention of medical records in bulk personal datasets held under class warrants.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): May I put on record my appreciation for the way that the Minister listened to the representations made by the Intelligence and Security Committee in this matter? It has proved to be a most constructive dialogue and I am extremely grateful to him for having taken on board and acted on the vast bulk of the recommendations that we put forward. May I raise one matter? On the issue of thematic warrants, I know that the Government, for very understandable reasons, were unable to move on some of the safeguards that the Committee wanted. Will the Minister give an undertaking that he will keep that under review as we see how the measure operates in practice?

Mr Wallace: I am grateful to my right hon. and learned Friend for his comments. Although it would be nice to take the credit, that belongs to my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General, who steered the Bill through Committee, and the present Prime Minister, who helped shape and deliver the Bill. I have merely come in at the end, but will take some of the credit nevertheless.

Of course we will keep the matter under review, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee asked. I do understand the concerns about thematic warrants. I know that he will keep the matter under review and the Government will do so as well.

We have made a number of minor and technical changes to improve the clarity and consistency of the legislation. Finally, in the absence of legislative consent from the Northern Ireland Assembly, we have removed measures that would have brought oversight of devolved investigatory powers in Northern Ireland within the remit of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner.

Many amendments have been accepted and we have worked together to produce the Bill that is before us today. I hope it will command the support of the whole House.

In closing, I remind the House that one of the aims of this legislation is to update investigatory powers for the digital age. It is worth contemplating briefly the consequences that would have come from failing to achieve that aim. Police forces across the country are increasingly struggling to pursue investigations because they cannot uncover crucial information as criminals’ activity moves online. Alan Wardle of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children told the Public Bill Committee that

“the police’s ability to investigate and prosecute some of the high-profile crimes we have seen in recent years—online grooming of children and the number of people who are viewing illegal images of children online, which has grown exponentially—is increasingly dependent on communications data. I think it is vital that this Bill ensures that the police have the powers and capabilities to continue to do that.” —[Official Report, Investigatory Powers Public Bill Committee, 24 March 2016; c. 34.]

4.15 pm

Let me give an example. In 2012, a Cambridgeshire constabulary investigation into sexual exploitation of a number of vulnerable children in Peterborough relied heavily on communications data. The operation resulted in sentences for 10 men, for a total of 114 years and nine months, covering the offences of rape, sexual activity with a child, inciting child prostitution and making indecent images of children. Call data were used to identify victims and offenders, and allowed investigators to establish links between them. The police were able to demonstrate call patterns linking the offenders with each other and with their victims. Subscriber data were obtained to attribute devices to offenders, and location data were used to demonstrate the movements of the offenders.
If those communications had been made using internet-based telephone services, rather than traditional phone calls, it is likely that police would not have been able to successfully disrupt this awful activity. The Bill goes a long way towards plugging this capability gap. In doing so, it safeguards the most vulnerable in our society, and it gives victims of crime a greater chance of achieving justice. That is why the Bill is so important.

Ms Abbott: Like the Minister, I came to the Bill towards the end, but I am happy to claim credit just like him. Let me say right at the beginning that the Bill has enjoyed, and continues to enjoy, cross-party support, but the House will forgive me if I put on record some of the reservations still raised by important stakeholders.

The first thing I would like to remind the House of is that there is a case before the European Court of Justice that involves the Home Secretary. It is brought by, among other distinguished persons, the deputy leader of the Labour party, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson). It relates to the predecessor legislation to the Bill—the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014. It seems clear from the interim judgment delivered by the advocate-general on 19 July this year that key sections of DRIPA will be struck down. It is clear that the Bill has even more widely drawn powers and has fewer safeguards and mechanisms for judicial oversight. The logical conclusion—we cannot say at this point what will happen—is that the powers in the Bill may well be among the shortest-lived in parliamentary history, as they may be struck down at the European Court of Justice, and that court proceedings would almost immediately follow Royal Assent.

Among the issues that have been raised with us during the passage of the Bill by stakeholders are access to internet records and the nature of the judicial safeguards; the protection of data, and the rights of journalists to protect their sources; the lack of powers to refer issues to the Investigatory Powers Tribunal; and insufficient checks on the sharing of data between agencies. There is no right of disclosure to the target and not necessarily a duty to provide information to the service provider. There is also the concern—it may be a theoretical concern, but it is a real one for many stakeholders—about the potential abuse of these investigatory powers by state agencies.

A wide number of interest groups and stakeholders have told Opposition Members that the powers in the Bill are perhaps a little disproportionate in relation to the objectives. The Society of Editors, the National Union of Journalists, with the backing of the TUC, and insufficient checks on the sharing of data between agencies. There is no right of disclosure to the target and not necessarily a duty to provide information to the service provider. There is also the concern—it may be a theoretical concern, but it is a real one for many stakeholders—about the potential abuse of these investigatory powers by state agencies.

A number of stakeholders, campaigning groups and other bodies have expressed their continuing dissatisfaction with elements of the Bill. They include Amnesty International, Article 19, Big Brother Watch, the Centre for Investigative Journalism, Don’t Spy On Us, English PEN, Index on Censorship, Labour Campaign for Human Rights, Liberty, the National Union of Journalists, OpenMedia, Open Rights Group, PEN International, Privacy International, Scottish PEN, the Society of Editors and the World Wide Web Foundation. In addition, I have held meetings with the TUC and a number of other trade unions that still have concerns about this Bill. I would be grateful if the Minister explained why, despite all the efforts that have been made to improve the Bill, there continue to be concerns among such a wide array of stakeholders.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that despite these reservations, the almost 300 amendments that the Government were forced to table on Report give us much greater safeguards in the exercise of these powers and a much greater capacity to scrutinise whether they are being used properly, with clear avenues for challenge where people are tempted to misuse them, all of which was absent before these changes?

Ms Abbott: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his, as usual, very wise observation. There is no question but that the amendments that the Government have been forced to table, and the work of Members on both sides of the House, have made this a much better Bill than the one that was originally presented to this House.

Dr Murrison: It is not a question of being forced. The hon. Lady may recall that this measure was subject to a Joint Committee on the draft Bill. There can be no Bill in recent memory that has had more scrutiny than this one. Will she also note clause 232, which establishes a review of this measure after five years—a most unusual mechanism for a Bill of this sort—and give the Government credit for doing everything in their power to reconcile the need to protect our liberties with the need to protect the press?

Ms Abbott: Right at the beginning of this debate, I made a point of acknowledging the very hard work of hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, including my hon. Friends of mine, but perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not here at that stage. The first thing I did was to acknowledge the diehard work of Members on both sides of Chamber. There is no question but that this is a better Bill than the one that was originally presented to us. We are very grateful, and, more importantly, the stakeholders are very grateful, for the possibilities for a review, but I would not be performing my role as a member of Her Majesty’s Opposition if I did not put on the record the reservations that still exist among some of our stakeholders.

A number of stakeholders, campaigning groups and other bodies have expressed their continuing dissatisfaction with elements of the Bill. They include Amnesty International, Article 19, Big Brother Watch, the Centre for Investigative Journalism, Don’t Spy On Us, English PEN, Index on Censorship, Labour Campaign for Human Rights, Liberty, the National Union of Journalists, OpenMedia, Open Rights Group, PEN International, Privacy International, Scottish PEN, the Society of Editors and the World Wide Web Foundation. In addition, I have held meetings with the TUC and a number of other trade unions that still have concerns about this Bill. I would be grateful if the Minister explained why, despite all the efforts that have been made to improve the Bill, there continue to be concerns among such a wide array of stakeholders.
Mr Wallace: Perhaps I could pick up on some of the concerns of Liberty. We will all have had in our inboxes this morning a letter from Liberty. The concerns expressed in it are, I am afraid, simply wrong. In the third paragraph, Liberty’s policy officer says:

“Bulk powers allow for...surveillance...The much vaunted ‘double lock’ system of authorisation in fact allows the Secretary of State rather than judges to authorise warrants.”

That is incorrect; in fact, the Secretary of State and a judge will authorise a warrant. Perhaps Liberty is incorrect in some of its assertions about why it is unhappy and should look at the Bill, as amended, that has been before this House.

Ms Abbott: I have no doubt that stakeholders will look at the amended Bill, and if it returns to us from the Lords, there will no doubt be another opportunity to tease out some of these issues.

This Bill has all-party support and that is significant, because getting the balance right between updating legislation to deal with an internet and high-tech age and defending the civil liberties of subjects is very important, and this House is best placed to do that. We have been grateful to Ministers for being willing to listen to Members in all parts of the House in seeking to improve the Bill.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Privacy is an essential right in a democratic society. It is a basic civil right, protected by statute, so it must follow that any incursion into that right should be limited and carefully considered. I want to make three short points to show that, through the passage of the Bill through this House, that necessity for considered judgment has been respected.

First, a significant amount of information “was given when the Bill was first tabled...including more information about the security services than we have ever seen in parliamentary papers.” —[Official Report, House of Lords, 11 October 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1797.]

Those are not my words, but the words of the Liberal Democrat peer Lord Carlile during last month’s debate in the other place.

Secondly, as the Bill has passed through the House and through Committee, the Government have listened. Again, that is not my view, but that of Lord Janvrin, the Cross-Bench peer who opened the debate in the other place by stating that the “changes have introduced significant improvements in the protection afforded to privacy.” —[Official Report, House of Lords, 11 October 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1797.]

Thirdly, this is a Bill that “stands not only for transparency but for the introduction of significant new safeguards”, which is a view expressed by David Anderson in paragraph 1.20 of his most recent report on bulk powers.

It is right that we think carefully when we look to limit the right to privacy, and this Government have done so. Importantly, we must also remember why we are passing this Bill. We are doing so to protect and ensure the safety of our citizens from illegal acts, including serious crime, and to fight international terrorism; and we are doing this in a fast-moving environment where we have to keep pace with technology.

Andrew Parker, the head of MI5, told The Guardian this morning that the number of terror plots thwarted in the past three years stands at 12. He said that “the tempo of terrorist plots and attempts is concerning and it’s enduring. Attacks in this country are higher” than he has experienced in the rest of his 33-year career at MI5. The Bill’s provisions are designed to ensure that our security services have the tools that they need to protect our citizens from those attacks.

David Anderson wrote in his report, which was published in August:

“The bulk powers play an important part in identifying, understanding and averting threats in Great Britain, Northern Ireland and further afield. Where alternative methods exist, they are often less effective, more dangerous, more resource-intensive, more intrusive or slower”.

The Bill strikes a balance between privacy and security, and it does so because the Government need the tools to fight external threats to the nation. Those tools ensure our safety and our freedom.

Joanna Cherry: Unlike the Minister and the shadow Home Secretary, but like the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), I have been with this Bill since the beginning and it has been an interesting journey. As I said earlier, much was promised from the Lords when the Bill left this House, and, as the shadow Home Secretary has said, people had considerable concerns at that time about its intrusion into civil liberties and the security of data.

It is a matter of regret that the Lords amendments as a whole have not lived up to expectations. However, some improvements have undoubtedly been made in the safeguards afforded by the Bill, as a result of Government amendments in the Lords. Although the SNP does not believe that they go far enough, we will support them because they improve the safeguards. The Minister has listed some of them. I am particularly happy with the taking up of the recommendation for a technical advisory panel; the imposition of some restrictions on access to bulk personal data sets; and the inclusion of the threshold for internet connection records. I also particularly welcome the Government amendments to clause 233, to ensure that the Scottish Government will be provided with the means to engage with the work of the judicial commissioners relating to the devolved powers in Scotland.

4.30 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I am pleased to note that the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and I have made similar sartorial choices today. Although we disagree on many other things, it seems we agree on the important things. Does she agree that the legislation is essential, because without it the expiration of existing legislation will create a legal vacuum?

Joanna Cherry: I agree that the legislation is essential. The SNP believes that it is important to give the security services and, indeed, law enforcement necessary and proportionate powers. I welcome, as I have said repeatedly in this House, the attempt in the Bill to codify the law and to provide an enhanced oversight regime. However, I will not demur from the position that I have held throughout, which is that in some respects the Bill does not provide sufficient safeguards.
The SNP and many other stakeholders mentioned by the shadow Home Secretary remain very concerned about allowing significantly unfettered collection of, and access to, communications data including internet connection records. We also oppose far-reaching bulk powers to acquire the personal and private data of our constituents when a proper case for the necessity and proportionality of those powers has yet to be made.

I consider it a matter of deep regret that the review of bulk powers by David Anderson, QC reported not to this House, but to the House of Lords. This House—the democratically elected and accountable Chamber—has not had an opportunity to debate that review. It is an excellent review as far as it goes, and I would not dare to undermine much of what it says. It is what is missing from the review that is important. It makes out a case that bulk powers can be of use to the state, but it does not address the necessity and proportionality of those powers. Those matters are yet to be addressed, and we will not get to debate them here. As the shadow Home Secretary said, they are very likely to be the subject of litigation in the future, and they are likely to be addressed by courts in the United Kingdom and in Europe—for as long as we have the sense to remain part of those European systems.

**Dr Murrison:** On the question of proportionality, does the hon. and learned Lady agree that the proposals must be put into some sort of context? As Lord Rooker pointed out yesterday, the problem is that we have a commercial sector with a large number of commercial providers who are busy harvesting data all the time in order to advertise things to us. Since the powers that the state is taking to itself are similar in some respects, it is important to bear that in mind when trying to ensure that we have some level of proportionality.

**Joanna Cherry:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that at some point the House needs to look at the mass harvesting of data by private companies, but there is a big difference between a private company harvesting personal data and the state doing so. A private company does not have the coercive power of the state, and that is the crucial reason why the Bill must be scrutinised so carefully.

It is a matter of the deepest regret that the review on bulk powers did not report to this House and has not been scrutinised in this House. I would not wish the SNP’s position on the Bill to be portrayed as irresponsible, because it is not. It is an attempt to make sure that the Bill fulfils its purpose while remaining lawful and proportionate. As has been alluded to during this debate, the Scottish Parliament has given legislative consent to the consolidating and enhanced safeguard provisions in the Bill, so far as those matters fall within its legislative competence. If Members care to read the terms of the legislative consent motion, which I do not believe was opposed by anyone in the Scottish Parliament, they will see that concern was reiterated about the potential impingement on civil liberties by internet connection record collection and bulk data collection.

I want to correct something that the Minister said about Liberty. Liberty has scrutinised the Bill in detail and provided detailed briefings—one might not agree with them all—on every aspect of the Bill. It is unfair to say that Liberty is mistaken about anything. Liberty is quite correct to say that, in reality, all that the double-lock system means is that a judge will check that the correct procedures have been followed; the Minister will still make the initial decision.

In previous debates, I have said that I would not use the phrase “mass surveillance”, because it is a bit too broad, and I have instead talked about suspicionless surveillance. That is the problem with the Bill: SNP Members and many others with concerns about the Bill believe that surveillance should be targeted and based on suspicion. There is a deal too much suspicionless surveillance in the Bill, even as amended.

**The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland):** I listened very carefully to what the hon. and learned Lady said about the double lock. Surely the point is that where the judge has the final say, authorisation will not be granted. Will not that fundamental change create the balance that both she and I want?

**Joanna Cherry:** I do not accept that the Government have gone as far as some of us would have liked them to go on the double lock, which is by having full-blown judicial warrantry with the power to look at the merits as well as at the process. However, I accept that this is an improvement on what was originally in the Bill, and its inclusion is a great tribute to the hard work that was done by me and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), as well as by Labour members of the Committee. If there had not been such root-and-branch opposition, many of the Government amendments that have finally been passed in the Lords would not be with us today.

**The Solicitor General:** We are all keen to claim the credit, but let us not forget that the Government’s position from the outset was to have a double lock. This important change is very much the result of Government initiative, as well as of the good intentions of Opposition Members.

**Joanna Cherry:** Indeed, but the fine detail on the double lock—that is what enables the Solicitor General to get up and say that it goes as far as it does—was inserted by way of amendment during the Bill’s passage.

**Suella Fernandes:** Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

**Joanna Cherry:** I will make a little progress, and then give way again, because I do not want to take up too much time.

During the Bill’s passage, SNP Members were pleased to offer our support to the Labour party on its amendment to protect trade unionists going about their lawful activities, but what about protections for other activists and campaigners going about their lawful activities and what about non-governmental organisations and whistleblowers? We should not have unjustified spying on trade unionists, and we should not have unjustified spying on other activists either. Whistleblowers can sometimes be very inconvenient to the Government and to the private sector, but they fulfil an important function and the Bill contains insufficient protection for them.

On the protection of journalists, it is true that significant amendments have been made in the Lords, but it is important to put on the record today that journalists...
have continued concerns about the provisions in the Bill. They feel that safeguards for journalistic sources should apply across the various powers in the Bill, rather than in their current limited form.

In parallel, although great progress has been made in the Lords on the question of legal professional privilege, some in the legal profession still have concerns about the way in which the Bill approaches it. The way the Bill is drafted may have undermined the central premise on which legal professional privilege is based. However, credit where credit is due: significant progress has been made. I spoke this morning to the Law Society of Scotland, which recognises that the Government have come a long way but is still concerned about these somewhat controversial measures and is very anxious to have post-legislative scrutiny of how legal professional privilege will work in practice.

The Solicitor General: The hon. and learned Lady will agree, first, that legal professional privilege has for the first time been averred in legislation, which is very important, and secondly, that further amendments made in the Lords—they were approved by Members such as Lord Pannick—now deal with situations in which legal professional privilege material has been obtained inadvertently. We are now covering even more areas in a circumscribed way, and creating the sort of safeguards introduced by the Lords, in particular, the Court of Justice of the European Union on these issues, which was that current provisions lacked vital safeguards. To my mind, that means that when this Bill becomes law it will be open to immediate challenge.

The Bill is certainly the better for its passage through the Lords, although it pains me slightly to say that, as someone who does not approve of the House of Lords—not because I do not approve of a second Chamber but because I think that it should be democratically accountable in some way. However, I do not believe that what was promised of the Lords, and expected by some on the Opposition Benches, on the protection of civil liberties has come to fruition.

It is a matter of the greatest regret that peers supported the internet connection record powers just hours after the Investigatory Powers Tribunal had ruled that the security agencies had been unlawfully scooping up personal confidential information on a massive scale for more than a decade. I was repeatedly told regarding my objections to the Bill that our security agencies are the best in the world and never break the law. I suspect that it is close to the truth that the British security agencies are, if not the best, among the best in the world; but they do sometimes break the law. No one is infallible. We must have safeguards that are real. It is noteworthy, and an indication of the inadequacy of the scrutiny of the Bill that, only hours after the Investigatory Powers Tribunal ruled that unlawful action had taken place, the Lords supported the provisions on internet connection records in their totality.

It seems that the battle has been lost in this House. But given the very real concerns I and others have about the lawfulness of aspects of the Bill, I suspect the battle may be won elsewhere.

Suella Fernandes: This landmark legislation enables our security, intelligence and law enforcement services to continue the intelligence gathering, analysis and code-breaking that are essential for the security of our country in a digital age. I was pleased to support the Government on Second Reading, and am even happier to do so today.

The Investigatory Powers Bill has been subject to intensive scrutiny. Along with many Members in the Chamber—including my hon. Friends the Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) and for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer) and the Solicitor General—I was privileged to sit on the Committees for that scrutiny. I was a member of the Joint Committee responsible for pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill. We considered 1,500 pages of evidence, interviewed numerous experts and campaigners, and made 86 recommendations to the Government.

Following that, there was a refreshingly collaborative cross-party approach during the Bill’s passage through Parliament. The Bill has benefited from the expertise and constructive criticism of many hon. Members, including the then Labour party spokesman on the issue, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), a former Director of Public Prosecutions.

Throughout that process it has emerged that our intelligence and security agencies depend upon the acquisition of bulk data—that is, information acquired in large volumes and used, subject to special restrictions, to acquire vital and unique intelligence that they cannot
obtain by other means. They need the power to intercept messages and will not be able to do their job without contextual intelligence, provided in the form of internet connection records.

4.45 pm

The threats we face are rapidly changing and multidimensional. At home, overseas and online, modern terrorist groups are mercurial and elusive, deploying instant messaging, WhatsApp, email and text to avoid detection, so that the prospect of attacks such as those in Paris and Brussels happening here in the UK is a strong possibility. Our intelligence services are regularly working to thwart plots against the UK—there were seven in 2015—directed by terrorists in Syria and inspired online by Daesh’s intricate use of social media. Meanwhile, paedophile rings use secret Facebook groups to share indecent photos. The police are constantly trying to trace vulnerable missing people. Privacy settings and encryption, while empowering, enabling and essential for the law-abiding citizen, are abused by serious fraudsters and others to create a cloak of invisibility for the worst misdemeanours. These networks are bewildering and often sourced by companies based overseas, placing them increasingly beyond the reach of the police and security services. As that threat evolves, so must our capabilities.

I support the Bill because it includes provisions that oblige internet and phone companies to store internet connection records of websites visited for 12 months. It enables the security services and police to intercept and track electronic communications and mount IT attacks, known as equipment interference, under a warrant authorised by the Home Secretary and an independent judge. It empowers our services to access and analyse bulk data, a tool that has become more important than ever before.

Critics argue that the Bill is disproportionate. They say it goes too far and that the powers avowed are unnecessary. In doing so, they misunderstand the nature of modern security and law enforcement. Without access to communications data, the National Crime Agency would not have had the evidence to prosecute paedophiles who had been visiting websites with indecent images of children. Without interception intelligence, MI6 could not have detected and disrupted numerous plots to attack the UK being planned by individuals based abroad. Without access to bulk data, GCHQ would not be able to uncover cyber-attacks against the UK.

I can see why, in the post-Snowden era, conspiracy theories abound. However, they are unsustainable in this context. For these powers, while wide-ranging, are transparent and subject to robust safeguards. First, multiple independent reviews, by David Anderson, QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, the Royal United Services Institute and the Intelligence and Security Committee, have concluded that our intelligence agencies are categorically not engaged in mass surveillance. The tools are used scrupulously and are subject to strict checks and rigorous oversight.

Secondly, the Bill creates a completely new system of warranting. A double lock on ministerial authorisation of warrants means that both judges and Ministers will consider the evidence and merits of granting permission for such powers to be used. Only where it is necessary and proportionate will a warrant be issued. It has been some time since I hung up my wig and gown, but any lawyer will say that the level of scrutiny imported in the wording of the Act is critical. We are not looking at Wednesday unreasonableness, but a higher level of scrutiny—an anxious level of scrutiny involving proportionality.

The test for proportionality under the ECHR is set out in a four-stage test. First, the judge will ask themselves whether the objective of the means is sufficient to justify a limitation of the right. Secondly, are the means rationally connected to the objective? Thirdly, could a less intrusive measure be used to achieve the same objective? Fourthly, the decision maker will balance the effect on rights against the importance of the objective. That is trite law, but it is very significant because it means that a considerable level of scrutiny will be employed to analyse whether the warrant is justified.

In our evidence sessions, Professor Christopher Forsyth, professor of public law at the University of Cambridge, said that this test was appropriate and that the Secretary of State and the judicial commissioner are assessing important aspects of the warranting process. Importantly, there will be different considerations to take into account. For example, in a diplomatic setting, it is not appropriate for the judge to have all the decision-making power, for there might be extraneous issues that are not within the mind of the judge that need to be taken into account.

Transparency runs through the Bill. All the powers are already legitimised by Acts of Parliament, while article 8 of the Human Rights Act acts as a limit on the level of intrusion into someone’s private life. Warrantry is scrutinised and reviewed. The Intelligence and Security Committee, independent reviewers and the judiciary through the independent commissioner and the Investigatory Powers Tribunal all provide challenge and supervision. Trust is the golden thread running through the viability of the new legislation. Some things necessarily need to remain secret, but notwithstanding that need for secrecy, the public’s trust, a sound legal basis and opportunity for impartial challenge are important for ensuring long-term robustness.

Finally, I would like to share some of my thoughts on privacy. As threats and capabilities evolve to meet the pace of technological change, so must our notions of privacy. The more we live our lives online, the more we routinely give up our privacy. As the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said, supermarkets, search engines and mapping devices all track our shopping choices, our interests and our movements, and use the data for commercial purposes. Every time we click “agree” to the small print on these ubiquitous services, we make a concession, and we allow our data to be gathered by private companies.

Critics of the Bill argue that the intelligence and security agencies’ acquisition and use of such data is a disproportionate violation of human rights, despite its national security purpose. Yet every day, in myriad contexts, we all willingly sacrifice our privacy. The more interconnected we choose to be, the less we can pray in the hope of absolute privacy. These days, the terrorists, the paedophiles and the serious fraudsters scheme online. Technology that empowers us also empowers them. Yes, we want world-class encryption, but we also want world-class security.

I am proud to support this Bill as a symbol of my trust—my trust in the skill and restraint of the unsung heroes who live their lives in the shadows: the code
breakers, the agents, the investigators and the detectives who work day and night to protect us. Subject to weighty checks, these powers epitomise the duty incumbent on all of us as elected Members—the duty to protect the safety of those who put us here and to prevent the threats that we can instead of turning the other cheek and hoping for the best.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) and to speak in support of the Bill.

In March 2016, David Anderson, QC suggested that this Bill “charts a bold route forward—and gets the most important things right”.

He went on to say that it “restores the rule of law and sets an international benchmark for candour.”

He suggested at that time that some matters remained to be resolved, but as the Government’s support for these Lords amendments demonstrates, there has been cross-party co-operation and support both in this House and in the other place. The Bill is all the better for it.

This relative consensus is well demonstrated by the remaining amendments, just rejected, relating to press regulation. There were, of course, concerns prior to my election to this place, that a Bill of this type could be construed as a snoopers’ charter. The fact that we have just had a debate on Leveson speaks well of the progress made on this Bill. The fact that we have got to this positive position is, in my view, in no small part due to the Government’s acceptance of suggestions made across the political divide and their taking of the three independent reviews as a starting-point for this legislation.

It is worth considering that the first report, the Anderson report, called for a new law that would be both comprehensive and comprehensible. The second report, from the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, said that the “legal framework has developed piecemeal, and is unnecessarily complicated.”

That, it said, had resulted in a “lack of transparency, which is not in the public interest.”

The third report, produced by the Royal United Services Institute, called for a “radical reshaping of the way that intrusive investigative techniques using the internet and digital data are authorised”, and said that it should be “subject to judicial scrutiny”.

The Bill delivers on all those fronts. It gives our law enforcement and intelligence agencies the power that they need to keep us safe. It brings together all the powers that are already available to those agencies before they are due to expire following the judicial review of the Data Retention and Investigatory Powers Act 2014, and gives them additional powers to catch up with new technology and the web. It introduces a double lock for the most intrusive warrants, providing judicial oversight and creating an investigatory powers commissioner. It not only delivers comprehensive legislation with safeguards, but gives the security agencies the power to keep up with technology that is being used by those who seek to do harm to our constituents.

That takes me back to the words of David Anderson, QC. Last month, in Strasbourg, he spoke to the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, a Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe—of which I am a member—about these powers and about the threat posed by terrorists across Europe. During the same session, the threat was brought home most powerfully by another speaker. This lady, a Parisian, had lost her daughter to the terrorists who were responsible for the Bataclan massacre in Paris. Her words, and her pain, were incredibly moving for all who listened. She demonstrated to us how difficult her life had become, and also the terror that her daughter had experienced in her final hours. That brought home to me the need for us in this place to do everything we can to ensure that we never have to hear testimonies like that from our constituents across this nation, and it is on that basis that I shall be very pleased to see the Bill become law.

Mr Wallace: I wish to place on record our gratitude to the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National party, and the Opposition Front Benchers—the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) and the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and, in the other place, Lord Murphy of Torfaen and Lord Rooker—for their contribution to making the Bill what it is today. We must ensure that it proceeds in a spirit of consensus, and I therefore approve of the provision in clause 232 for a review of the Bill in five years’ time. Obviously I must also express my gratitude to the Prime Minister, who helped to shape the Bill and to introduce the important powers that it gives our security services and police to help them to do their job.

I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes)—the former Security Minister—and the Chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). They, too, have made a considerable contribution. I also thank the SNP, including the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), although she seemed rather cynical about the Bill in her more recent contributions. I recognise that the support of the SNP goes a long way towards the application of the Bill in the United Kingdom; it is important that we all embrace its aims.

A long time ago, in a different life, I did some of this stuff when there was no regulation, before the introduction of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000. We are now in a much healthier place: a place with scrutiny, oversight and an understanding by all of matters that, in the old days, we did not even know had happened. We should not underestimate the distance that we have come since days gone by. We have come a very long way since then, and I am proud of what the Bill gives us, and gives the men and women who need in to keep us safe.

Having had conversations with colleagues overseas, I know that people are envious of this Bill. We should not forget that, at this moment, there are people in Germany and France who face a much greater threat to life and liberty. There are forces of law and order there that are struggling to come to terms with the modern threat, sometimes with legislation that is out of date. I think that by introducing this Bill we have brought ourselves
up to date, and that we are now in a position to tackle the threat. I am grateful to the whole House, and to members of all its political parties, for supporting the Bill.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 10, 16 to 337 and 340 to 377 agreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 11 to 15, 338 and 339;

That Ms Diane Abbott, Victoria Atkins, Robert Buckland, Joanna Cherry, Nic Dakin, Andrew Griffiths and Mr Ben Wallace be members of the Committee;

That Mr Ben Wallace be Chair of the Committee;

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(Christopher Pincher.)

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

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take the motions together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6) and Order of 24 October),

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Sir John Holmes as the Chair of the Electoral Commission with effect from 1 January 2017 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Dame Susan Bruce as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2017 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

EUROPEAN UNION DOCUMENTS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 119(11)),

DRAFT BUDGET 2017

That the House takes note of the European Union Documents No.10763/16, a Proposed Decision on the mobilisation of the European Union Solidarity Fund to provide for the payment of advances in the general budget of the Union for 2017; No. 10764/16, a Proposed Decision on the mobilisation of the Flexibility Instrument to finance immediate budgetary measures to address the on-going migration, refugee and security crisis; No. 10765/16, a Proposed Decision on the mobilisation of the Contingency Margin in 2017; unnumbered European Document, Statement of estimates of the European Commission for the financial year 2017; supports the Government’s efforts to limit the size of the EU Budget in order to get the best deal for UK taxpayers; welcomes the fact that the 2017 Draft Budget respects the Multi-Annual Financial Framework agreement; further welcomes the reduction in payments in the 2017 Draft Budget compared to the 2016 Budget; and notes that the 2017 Draft Budget achieves a greater margin in payments than in 2016.

AVIATION SECURITY (REASONED OPINION)

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. 12090/16 and Addenda 1, 2 and 3, a proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a Union certification system for aviation security screening equipment; considers that the proposal does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity for the reasons set out in Chapter 1 of the Sixteenth Report of the European Scrutiny Committee (HC 71-xiv) and, in accordance with Article 6 of Protocol No. 2 annexed to EU Treaties on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, instructs the Clerk of the House to forward this reasoned opinion to the Presidents of the European Institutions.—(Christopher Pincher.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

The Royal Marines

5.1 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): This petition is on behalf of the people of Plymouth following the Government decision to announce that the Royal Marines 3 Commando Brigade is leaving Stonehouse barracks.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that RM Stonehouse, which is home to 3 Commando Brigade, will be disposed of through the Ministry of Defence’s estate optimisation strategy.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to urge the Government to ensure that 3 Commando Brigade is retained in Plymouth and not moved out of the local area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P001970]
5.2 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): The clocks turned back last weekend and the upside was an extra hour in bed. However, not only does this mean the days are getting shorter and winter is on the horizon, but I am afraid, for passengers of the Chase line, it marks more misery. What is at the best of times a railway line where passengers have to endure cancelled and delayed trains is at this time of year a line where they also face severe overcrowding.

I should start by giving some background. The Chase line is the railway line that connects Cannock Chase with Walsall and Birmingham. It runs from Rugeley Trent Valley, a station which is actually in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), and stops in my constituency at Rugeley Town, Hednesford and Cannock.

The good news is that the misery for the passengers will be addressed by the electrification of the line. Indeed, the previous Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend Sir Patrick McLoughlin, was incredibly supportive of this electrification project, understanding the line well and the needs of residents as a former Cannock resident and councillor.

The electrification of the line will mean faster and more frequent trains, increasing the capacity on the line. But I am afraid there are several issues that I would like to outline in this debate relating to the service passengers will experience in the next couple of years. I want to cover the issues that passengers are currently facing, the issue of rolling stock when the line is electrified and the need to upgrade the facilities at the stations throughout my constituency, particularly Rugeley, Hednesford and Cannock.

Amazon has one of its fulfilment centres in Rugeley. Every autumn, it recruits seasonal staff to support demand and it recently announced 4,500 seasonal jobs. This is clearly excellent news for the creation of jobs. However, with a claimant rate of just over 750 across Cannock Chase, people will need to travel to fill those positions. Last autumn, Amazon recruited around half of its additional seasonal staff, and my inbox was full of complaints from passengers who were using the Chase line. Their complaints included overcrowded trains, passengers not buying tickets, and trains being delayed and cancelled. I am afraid that this autumn has been much the same for Chase line passengers, and the situation is likely to get worse.

The overcrowding of some services, particularly the commuter trains, is a constant and consistent complaint. All too often, it is reported to me that there are only two carriages on these services. Bearing in mind the level of use, that is simply unacceptable. Only this morning, I received a tweet from a passenger saying that the 7.04 service from Rugeley was made up of only two carriages. The passenger went on to say that they were standing in a packed carriage and asking London Midland to turn down the heating. On a different occasion, a passenger reported seeing a schoolboy faint, having had to stand. I have called for the level of service to be improved, and I have specifically asked the franchisee, London Midland, to review the number of carriages, particularly at peak hours. I am therefore particularly disappointed that the problem has recurred this autumn. Chase line passengers deserve better. I would therefore like to ask the Minister to put pressure on London Midland to provide the appropriate number of carriages on peak-time services on the Chase line.

The issue of overcrowding is exacerbated by the fact that not all passengers are paying for their tickets. As I understand it, the issue of Amazon staff not paying for their tickets is being addressed, and they are having their tickets paid for at source out of their salaries. However, there are still concerns about the lack of ticket inspectors resulting in passengers still not paying for their tickets. Some are able to dodge the inspectors at the various stations. Honest fee-paying passengers are hugely frustrated by this, and they want London Midland to ensure that tickets on these services are inspected, where possible as passengers board the trains.

The misery does not stop there. Another issue facing those long-suffering passengers is delayed and cancelled trains. It is not uncommon for passengers using the service to and from Rugeley to complain that the service has been stopped and re-directed from stations further up the line. This is an hourly service, so these problems result in people not being able to get to work on time and having to explain why they are late, day in and day out. They result in parents being unable to get back from work to pick up their children, and parents picking up children who are using the service not knowing when their train is going to arrive because it is stuck at Hednesford or Cannock station. London Midland’s explanation is that delayed trains are redirected part-way up the line to ensure that subsequent services are not also delayed, but that is little comfort for someone who is trying to use the service from the Rugeley stations. Frankly, residents in Rugeley are poorly served by this service, and that needs to be addressed.

As I have said, the electrification of the line will help to alleviate many of the issues I have outlined. For one thing, we will have a faster and more frequent service, with a train every half hour rather than every hour. That said, that will happen only when electric trains are running on the line.

I am glad to say that the electrification works are on track—sorry for the expression—for completion on time by the end of 2017. It was a real pleasure to meet the various stakeholders to look at the progress of the engineering works along the line, including meeting the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to review the now-completed major engineering work to tunnel under the shops in Walsall town centre, which included managing to keep the shops open throughout. I believe that McDonald’s did a very good trade during that time.

While the engineering works will be completed on time by the end of next year, which is fantastic news, I have uncovered an issue that I never really thought was possible. Despite plenty of warning—this project has been under way for some time—it appears that London Midland does not have access to rolling stock to run on the line, saying that it may be December 2018 before it has the electric trains. I started to get a sense that there was an issue with rolling stock when I wrote to London Midland asking when we would get electric trains on the Chase Railway Line

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn. —(Christopher Pincher.)
the line and have a faster, more frequent service. The initial reason I was given for a potential delay to the new service was timetabling, which made me somewhat suspicious.

The Hendy review stated that electric services would start by May 2018. However, it has now become apparent that London Midland will not be able to run electric trains until much later in 2018—nearly a year after the completion of the engineering works. Quite rightly, the passengers who use the service will see the project being completed at the end of 2017 and expect the new service to be running soon after. While we accept the need to test the line and train the drivers, which might delay things a little, the lack of rolling stock is unbelievable and unacceptable. There is a danger that Chase line passengers will have to suffer yet another autumn of pain.

I have several points to raise with the Minister. What are the Government doing to take a strategic view of the status of electrification projects and the availability of electric trains to ensure that rolling stock is being utilised in the most effective way? What measures are the Government taking to make sure that those bidding for new franchises are ensuring that the rolling stock requirements are being met?

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): One of the challenges in my part of the country is that the rapid housing growth that is coming on stream will put only more pressure on our existing rail services. Is that a problem that I call on the bidders to do everything they can to solve it as quickly as possible.

Amanda Milling: My hon. Friend must have been reading what is coming up later in my speech. His point also affects my constituency. Following the closure of Rugeley B power station, which I have discussed in this place several times, there will be new development, including new homes and businesses, meaning more passengers on the line and the need for more capacity. The problem is only going to increase and we need to solve it as quickly as possible.

The franchise for the Chase line is currently under review and, with the appointment due next year, I want to make a few points. What measures will the bidders take to ensure that the short-term issues of overcrowding, delays and cancellations are built into their plans for 2017? When will electric trains be running on the line? The contract says that that should be by the end of 2017 and some 12 months after the electrification work will be completed. I would like to know from the bidders what they are going to do to get trains on these lines as quickly as possible, at least by May 2018, as outlined in the Hendy review earlier this year. I know from some of the points made by passengers that there is a desire for later trains to and from Birmingham, so I am pleased that part of the specification will include those. I call on the bidders to do everything they can to make sure we get those later trains, because people are having to leave concerts and events in Birmingham early because otherwise they are not able to get home.

Finally, let me deal with the facilities available at each of these stations which serve Cannock Chase residents. In 2010, the national stations improvement programme led to welcome upgrades, including CCTV at platform level, new shelters and customer information systems. However, the facilities are still incredibly basic in terms of offering a welcoming environment—a welcome to Cannock Chase. There will soon be a designer outlet village in Cannock, similar to that in Bicester, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is in her place, and Cheshire Oaks. It is expected to attract about 4 million visitors a year and will be situated close to Cannock train station. The developer anticipates that about 2% of visitors will be coming in by rail, although it is felt there is scope for that number to be much greater. As such, Cannock station will be the gateway to Cannock Chase and the Mill Green designer outlet village. The station currently does not have the facilities suited to that level of traffic and hardly provides a warm welcome to Cannock. The section 106 agreement provides £90,000 for station improvements, but it is accepted that much wider external funding will be required to make the necessary upgrades to the station’s facilities. I therefore ask the Minister to look at what Government investment could be provided to improve the facilities at Cannock station. The next station up the line is Hednesford, where I commend the work being undertaken by the Heart of Hednesford Group to adopt the station as a community platform to ensure the station provides a warm welcome to Hednesford. This is an excellent example of how a community group can work to improve the facilities at a station.

The station upgrades were not included as part of the electrification project. I have mentioned two stations that need improvement, but in all honesty I can say that they all do. Just some of the improvements required include having public toilets, parking and improved disabled access—that is a short list, drawn from the very long list I have in this folder. I therefore ask the Minister to consider what additional support can be provided by the Government to upgrade the facilities. I also call on the bidders, Network Rail and the two local enterprise partnerships to look at ways in which they can provide the investment to make these necessary improvements.

I could talk about many issues on the Chase line, after 18 months of social media contact, emails and letters on the subject. I hope that I have covered at least some of the issues raised by passengers. I wish to take the opportunity to thank the passengers and residents who have contacted me over the past few days, in the run-up to this debate, with specific examples, pulling together the key themes. In summary, Chase line passengers are getting a poor deal and deserve a better service. This autumn, next autumn and beyond. I hope the electrification project will address many of the issues outlined, but it will do so only if there are electric trains running on the line. With the Mill Green development and significant redevelopment in Rugeley, following the closure of Rugeley B power station and the subsequent addition of new homes and new businesses, the need for the railway line and the station facilities to be suitable for increased passenger use is as important as ever. I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for his time this evening, and I look forward to his response and his support for the various issues I have outlined.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to be here today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock

NOVEMBER 2016

Chase Railway Line

Chase Railway Line
Chase (Amanda Milling) on securing this debate and on demonstrating once again why she is a doughty champion for her constituency and for the needs of the Chase line. This is not the first time that she has raised these issues with me. We have met in the past as well, and I know that she has also met officials from London Midland to discuss her concerns. I wholly understand her frustrations and the frustrations of her constituents.

Overcrowding is not unique to the Chase line. It is an issue across the network that we are continuing to address through continual investment in new rolling stock. We have more and more passengers using our railways, with a 115% increase in the number of people using the railways since privatisation. The Chase line is no different. Our own rail investment strategy recognises that there has been significant passenger growth in this corridor between Birmingham and other towns along the line. Growing at approximately 14% per annum, the Chase line is in fact the west midlands franchise’s fastest growing route. It has seen significant investment in rail electrification to improve capacity and journey times.

As my hon. Friend pointed out, the already crowded line has seen the addition of some 4,000 seasonal workers whom Amazon employs at its Rugeley fulfilment centre. We welcome the boost that that will have for the local economy, but it does place short-term additional pressures on local rail services.

At present, London Midland does not have any additional trains to bring into service to alleviate the problems that my hon. Friend highlighted. Nor are there any suitable diesel trains nationally that it could lease, which would match the needs of the Chase line. Therefore, in the short term, London Midland is limited to its current fleet of diesel trains.

Performance on the Chase line is regularly over 90% in terms of punctuality performance measurements. Over recent weeks, cancellations have been slightly higher than normal, partly due, I gather, to the volume of train crews who are in training and also to the fact that the class 170s, which form the majority of services on the line, are not necessarily behaving as they should, because of their defective door control units. I understand that London Midland has commissioned an investigation into how to improve the reliability of those door control units, which I hope will start to address some of the issues that my hon. Friend raises.

The Chase line is important rail connection between Birmingham New Street and Rugeley Trent Valley via Walsall and Cannock. It currently has one train per hour in each direction with some additional services in the peak. The electric services only operate between Birmingham and Walsall, where the overhead line equipment ends, and that is what we are seeking to change. As my hon. Friend pointed out, the electrification of the Chase line will give the new rail franchise holder considerably more capacity to carry additional passengers.

Work has already started on this project and is due to be completed in December 2017. The project will bridge the gap in the electrification between Walsall and Rugeley Trent Valley. It will also create a diversionary route for west coast main line traffic if other lines are closed for engineering works. It will be gauge cleared for larger freight train traffic.

A parallel project will deliver enhancements to line speed alongside electrification through track remodelling and the closure of a level crossing in Bloxwich. Switching services to run with electric rolling stock with enhanced performance characteristics will reduce journey times to such an extent that a regular, all-day, two-trains-per-hour service can be operated with no additional rolling stock. Furthermore, the electrification will release diesels for use across the west midlands.

Doubling the off-peak frequency of services will enhance connectivity for all towns along the Chase line. In particular, it will improve connectivity to the west coast main line services. As I have said, work has already started. The entry-into-service date is due to be December 2017, and, as my hon. Friend rightly points out, the full timetable is likely to be delivered by December 2018. However, during that period, as she also rightly pointed out, time will need to be taken to train up drivers in the new route and ensure that the trains are serviceable for the route, are reliable and can operate fully, although the timetable will be introduced gradually from May 2018, ramping up as the service reliability improves also.

We anticipate that those services will start in May 2018, with a full service by December 2018, but bidders have the opportunity to propose alternative procurement strategies for rolling stock that may allow that to be brought forward if the rolling stock is there. As a Department, we specify the output that we want on behalf of passengers, but it is primarily for train operating companies to work with rolling stock companies to find the rolling stock that best suits the needs to fit the output that we have specified and ensure that they can deliver on commitments that they make in their bids and in the eventual successful franchise.

That is an important part of the franchise process, because the more that bidders can impress the Department that they are exceeding the specification in the invitation to tender, the more chance they have to obtain quality points in terms of the bid and the way the Department will judge it. It is in the interest of bidders always to seek to exceed the minimum identified in our specification.

Even with our invitation-to-tender specification, there will be numerous passenger improvements by December 2018. The number of trains per hour between Birmingham and Rugeley during the morning off-peak will be doubled. There will be increased evening frequency, Monday to Friday between Birmingham and Walsall, at three trains per hour, and new direct services between Walsall and London at peak times.

As part of the competition for the new franchise, bidders are required to present solutions that meet forecast passenger demand in affordable stages through to 2026. A base minimum requirement is set to enable bidders to present competitive, innovative, value-for-money solutions that best meet that demand and overall passenger needs. That solution could be presented in a number of different ways, dependent on fare income, infrastructure constraints and availability of rolling stock. It is therefore the Department’s policy to set that as an output-based specification to give bidders the maximum flexibility to deliver the best solution as they find it on the ground.
On the Chase line, the demand requirements have been derived from a number of measures, including a recent independent ticketless travel survey, conducted as a precursor to the issuing of the invitation to tender. In addition, bidders will have to take into account local views from the public consultation in which there are representations from the Cannock area by Cannock Chase District Council, Brereton and Ravenhill Parish Council and the active Cannock Chase Rail Promotion Group.

I also note the concern my hon. Friend expressed regarding the Rugeley trains that are being diverted. I am sure she will want to take note of the fact that financial penalties accrue to train operating companies should they miss stations out or cancel services, even if the end goal is to restore services for the rest of the day in a logical format.

My hon. Friend may also wish to reaffirm to her constituents that the new franchise will include delay repay 15, which will see passengers eligible for at least 25% compensation if a train is more than 15 minutes late, and more if it is cancelled.

I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the many community groups that make Hednesford, Cannock and Rugeley stations the very best that they can be to support their local communities. She referred to the new station improvement scheme. There is also a minor works scheme that each train operating company has access to. She also mentioned section 106 investment. If any commercial development—she referred to one that is forecast in the area, Mill Green—drives extra demand to the extent that the existing infrastructure cannot cope, it has the option of choosing to invest, as Bicester Village did, in the local station for its own commercial benefit. I urge her to have that particular discussion.

Let me address the issue of antisocial behaviour that my hon. Friend raised. As she knows, this has been attributed mainly to the 4,000 seasonal workers at Amazon. My Department has spoken to London Midland, whose view is that the antisocial behaviour is predominantly due to fare evasion. I hope my hon. Friend will welcome the fact that to address the problem, London Midland has taken on five new revenue protection and security managers. Among their other duties, they will carry out increased patrols and ticket checks on the Chase line between Rugeley and Birmingham New Street, providing an increased presence during the morning peak to coincide with Amazon's shift change-over.

London Midland met Amazon in mid-September to discuss further solutions. As my hon. Friend mentioned, they have come to an agreement whereby Amazon will soon start selling passes directly to staff in the form of scratch-off tickets. It is hoped that this will eliminate much of the antisocial behaviour, but London Midland will continue to work closely with the British Transport police to address all antisocial behaviour throughout the network.

As I mentioned, we recently issued the invitation to tender for the west midlands franchise to the shortlisted bidders. We are asking them to deliver ambitious improvements for passengers across the west midlands network as a whole, not least some 20,000 additional passenger places on trains between London and Birmingham in the morning peak. Bidders will be asked to provide new ticket options that provide better value for customers who may travel fewer than five days a week, as well as new peak time services between Walsall and London.

As I said earlier, these are minimum requirements. We expect bidders to go above and beyond what we are asking for. I urge my hon. Friend to contact the bidders directly and let them know the benefits that she wants to see on behalf of her constituents. I am sure the bidders are paying close attention to her words today and are listening carefully to them, but nothing beats meeting those companies to tell them face to face.

I recognise and pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s dedicated pursuit of an improved service on the Chase line. We are committed to tackling overcrowding wherever it occurs to provide better, more comfortable journeys for passengers. We are in the midst of the largest rail investment programme since the Victorian era, which will increase capacity and improve the rail network. It does not happen overnight. It takes time for new rolling stock to come on stream and for passengers to see the benefits, but with continued pressure from the Department and from local MPs, I am sure that in the west midlands the bidders will be taking close note of who is shouting, what they want to see and what they want on behalf of their constituents. I welcome my hon. Friend’s contribution today.

Question put and agreed to.

5.32 pm

House adjourned.
The Government are building a democracy to work for everyone, including young people. Online registration has made it easier and faster to register to vote, and since its introduction a record 4.2 million young people registered to vote. Of those, 3 million registered using the online system.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the Youth Parliament will be sitting under my encouraging chairmanship rather than under my command, but I am extremely grateful to the Minister for the sentiment that he has expressed.

Chris Skidmore: We discussed this issue at the previous session of Cabinet Office questions. We will not be lowering the parliamentary voting age, because since the general election Parliament has debated the proposal a number of times and repeatedly voted against it. It is important to recognise that most democracies consider that 18 is the right age to enfranchise young people. A person must be at least 18 to serve on a jury for similar reasons.

Mr Runil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend referred to the need to ensure that every vote is equal. In the light of the number of spoiled ballot papers in elections for police and crime commissioners, will he think again about reintroducing the first-past-the-post system for elections of that kind in England?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is right that we need a clear and secure democracy if we are to continue to have confidence in our system. In the elections for police and crime commissioners, about 8 million people voted and there were more than 300,000 spoiled ballot papers. For the EU referendum, in which 35 million people voted, there were just 25,000 spoiled ballot papers. There is clearly an issue that the Government will want to look into.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Has it occurred to the Minister that if the Government were not so aggressively making it difficult for millions of people to be included in the register, and if the previous Prime Minister had not so arrogantly dismissed the case for enfranchising 16 and 17-year-olds, the referendum result would have been different, and he would still be Prime Minister?

Chris Skidmore: It is important to recognise that in the referendum a record number of people voted on one side—17.4 million voted for the UK to leave the European Union—and that a record 46.5 million people were registered to vote, of whom 3 million registered using the individual electoral registration system online. That shows that people have full confidence in the future of our new system.
Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that more young people might register to vote if they thought that it would make a positive difference to their lives, and that decisions such as trebling tuition fees, abolishing the education maintenance allowance and restricting young people’s housing benefit only act as a disincentive for them to become involved in politics?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Lady is right, but there is a problem with young people’s registration: we allow 16-year-olds to register to vote, but only 37% of them choose to do so. As I said earlier, we need to take account of the issues that matter to young people. Such issues will be debated by the Youth Parliament next Friday, but none of those to which the hon. Lady refers are on the agenda.

Voting Rights: Overseas UK Citizens

2. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): How he plans to give UK citizens living overseas the right to vote for life.

10. Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What progress he has made on giving UK citizens living overseas the right to vote for life.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): On 7 October the Government published a policy statement setting out our detailed proposals for votes for life, and explaining how we plan to meet our manifesto commitment to scrap the 15-year time limit for overseas voting. We intend the system to be in place before the next scheduled UK parliamentary general election.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Minister for that encouraging reply, but may I return to the subject of cutting the cost of politics? Can he tell us when the Government will be able to equalise the size of constituencies?

Chris Skidmore: We are determined that by the time of the 2020 general election, the historic principle of equal seats will be in place. If we do not introduce that reform, we will be fighting our seats on the basis of data that go back to the year 2000, meaning that they are 20 years out of date. That is completely unacceptable, which is why we must press ahead with boundary reform.

Glyn Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that by including British citizens living abroad who have previously been resident to vote, as well as those who have previously been registered, the Government are enabling more people to participate in our politics and delivering a democracy that truly works for everyone?

Chris Skidmore: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Our proposal to scrap the requirement that an overseas elector must have been previously registered to vote when they were resident in the UK will mean that even more Brits abroad can vote if they so choose.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): How will the Minister ensure that UK citizens living overseas in the EU have not only the right to vote, but the right to remain in EU countries?

Chris Skidmore: We will ensure that we have a democracy that works for everyone, which is why we are determined to ensure that Britons living abroad will, regardless of which country they live in, be able to participate in our democracy, especially those who have lived abroad for more than 15 years, such as Harry Shindler, a Labour voter who lives in Italy and fought in world war two, but is unable to vote at the moment. It is right that we give these people who have served their country the right to vote.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Alongside extending suffrage for UK citizens living abroad, what consideration has the Cabinet Office given to extending suffrage in general elections to all EU and non-Commonwealth immigrants permanently living in Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Chris Skidmore: In terms of local government suffrage, EU citizens can already vote. For parliamentary suffrage, we are extending the franchise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) rightly says, to an extra 3.7 million Brits abroad. When it comes to the question of those living in this country, obviously that is subject to future negotiations.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): At a time when the Government are failing in any serious way to address the democratic deficit in the UK, they are, as has been mentioned, pursuing plans to remove the 15-year time limit for overseas voters and to hand a vote for life to an estimated 1 million expats. Will the Minister explain how that might affect Electoral Commission guidelines on “permissible donors”, and will he assure the House that under no circumstances will the proposed changes allow unlimited political financial donations from non-UK taxpayers abroad to be funnelled into the coffers of any UK political party?

Chris Skidmore: First, may I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place? It is great to see him across the Dispatch Box.

On the issue of overseas electors and ensuring that those living abroad for more than 15 years have a vote for life, the principle is clear: we must ensure that those who were born in this country, who have often paid tax in this country and have moved abroad are given a right to participate in our democracy. These include people such as Harry Shindler, a Labour voter who fought in world war two. We want to ensure that these people who have given something to our country are allowed to participate in our democracy.

House of Lords: Membership

3. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): If he will bring forward proposals to limit the size of the membership of the House of Lords.

5. Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): If he will bring forward proposals to limit the size of the membership of the House of Lords.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government agree that the House of Lords cannot grow indefinitely. However, comprehensive reform is not a priority for this Parliament, given the growing
number of pressing priorities elsewhere. Nevertheless, when there are measures that can command consensus, we would welcome working with peers to look at taking them forward.

Chris Law: A simpler answer would have been, “No, we will kick that into the long grass.”

It is clear that the House of Lords needs radical reform. In fact, we should listen to the new Lord Speaker, who said only last week:

“I don’t think we can justify a situation where you have over 800 peers at the same time as you’re bringing down the Commons to 600 MPs”.

Does the Minister agree?

Chris Skidmore: This was raised at an important debate on 26 October, when the House agreed with the Government that this is not a priority. The Government agree that House of Lords reform is not one of the priorities of the British people: a recent YouGov study showed that just 18% of the public think House of Lords reform is a priority. I am amazed that the Scottish National party has chosen this issue to campaign on. Why not campaign on education or on health—why not campaign on the issues that matter to the Scottish people?

Ian Blackford: What an outrage to democracy that answer from the Minister was. We have the ridiculous situation that there are more unelected Members of the House of Lords than MPs living in the highlands of Scotland, yet this Government want to cut democratic participation. We will be left with three Members of Parliament for half the landmass of Scotland and the highlands. That is not democratic accountability. Cut the Lords, not MPs.

Mr Speaker: It was difficult to detect a question there, but the intellectual dexterity of the Minister will enable him briefly to reply.

Chris Skidmore: We have proposals on boundary changes in Scotland, and there is a consultation that I commend to all Members. Some seats in Scotland are twice the size of others, and that historical injustice must be rectified.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right that reducing the size of the House of Lords is not a priority, but neither is reducing the size of the Commons. As we are abolishing goodness knows how many MEPs and taking on their workloads, should not the Government look again at their proposal and equalise seats, which is quite correct, but keep the same number of Members of Parliament?

Chris Skidmore: The previous Parliament passed a law to ensure that we could reduce the number of seats from 650 to 600, but a delay occurred because Opposition Members decided to kick this can down the road. The reduction in the number of seats will save £66 million over the course of a Parliament. It is right that we should make savings and put our own House in order.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): It is absolutely right that there should be equal votes and that we should cut the cost of politics in the House of Commons. It is absurd that there are no Scottish National party peers in the House of Lords while the party has 56 Members in this House, and that there are 100 Liberal Democrat peers but a pathetic rump of only eight Members here. Does the Minister agree that this shows the need to rebalance membership of the House of Lords?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The historic campaign for the equalisation of seats was initiated by the Chartists in their people’s manifesto back in 1838, and this Government are determined to ensure that this historic wrong is righted.

13. [906989] Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): There has been much speculation that a certain Nigel Farage will be joining the swarm of unelected bureaucrats in the House of Lords. Is Mr Farage to be rewarded with a peerage, or have the Government done enough damage already?

Chris Skidmore: All appointments to the House of Lords are scrutinised by an independent Committee, and it is right that that process should be followed.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Does my hon. Friend recall the words of Sir Winston Churchill when he said that democracy was not a particularly good system but the best that we had? Does he agree that, until someone comes up with a better idea, the House of Lords is perhaps not that bad?

Chris Skidmore: As I have said, House of Lords reform is not a priority in this Parliament; nor is it a priority for the general public. We want to establish a consensus with the House of Lords, and it must be for the House of Lords to come up with that consensus.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Could we not at least get rid of the by-elections for hereditary peers? Earlier this year, the House of Lords decided to remove the second Baron Bridges because he had not turned up for five whole years. There was then a by-election, in which the 15th Earl of Cork and Orrery defeated the 12th Lord Vaux of Harrowden and the eighth Viscount Hood. Under the alternative vote system, the Earl of Limerick was bottom of the list. Does not this bring the whole system into disrepute? Is this “Blackadder” or Gilbert and Sullivan?

Chris Skidmore: When it comes to “Blackadder”, this was a Labour policy introduced by a Labour Government, so this is yet another U-turn from the Corbynistas.

Hon. Members: Ooh!

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I think that—[Interruption.]—/Interruption.

Mr Speaker: Order. I can scarcely hear the hon. Gentleman. He must be heard.

Tommy Sheppard: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think that people watching this debate will be terrified by the complacency of this Government. Does the Minister not realise that the twin actions of increasing without limit the number of unelected Members of Parliament while reducing the number of elected lawmakers is
seriously damaging this institution in the eyes of our own electorate and lowering the esteem in which we are held abroad?

Chris Skidmore: The Government agree with the primacy of the House of Commons. The hon. Gentleman made those points in a debate on 26 October, and at that time the House agreed with the Government that this was not a priority and that our priority should be to equalise seats and to ensure that the historic principle of boundary reform occurs.

**Departmental Efficiency Savings**

4. Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What steps he is taking to help Government Departments deliver efficiency savings.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): The Government are striving towards their manifesto commitment to achieve £20 billion of annual efficiency savings by 2020. Cabinet Office functions are supporting Departments by providing expert support and advice in all areas, including commercial property, infrastructure, fraud and error, and debt. In addition, I will be leading a review with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to see whether further savings are possible over that period.

Mr Speaker: I know the House will want to join me in congratulating the Minister on the recent arrival of his second child, a brother for Wilfred.

Huw Merriman: May I add my congratulations as well? I thank the Minister for his answer. How much did the Government deliver in efficiency savings over the last term and how much is to come?

Ben Gummer: I thank my hon. Friend and you, Mr Speaker.

We saved £18.6 billion in the previous Parliament. We hope to do better than that over this Parliament. We have made a good start with more than £1.5 billion saved by transforming how Government works, but there is more to do. It is a hard task, but we will complete it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): May I first congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your energy efficiency saving this morning, on the bicycle in Portcullis House, for the poppy appeal? Is it possible for hon. Members and the wider public to track savings in various Departments to see the practical benefits of those savings?

Ben Gummer: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible suggestion. As we evolve the single departmental plans, I hope to be able to make the savings in individual Departments far more transparent. He is right to touch on that subject; it is something that I want to do more with.

15. Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): [906991] Government efficiency savings can be achieved through greater use of new technology, such as GOV.UK Notify. Will the Minister encourage its greater use by Whitehall Departments?

Ben Gummer: GOV.UK Notify is another excellent Government Digital Service product. We are putting more money into the GDS, which we are using more across Government. I hope that that will be one of many applications brought forward as a result of its success.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given that the cost of special advisers has almost doubled in 10 years and that the Tory Government are spending more on special advisers than the new Labour Government, would not dealing with that be a simple cost-cutting measure?

Ben Gummer: On the contrary, we have kept the cost of special advisers under review and fairly flat. The list of responsibilities has been published recently and the hon. Gentleman will see that that cost is fairly constant.

**Voting Fraud**

6. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle voting fraud.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): The Government are committed to tackling fraud in UK polls. We have already taken steps to improve the security of polls through the introduction of individual electoral registration. We are currently considering the findings and recommendations of the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) into electoral fraud. The Government will provide a full response in due course.

Neil Parish: In a democracy, we want as many people to vote and register as possible. In some constituencies, however, there is still too much electoral register fraud. What more can the Minister and Government do about that?

Chris Skidmore: For democracy to work for everyone, we need to ensure that it is clear and secure. The Government are determined to ensure that the electoral register is as complete and accurate as possible. We note that the Electoral Commission has also made recommendations about ID in polling stations. We will reflect on the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar and respond in due course.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): Does the Minister believe that lessons can be learned from the additional measures to tackle voter fraud in Northern Ireland?

Chris Skidmore: Obviously, the electoral system in Northern Ireland is separate and has seen advances when it comes to security around polling stations and the electoral process. The Government are interested in all such examples and will be happy to respond when we publish our findings following the report of my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [906992] Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.
The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): The Cabinet Office is responsible for delivering a democracy that works for everyone, supporting the design and delivery of Government policy, and driving efficiencies and reforms to make the Government work better.

Jack Lopresti: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the work of the Minister for the constitution, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), with my constituent Mehala Osborne and the domestic violence charity Survive, to reform anonymous registration to ensure that women silenced by the current registration process will no longer be denied the chance to express their democratic will?

Ben Gummer: I will indeed join with my hon. Friend. His commitment to the cause is well known, as is the commitment of my hon. Friend the Minister for the constitution, who has really taken this on as something that he wants to achieve in his post. For survivors of domestic abuse, voting is more than just a cross on a ballot paper; it is a renewed statement of the freedom that is rightfully theirs.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Let us take the Minister back to the boundary review, because interestingly the Government payroll is not being cut in this process. Ministers should therefore listen to the Members sitting behind them, such as the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who has said:

“We are talking about reducing the number of people we elect at the ballot box, whilst stuffing the House of Lords with yet more people”.

If this is really not a partisan process, and in view of Brexit and the fact that we are removing 73 MEPs, is it not now time to have a fresh review, based on having 650 seats in this place?

Ben Gummer: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman will start as he means to go on. I see that he has five Members on the Opposition Front-Bench, compared with our very modest two, which shows how we can cut the cost of politics just by being in power.

T3. [906994] Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): After the referendum, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee wrote to the Government suggesting that they should conduct a review of civil service capacity in view of the extra workload being piled on Whitehall. Can the Minister give any indication of whether such a review is being conducted? Would he consider conducting such a review?

Ben Gummer: The review is going on at the moment, and I am leading it. We have started by looking at senior civil service capacity, but it will go through the entire civil service. It is a very thorough process, and I am making sure that I am talking to all the Ministers leading Brexit-affected Departments to make sure that they are happy with the capacity of their offices.

T2. [906993] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I do not disagree with the Minister on equalising constituencies, but if we want equal constituencies based on proper data, surely the 2 million newly registered voters should be taken into account in that equalisation.

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman talks about data, so let us go back to the fact that if we delay boundary reform even further, we will be drawing up the seats on the basis of data, in England and Wales, from 2000—20 years ago. That is clearly unacceptable, which is why we must ensure that boundary reform takes place. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Far too many noisy private conversations are taking place, which is very unfair to Members who want to ask questions and Ministers who want to answer them. Let us hear the voice of the Vale of Clwyd, Dr James Davies.

T4. [906995] Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): One benefit of devolution was meant to be that it would allow the comparison of different policy approaches to the same problems. With that in mind, will the Minister consider legislating to ensure the provision of comparable data across the UK?

Ben Gummer: My hon. Friend makes a sensible point. We are learning a lot from the devolved Administrations, just as they are learning from us. His point is well made, which is why we signed a concordat on statistical evidence a few months ago, ensuring that we are sharing the same methods of evidence gathering across all the Administrations.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Instead of using the single example of an expat war veteran to justify extending the franchise to UK citizens abroad, should the Minister not concentrate on those who live here and pay their taxes—EU citizens—and those who will have to live with the consequences, the 16 and 17-year-olds?

Chris Skidmore: Giving votes for life to those Britons who have lived abroad for more than 15 years was a manifesto commitment that will be delivered by this Government. We are determined to ensure that British people who live abroad are given the right to participate in our democracy, which is absolutely the right thing to do.

T5. [906996] Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): I welcome the speech by the Minister for the Cabinet Office to the Reform think tank, in which he made the powerful case for public service reform, to make it more tailored to individual needs. May I urge him to be careful to ensure that, in delivering it, Whitehall does not end up exposing or misplacing personal data, as has happened in the past?

Ben Gummer: I will, and I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. It is of course important that we take people with us on this, but at its core we must remember that the state is there to serve people, not the other way round. That is why this Administration are putting themselves at the service of the British people, and I intend to ensure that public services reflect that fact.

T8. [906999] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): This Department has estimated that cutting the number of MPs to 600 will save £15 million a year. Library figures collated for me have shown that House of Lords allowances...
alone cost £20 million a year, so does the Minister not accept that the cuts and savings to be made should be applied to the unelected House, not the elected Chamber?

Chris Skidmore: This Government are proud of the fact that the cost of the House of Lords has been reduced by 14% since 2010.

T6. [90697] Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is good to see the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in his place. Will he perhaps set out what his priorities will be?

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Sir Patrick McLoughlin): As Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, I oversee the administration of the estates and the rents of the Duchy of Lancaster. I contribute to the Government’s policy and decision-making process by attending Cabinet and attending and chairing Cabinet Committees. This role is not without precedence under both Labour and Conservative Governments.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am pleased that the Government plan to audit racial disparities in public service outcomes, but may I ask Ministers that, in doing so, they ensure that every Department and agency uses the 2011 census classifications, which differentiate Gypsies and Travellers?

Ben Gummer: That is a very helpful contribution from the hon. Lady, and I will indeed ensure that.

T9. [90700] Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): The annual canvass is extremely expensive. What are the Government doing to reduce its cost?

Chris Skidmore: It is absolutely right that we make the system as efficient as possible and less expensive. To address both those aims, we are undertaking three pilots this year to test new approaches to conducting a canvass. I am also pleased to announce today that there will be 18 more pilots in England and Wales in 2017.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Latest assessments suggest that only 51% of 16 to 17-year-olds are registered to vote, compared with 85% of adults. In Neath, we have had successful voter registration awareness events to encourage under-18s to register. Will the Minister please explain the Government’s plans to promote young people’s registration?

Chris Skidmore: As part of a democracy that works for everyone, we are determined that young people’s voices will be heard, which means going around the country, as I am doing in the coming weeks, to places such as Sheffield, Manchester and Liverpool to talk to young people about their priorities and how we can ensure that they are fully involved in the democratic process.

The Prime Minister was asked—

**Engagements**

Q1. [90692] Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 2 November.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Stephen Doughty: We have no clarity on access to the single market, huge disadvantages still in energy costs, and foreign steel being used in our key defence projects. We know that the Prime Minister likes to try to channel the Iron Lady, but when will she show some mettle in standing up for British-made steel?

The Prime Minister: This Government have stood up for British-made steel, and we have taken a number of measures that have improved the situation for the steel industry. The hon. Gentleman says that there is no clarity in relation to Brexit. I am very clear that what we want to achieve is the best possible deal for businesses in the United Kingdom, so that they can trade with, and operate within, the single European market.

Q2. [90693] Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I applaud the Government’s continued commitment to infrastructure development, with 6,000 projects in the pipeline worth £480 billion. Will the Government quickly and speedily take forward the lower Thames crossing and extra investment in Kent roads, which will help to provide more homes, jobs and businesses, and help people in Kent, Medway and the Thames Gateway area?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and for recognising the contribution that the Government have made in increasing investment in infrastructure, and the importance of that investment. We have consulted on proposals around a lower Thames crossing. There were more than 47,000 responses to that consultation. Those are now being considered, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will respond to that consultation in due course.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to welcome Neasa Constance McGinn? I hope that the evidently effective crash course in midwifery undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is not a sign to the Government that we believe in downgrading midwifery training.

Just a few months ago, on the steps of Downing Street, the Prime Minister promised to stand up for families who are “just managing” to get by. However, we now know that those were empty words, as this Government plan to cut work allowances for exactly those families that we believe in.

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the birth, I understand, of his granddaughter? [Interruption.] No! I am sorry. In that case, I am completely mystified. [Interruption.] In that case—[Interruption.] Wait for it. In that case, perhaps one should never trust a former Chief Whip. [Interruption.]

On the point that the right hon. Gentleman raised in relation to universal credit, the introduction of universal credit was an important reform that was brought about in our welfare system. It is a simpler system, so people...
can see much more easily where they stand in relation to benefits. Crucially, the point about universal credit is making sure that work always pays. As people work more, they earn more. It is right that we do not want to see people just being written off to a life on benefits and that we are encouraging people to get into the workplace.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is a bit unfair to blame a former Chief Whip for some little bit of confusion—very ungallant. Can we not just admire my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North for his work? [ Interruption. ] It is extremely rude to point.

The Prime Minister: At least my former Chief Whip has a job. On the serious point that the right hon. Gentleman raises about universal credit, I repeat what I have just said. I think it is important that we look at why universal credit has been introduced. It was introduced because, with the benefits system under the Labour Government, we saw too many people finding that they were better off on benefits than they were in work. What is important is that we value work and we value getting people into work if they are able to work, but we want a system that is fair both to those who need the benefits and to those who pay for the benefits through their taxes. There are many families struggling to make ends meet who are paying for the benefits of others. I want a system that is fair to them as well.

Jeremy Corbyn: This week, an Oxford University study found that there is a direct link between rising levels of benefit sanctions and rising demand for food banks. A million people accessed a food bank last year to receive a food parcel; only 40,000 did so in 2010. I welcome the Government’s promise to review the work capability assessment for disabled people, but will the Prime Minister further commit to reviewing the whole punitive sanctions regime?

The Prime Minister: It is absolutely right that in our welfare system, we have a system that makes sure that those people who receive benefits are those for whom it is right to receive benefits. That is why we have assessments in our welfare system. But it is also important in our welfare system that we ensure that those who are able to get into the workplace are making every effort to get into the workplace. That is why we have sanctions in our system. What the right hon. Gentleman wants is no assessments, no sanctions and unlimited welfare. That is not fair to those who are accessing the welfare system, and it is not fair to the taxpayers who pay for it.

Jeremy Corbyn: According to a Sheffield Hallam University study, one in five claimants who have been sanctioned became homeless as a result. Many of those included families with children.

Could I recommend that the Prime Minister support British cinema, and takes herself along to a cinema to see a Palme d’Or-winning film, “I, Daniel Blake”? While she is doing so, perhaps she could take the Work and Pensions Secretary with her, because he described the film as “monstrously unfair” and then went on to admit that he had never seen it, so he has obviously got a very fair sense of judgment on this. But I will tell the Prime Minister what is monstrously unfair: an ex-serviceman like David Clapson dying without food in his home due to the Government’s sanctions regime. It is time that we ended this institutionalised barbarity against often very vulnerable people.

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that, of course, it is important that, in our welfare system, we ensure that those who need the support that the state is giving them through the benefits system are able to access it. But it is also important in our system that those who are paying for it feel that the system is fair to them as well. That is right; that is why we need to have work capability assessments—it is why we need to have sanctions in our system. Now, the right hon. Gentleman has a view that there should be no assessments, no sanctions and unlimited welfare. I have to say to him that the Labour party is drifting away from the views of Labour voters; it is the Conservative party that understands working class people.

Jeremy Corbyn: The housing benefit bill has gone up by more than £4 billion because of high levels of rent and the necessity of supporting people with that. Is that a sensible use of public money? I think not.

In response to the March Budget, I asked the Chancellor to abandon the £30 cut for disabled people on employment and support allowance, who are unable to work, but who, with support, may be able to work in the future—they want to be able to get into work. What evidence does the Prime Minister have that imposing poverty on people with disabilities actually helps them into work?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to say that what we have seen under this Government is nearly half a million more disabled people actually in the workplace. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has launched a Green Paper on work, which is starting to look at how we can continue to provide and increase support for those who are disabled who want to get into the workplace. But the right hon. Gentleman started his question by asking me about the increase in the money that is being spent on housing benefit. If he thinks that the amount of money being spent on housing benefit is so important, why did he oppose the changes we made to housing benefit to reduce the housing benefit bill?

Jeremy Corbyn: As the Prime Minister well knows, my concern, and that of my party, is about the incredible amount of money being paid into the private rented sector in excessive rents, and that could be brought under control and handled much better.

Many people in this House will have been deeply moved by the article by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) about the tragic death of her son and having to take out a bank loan to cover the funeral costs. The Prime Minister may be aware that the Sunday Mirror, with the support of the Labour party, is calling for an end to council charges for the cost to parents of laying a child to rest. It would cost £10 million a year—a very small proportion of total
Government expenditure—to ensure that every council could ensure that those going through the horror of losing a child to rest did not have a bill imposed on them by the local authority to put that child to rest. I hope the Prime Minister will be able to consider this and act accordingly.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the issue that the right hon. Gentleman has raised. There are, of course, facilities available through the social fund funeral expenses payment scheme for payments to be made available to people who qualify and meet the eligibility conditions. Of course it is difficult for anybody when they have to go through the tragedy of losing a child and then face consequences of the sort that the right hon. Gentleman mentions. We are making sure, of course, in relation to local authorities, that they now have the extra revenues available to them through business rates and other local revenues. It is up to councils to consider what they wish to do on this, but I say to the right hon. Gentleman that there are facilities available through those social fund funeral expenses to deal with the issue that he raises.

Q3. [906964] David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): Northamptonshire has for a long time had a growing population without the right level of funding for our public services. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the current reviews of the funding formulas for schools, policing and health will properly reflect the population growths in Northampton and the rest of the county so that our services get the funding they need?

The Prime Minister: We have protected the schools budget in relation to funding paid per pupil, and we are protecting the police budget. But of course, as we look at the various ways—the various funding formulas—through which we are funding public services in my hon. Friend’s constituency and in the county of Northamptonshire, we will be looking at the very issue of what is right in terms of the needs of the local area and the numbers of people there.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): It is with sadness that we learned of the death of a serviceman in a live firing exercise at the range in Tain. No doubt the Prime Minister and right hon. and hon. Members across this House will extend their condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of the serviceman who has died so tragically.

The Prime Minister says that she wants to tackle international and domestic tax avoidance and serious criminality. SNP Members support this. If she were told that specific UK financial vehicles were being used for tax avoidance and other serious criminality, what would she do about it?

Angus Robertson: Scottish limited partnerships were established by this House in 1907, and they are being aggressively marketed internationally, especially in eastern Europe. The International Monetary Fund has warned of the risk posed by SLPs in the fight against global money laundering and against organised crime. It is now a matter of public record that SLPs have acted as “fronts for websites peddling child abuse images, and...have been part of major corruption cases” in Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Latvia and Moldova, including in the arms industry. Given the seriousness of this issue and the Prime Minister’s commitment to dealing with criminality, but the lack of progress on SLPs, will she agree to meet me to discuss a joint way forward?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises issues around criminality and investigations into criminal activity that is taking place, and talks about the issue of websites peddling child abuse and child sexual exploitation. It is precisely in order to increase our ability to deal with this criminal activity that we created the National Crime Agency and have been ensuring that we are working with the City on other issues such as money laundering. We are looking at the whole question of how we can ensure that we are taking effective action on criminal activity. I am pleased to say to the right hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] He keeps asking me to meet him. As he knows, I do meet him on occasion—I am always happy to do so—but if he wants to talk to me about dealing with criminal activity, then I will be able to tell him about the work that has been done over the past six years under this Government in terms of the National Crime Agency, working with the City on money laundering, and enhancing our ability to deal with exactly the sort of criminal activity he is talking about.

Q5. [906966] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is disappointing that we did not hear from the Leader of the Opposition any welcome for the huge boost to manufacturing and employment that has come from Nissan’s decision to produce two new models at its factory? Does she agree that that decision demonstrates great confidence in the UK, with benefits throughout the supply chain, which includes companies such as Automotive Insulations in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right in two senses. First, it is extremely disappointing that the Leader of the Opposition has not welcomed this, unlike his colleague, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who has welcomed the fact that these jobs have been saved in her constituency and in the supply chain around the country—that supply chain is every bit as important. I know that Automotive Insulations in my hon. Friend’s constituency is receiving money as part of a project funded through the Advanced Propulsion Centre, and I wish it all the very best for the future.

Q4. [906965] David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): What assurances can the Prime Minister give to the agri-food sector right across the United Kingdom that it will be given the important status required in Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that we are determined to get the best possible deal for the British people on exiting the European
Union. We are looking at the various sectors and we are very conscious of the importance of the food and agricultural sector across the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland. We will do everything we can, including listening to representations made by the Northern Ireland Executive, to ensure that we get the best deal possible for our agri-food sector.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to welcome the accelerated access review and to pay tribute to my hon. Friend, the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who has done so much to place life sciences in the UK on the agenda and to ensure that the UK develops as the best possible place to develop new drugs, which is exactly what we want to see. The Department of Health will look at the review’s recommendations and respond to them shortly. This is an important development in our ability to accelerate access to drugs, which is to the benefit of patients.

Q6. [906967] Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): In recent weeks, three Government Ministers have expressed three different views on what will happen, while industry cries out for clarity. Is the Prime Minister happy to sit back and see thousands more jobs lost?

The Prime Minister: We understand the challenges faced by the UK oil and gas industry and we take them very seriously. That is why we established the Oil and Gas Authority and why we have taken action, with the £2.3 billion package of measures in the last two Budgets, to make sure that the North sea continues to attract investment, and to safeguard the future of that vital national asset. We have taken a range of measures. We understand the concerns about the oil and gas industry, and to safeguard the future of that vital asset. We have taken a range of measures. We understand the challenges under that industry, and we have taken a range of measures. We have taken a range of measures. We understand the challenges faced by that industry, and we have taken a range of measures.

Q7. [906968] Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Tata Speciality is a big employer in my constituency and its workforce are worried by the long period of uncertainty enacted by Tata Steel. Will the Prime Minister use her trade visit to India to secure from the company the future of steel production in Britain, and to convey the importance of Tata acting as a responsible owner and, in the case of Tata Speciality, seller of its UK steel assets?

The Prime Minister: I can assure the hon. Lady that we recognise both the importance of steel and the importance of Tata in the United Kingdom. That is why, as a Government, we have had discussions with Tata on the future of steel here in the United Kingdom, and we will continue to do so.

Q12. [906973] David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): As I am sure the Prime Minister is aware, my constituency apparently contains more cows than any other. That means world-class cheese, from Godminster and Barber’s to Montgomery’s Cheddar, Wye Farms and many more. Can my right hon. Friend assure the west country’s farmers that in negotiating the best deal for Britain in the coming weeks and months, the interests of our agricultural industry and farming community will be uppermost in her mind? Will she pop down to Somerset soon for a chunk of Cheddar and perhaps a drop of cider?

Mr Speaker: West country cheese! I think we are clear.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend’s invitation to the west country and cider is difficult to refuse, so I look forward at some stage to coming down to Somerset and being able to sample those products. He is absolutely right, as others in this Chamber have been, about the importance of our agricultural sector to economies across the UK. Particular parts of the UK rely heavily on the agricultural sector, and we will be taking their needs and considerations into account as we negotiate and deliver the best possible deal for this country in leaving the EU.

Q9. [906970] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): This morning the High Court ruled that the Government have comprehensively failed to tackle air pollution properly. Which does the Prime Minister feel is worse: the Government losing in the High Court for the second time, or the 40,000 early deaths that result from air pollution every year in the UK?

The Prime Minister: I have been asked about air quality in this Chamber previously at Prime Minister’s questions, and I have always made it clear that we recognise that there is more for the Government to do. We have been doing a lot in this area. We have been
puts extra money into actions that will relieve the issues around air quality, but we recognise that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs now has to look at the judgment that has been made by the courts, and we have to look again at the proposals that we will bring forward. Nobody in this House doubts the importance of the issue of air quality. We have taken action, but there is more to do and we will do it.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Prime Minister will remember visiting the Witney constituency recently. I am pleased to report that Chipping Norton has been shortlisted for the Great British High Street awards. Will she join me in congratulating the small businesses of Chipping Norton, and can she tell me what support Government offer to the small businesses in our market towns?

The Prime Minister: May I take this opportunity, which is my first, to welcome my hon. Friend to this Chamber? I congratulate him on his excellent result in the by-election.

My hon. Friend’s question brings back many happy memories for me, because when I was a child Chipping Norton was our local town. I used to go there and spend my pocket money assiduously in the shops, so I have done my bit for his high street in Chipping Norton. We are very clear, as a Government, that the action we have taken on issues such as business rates is there to help to support small businesses.

Mr Speaker: We are always grateful for a bit of extra information, and we have now had it.

Q10. [906971] Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This Government’s record on immigration detention is disgraceful, with the UK being the only country in the EU that has no time limit on detention. Amid concern over plans to replace Dungavel with a short-term detention facility near Glasgow airport, the people of Renfrewshire want no part in these inhumane and ineffective practices. Will she use the closure of Dungavel as an opportunity to rethink detention policy and end this stain on our human rights record?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that a lot of work has been done by the Government on the whole question of immigration detention, and a number of changes have been made. An independent review took place about a year ago on the whole question of detention of people in the immigration estate. It is important to realise that where people are due to be removed from this country, and there is the prospect that they could be lost to the system if they are not detained, there are circumstances in which it is right to detain them in the immigration estate. We need to make sure we have got that estate right, and that is why a lot of work has been done on this. The fundamental point is that I suspect he does not think we should detain anybody in relation to immigration enforcement, but we believe there are those who are rightly detained before we remove them from this country.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): When people make fun of Christianity in this country, it rightly turns the other cheek. When a young gymnast, Louis Smith, makes fun of another religion widely practised in this country, he is hounded on Twitter and by the media and suspended by his association. For goodness sake, this man received death threats, and we have all looked the other way. My question to the Prime Minister is this: what is going on in this country, because I no longer understand the rules?

The Prime Minister: I understand the level of concern that my hon. Friend has raised in relation to this matter. There is a balance that we need to find. We value freedom of expression and freedom of speech in this country—that is absolutely essential in underpinning our democracy—but we also value tolerance of others and tolerance in relation to religions. This is one of the issues we have looked at in the counter-extremism strategy that the Government have produced. Yes, it is right that people can have that freedom of expression, but that right has a responsibility too, which is the responsibility to recognise the importance of tolerance of others.

Q13. [906974] Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Today’s Daily Record leads on DWP issues. Is the Prime Minister aware that a telephone call to the Department for Work and Pensions by a severely disabled person or their carer can cost up to 45p a minute, which, with an average length of a call of 13 minutes, is a considerable sum from their social security entitlement? Should a disabled citizen pay this price, or does the Prime Minister agree with me that we should end this telephone tax on the most vulnerable in our society?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue that has been raised on a number of occasions in this House. That is why the Government are implementing new guidelines in relation to the operation of these telephone lines. The number of lines that are costing people in the way to which he refers is being reduced, so the Government have recognised the issue and are taking action.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The past 18 months have been hell for commuters in my constituency of Lewes using the Southern rail network. Last night, a journey that should have taken just over an hour took over four hours. May I beg the Prime Minister to intervene on the Southern rail network? While we have a country that works for everyone, in Sussex we have a railway that works for no one.

The Prime Minister: I feel for my hon. Friend in relation to the journey she had to go through last night and the extended time that it took. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport has been taking action in working with Southern rail and Network Rail in relation to the improvements that are necessary. We have stepped in to invest £20 million specifically to tackle the breakdown on the Southern rail network, which is proving so difficult for passengers. I recognise the degree of concern about this. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport is on the case, and is working to ensure those improvements.

Q14. [906975] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Has the Prime Minister spotted the ludicrous refusal by FIFA, the footballing federation, to let our
players wear poppies at the forthcoming Scotland-England game? Will she tell the respective associations that, in this country, we decide when to wear poppies and that we will be wearing them at Wembley?

The Prime Minister: I think the stance that has been taken by FIFA is utterly outrageous. Our football players want to recognise and respect those who have given their lives for our safety and security. I think it is absolutely right that they should be able to do so. This is for our football associations, but I think a clear message is going from this House that we want our players to be able to wear poppies. I have to say to FIFA that before they start telling us what to do they jolly well ought to sort their own house out.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her recent announcement of a taskforce to stamp out the vile business of modern slavery? Will she join me in congratulating my constituent Mike Emberson and the Medaille Trust on their 10 years of work with the victims and the 70 places they now provide across their country. That is why the taskforce I have set up will continue that momentum. We will be relentless in our fight because, sadly, too much slavery is still taking place in this country. That is why the taskforce I have set up will continue that momentum. We will be relentless in our pursuit of eradicating modern slavery.

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to endorse my right hon. Friend’s comments. I have met representatives of the Medaille Trust and talked to some of the victims they have helped. It is absolutely right that we continue the momentum in our fight against modern slavery. This country is leading the world and we should continue the fight because, sadly, too much slavery is still taking place in the streets and in the towns and villages of this country. That is why the taskforce I have set up will continue that momentum. We will be relentless in our pursuit of eradicating modern slavery.

Q15. [906976] Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): In July, the armed forces charity SSAFA published an in-depth survey of nearly 1,000 working-age veterans. Some 85% of them thought the UK did not give them enough support and only 16% thought the armed forces covenant was being implemented effectively. What is the Prime Minister doing personally to change that?

The Prime Minister: We absolutely recognise the debt we owe to our veterans. That is why, through the armed forces covenant and throughout the work the Ministry of Defence is doing, we are increasingly recognising the support that is necessary for veterans. The hon. Gentleman talks about what we can do. One thing we can do is to help people who come out of the armed forces to find their way into the world of work. That is why it is important both that we have a system that helps them to find the support that is necessary to get into the world of work and that we have an economy that is providing the jobs that people need.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): This week is Offshore Wind Week. The development of the offshore wind sector is vital to my Cleethorpes constituency. Will my right hon. Friend assure the industry and my constituents that the Government will continue to work with the industry to develop future jobs for young people, with a particular emphasis on training?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that the Government will continue to work with the industry. It has been an important development for the United Kingdom and makes up an important part of the energy we generate from renewables. As he says, it does provide jobs and we need to ensure that we look at the training that will enable people to take up those jobs. That is why skills form part of the work we are doing on our future industrial strategy.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister agree that it is highly irresponsible and, indeed, dangerous for people to talk up the prospect of increased violence in Northern Ireland as a result of our leaving the EU, and that people should use the agreed institutions that were set up under the various agreements, not stand outside them or create new ones? Does she also agree that Brexit will not result in any change, alteration or impeding of the way in which the regions, countries and people within the UK connect with one another?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance in relation to movement around the United Kingdom. No change will take place. We will ensure that Brexit is a good deal for the whole of the United Kingdom. Those who wish to encourage violence off the back of that should, frankly, be ashamed of themselves. It is essential that we all work together to make a success of this and get the best possible opportunities for people across the whole of the United Kingdom.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in praising Henley-on-Thames for receiving its first tranche of community infrastructure levy money at the higher rate because it has a neighbourhood plan? Will she join me in praising neighbourhood planning generally as the best means of giving communities a say over the planning system?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate my neighbouring MP and Henley-on-Thames on that achievement. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that neighbourhood plans are a crucial part of the planning system. That is how local people can have a real say over what is happening in their local area.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): May I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn)? Moving swiftly from midwives to doctors, is the Prime Minister aware that doctors in Doncaster face a crisis in primary care, because as GPs retire, it is proving almost impossible to get new ones to take over their practices? Because of restrictions in the Health and Social Care Act 2012, NHS bodies cannot take the necessary action, for example putting in salaried GPs. Will she do something about this matter quickly? Otherwise, many of my constituents will be left without a doctor.

The Prime Minister: After my unfortunate mistake earlier about the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), I failed to add my congratulations to the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), so am happy now to do so.
It is important to have GPs coming through, so that we can replace those who are retiring. Over the past six years we have seen thousands more GPs in our NHS. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health are ensuring that we have a programme to bring more doctors into training, so that places such as the right hon. Lady’s constituency, and those of other Members across the House, have GPs in the numbers needed.
Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you do anything about the fact that the Home Office is not observing named days? On 17 October, the Home Secretary made a statement on the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, in the course of which she said that she had passed on a request that Dame Lowell Goddard should appear before the Home Affairs Committee—as you know, Dame Lowell Goddard had resigned as the inquiry’s chair. I put down a named day written question to the Home Secretary asking if she would put the relevant correspondence with Dame Lowell Goddard in the Library. There was an interim reply saying that the Home Office was unable to answer the question on that particular day. A few days later I therefore put down another question, due for answer yesterday, asking when the Home Secretary would make a substantive reply to the first question. There has been no reply at all.

The Home Office, as I understand the position, seems to be in such a state of crisis about written questions that it is not able to answer them—unless it does not want to provide an answer in the first place. This seems quite simple to me: the Home Secretary could say that she had placed the correspondence in the Library or else say what she meant when she said what she had passed on the information. It is hardly a complex question, so why do I have to raise a point of order with you, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: It is a very curious state of affairs to which the hon. Gentleman alludes. If he has a wider concern about overall response rates to questions it is of course open to him to write to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), the Chair of the Procedure Committee, which keeps an eye on these matters. In relation to this particular question, the situation seems rather curious. However, experience tells me that when a Member raises his or her disquiet about a lengthy delay in securing a reply to a parliamentary question, that reply is, thereafter, ordinarily forthcoming very quickly. If the hon. Gentleman is in any doubt on that matter, he can always have a word with his right hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman), who has found it expedient to complain from time to time and has then secured very quick replies. The Leader of the House will have the hon. Gentleman’s interests at heart and I think a solution will be found, possibly within hours.

Mr Winnick: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I will persist if that does not happen.

Mr Speaker: If I may very politely say so, that observation was superfluous, in the sense that I do not think that any Member of the House would have expected anything less of the hon. Gentleman. He is nothing if not persistent and tenacious to a fault.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the freezing and seizing of assets belonging to states or organisations who sponsor or perpetrate acts of terrorism for the purposes of enabling compensation to be paid to the British victims of such terrorism; to provide a definition of British victims for the purpose of eligibility for such compensation; and for connected purposes.

Today, I lay before the House a Bill that will give hope to all British citizens who have suffered at the hands of terrorism—hope that one day soon their own United Kingdom Government might be obliged to act decisively against the perpetrators and backers of these horrific crimes, and deliver justice to all those whose lives have been so cruelly cut short, or have suffered injury or loss. My Bill would give Her Majesty’s Government direct power to freeze or seize assets of any state or organisation that sponsors or perpetrates such acts. IRA terrorism, supported by Colonel Gaddafi’s regime, is the most significant example in recent times of when British citizens have been failed by their own Government in seeking justice for crimes committed against them, but in today’s world there are new threats and new generations of terrorists who seek to harm British people. My Bill will mandate Governments to seek compensation for all British victims of terrorism, providing them with the powers they need to do so.

As chairman of the parliamentary support group for victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism, I am proud to have championed, along with my colleagues, the cause to obtain compensation for the victims of these dreadful crimes, and to follow on the good work of the former Member for Thurrock, Andrew Mackinlay, to whom I pay heartfelt tribute for his steadfast support for the campaign for justice for the victims of terrorism perpetrated by the IRA.

Many of us have friends, family or constituents who have suffered at the hands of politically motivated terrorism. Last year marked a quarter of a century since the assassination of my friend and former Member for Eastbourne, Ian Gow, whose murder at the hands of the IRA in July 1990 had a profound effect on me and on so many others who knew Ian as a soldier, lawyer, parliamentarian, friend, and staunch defender of Queen and country. In this Chamber, we commemorate with personal shields our own fallen colleagues who were victims of terrorism: Ian Gow, Airey Neave, Robert Bradford and Sir Anthony Berry, who was killed in the Grand hotel, Brighton in 1984. All were victims of IRA-INLA terrorism.

Terrorism in the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s had a profound effect on so many of my generation, who remember growing up with the threat of bombs in London, Belfast and towns and cities across the United Kingdom. Indeed, 9 February 1996 will always be etched on my mind. I visited the Britannia hotel in Docklands to discuss plans for an international dinner I had organised, to be held on 1 October that year, in honour of Lady Thatcher. I travelled back via South Quay station and arrived home in Romford only to watch the “ITN News” with
horror, as I learned about the devastating bomb explosion that had occurred soon after I had boarded the docklands light railway. That bombing, as well as so many other acts of terrorism by the IRA, was carried out using explosives supplied by the Libyan regime, yet so many years later victims have not received the compensation they rightly deserve. Some of the victims and their families who suffered that trauma are now elderly or have passed away.

Zaoui Berezag was a victim of the Canary Wharf bombing, and was left severely mentally and physically impaired; he was cared for by his devoted wife Gemma until she sadly died last year. They never received one penny in compensation. Victims of the Harrods bombing of 17 December 1983, such as the family of WPC Jane Arbuthnot and Police Inspector Stephen Dodd, did not receive compensation, while the family of an American who was killed precisely in the same place at the same time did receive compensation. That is because, unlike the UK Government, the United States Government, under President George W Bush, fought and won the argument with the Gaddafi regime for American victims.

How can it be justified that some victims should receive compensation while others do not? Surely it should be settled when the victims or their families are still alive. It is truly terrible that British victims have been treated so differently from Americans. Their Government stood by their victims; our Government did not.

Each time the issue of compensation for these deserving victims is raised, we have until now received the same empty response from Governments of all persuasions. Each time, we hear weak excuses for not pursuing a way of bringing this matter to a satisfactory conclusion for the British victims of terrorism. Each time, the long-hurting victims of the IRA-Gaddafi's regime listen in, only to be let down and left to wait indefinitely.

These wicked acts took place a long time ago and many of the victims fear that, unless action is taken soon, they will not be around to see this matter concluded and will never receive the justice and compensation they deserve. Time is running out, so today I bring this Bill to the Floor of the House with the aim of giving Her Majesty's Government the power to act and resolve this issue by making provision for the freezing and seizing of assets belonging to any state or organisation that sponsors or perpetrates acts of terrorism against a British citizen. I include in that category citizens of Ireland, as well as any citizens of our Crown dependencies or overseas territories that might have been affected.

When sanctions against Libya are eventually lifted, it is vital that we do not miss the opportunity finally to bring this matter to a close and come to an agreement with any future Government in Tripoli. The British victims of Libyan-sponsored IRA terrorism must never be forgotten, and we must not discard the one bargaining tool we have—frozen assets—to ensure that justice is served.

Over many decades, Governments have both missed and avoided opportunities to bring justice to the victims. This cannot be allowed to happen one moment longer. It would be intolerable if, when the assets are unfrozen, the UK is unable to ensure that talks are opened and had no power to act. Just as the Libyan people were victims of Gaddafi, the British victims of Gaddafi-sponsored IRA terrorism are too, and it is the duty of Her Majesty's Government to fight to bring justice.

This Bill proposes a thorough basis for legislation to allow Her Majesty's Government to ensure that eventually, however many years it takes, the UK victims of the IRA-Gaddafi regime will eventually receive compensation and justice. I say to the House that we need a law that ensures that any future victims of terrorism will not have to suffer the same trauma. That is why my Bill is important, not just for the victims of IRA terrorism, but for those British citizens who may, God forbid, become victims of terrorism in years hence. So it is for the defence, the well-being and the protection of all of Her Majesty's subjects that I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Andrew Rosindell, James Cartlidge, Mr Nigel Dodds, Kate Hoey, Sir Gerald Howarth, Daniel Kawczynski, Danny Kinahan, Mr Khalid Mahmood, Dr Paul Monaghan, Ian Paisley, Gavin Robinson and Henry Smith present the Bill.

Andrew Rosindell accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 88).
Community Pharmacies

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment tabled in the name of the Prime Minister.

12.55 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that community pharmacies are valued assets that offer face-to-face healthcare advice which relieves pressure on other NHS services; calls on the Government to rethink its changes to community pharmacy funding; and further calls on the Government to ensure that community pharmacies are protected from service reduction and closure and that local provision of community pharmacy services is protected.

This is an issue that affects many of our constituents, and it has aroused considerable opposition from so many of them that 2.2 million people have signed a petition. Community pharmacists, I am sure, have lobbied Members of all parties about these cuts and have explained why they should be opposed. Indeed, Members of all parties have raised their concerns and their opposition to these cuts.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), who has campaigned tirelessly on this issue, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron). Government Members have also raised their opposition in Westminster Hall debates, Adjournment debates and parliamentary questions. Their opposition to the cuts is entirely understandable.

When the Government announced, in December last year, that they were going to pursue the cuts, they talked of cutting the budget for community pharmacy services by £170 million, with further cuts to follow. Opposition to the cuts was clear, and indeed was heightened when the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Mr Hunt), announced that the cuts might lead to as many as 3,000 community pharmacies closing.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): We have had a lot of correspondence from local pharmacists and their customers worried about essential parts of the local community such as businesses, but is it not also the case that, with massive cuts in acute services and with primary care under pressure, those pharmacies provide an essential and cost-effective part of the local health service, which we simply cannot do without?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point, which completely blows apart many of the arguments that the Government have advanced in their consultation. Perhaps I could give way to my hon. Friend.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the cuts have aroused so much opposition from not just Labour but Conservative Members.

Andy Slaughter: But these cuts are designed to reduce the numbers of pharmacists. When you have only seven weeks’ notice, it is impossible for GPs, other primary care providers and pharmacists to accommodate these cuts. Does my hon. Friend agree that with only seven weeks’ notice, it is impossible for GPs, other primary care providers and pharmacists to accommodate these cuts and that the cuts could lead to the closure of up to 3,000 community pharmacies?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has anticipated my argument—I could probably sit down now that he has put it so eloquently, but I shall plough on while I have the indulgence of the House.

I was saying that the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire had said that these cuts might lead to some 3,000 community pharmacies closing. Then, of course, the right hon. Gentleman left his post in the Department of Health, which we are all very sad about. Now we have a new Minister, and we are delighted to welcome the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) to his place—not least because in one of his first interventions when he was allowed out, he visited the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s annual conference in September and said he was delaying the cuts. He said:

“I think it is right that we spend the time, particularly me as an incoming minister, to make sure that we are making the correct decision”.

He continued by saying that “what we do is going to be right for you, is going to be right for the NHS and right for the public more generally.”

Well, if the Minister had left it there—with that U-turn—he would have won the praise of Labour Members.

Unfortunately, we then had a U-turn on the U-turn from the Minister. When the Minister came before the House last month we found out that, far from having listened, taken account of various consultations and decided to do what was best for the NHS, he intended to impose a 12% cut on current levels to pharmacy budgets for the remainder of this financial year—giving pharmacists just six weeks’ notice—and a 7% cut the year after that.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab) rose—

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: Because she represents my mother’s home town, I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston.

Kate Green: It is a privilege to represent my hon. Friend’s mother, and he, of course, knows my constituency well. The constituency has high levels of deprivation, and our primary care services face incredible pressure. We have just had low-quality A & E services, but is “Think Pharmacy First” campaign, whose aim is to take pressure off GPs, and our primary care services face incredible pressure. We have just had low-quality A & E services, but is “Think Pharmacy First” campaign, whose aim is to take pressure off GPs, and our primary care services face incredible pressure.

Kate Green: It is a privilege to represent my hon. Friend’s mother, and he, of course, knows my constituency well. The constituency has high levels of deprivation, and our primary care services face incredible pressure. We have just had low-quality A & E services, but is “Think Pharmacy First” campaign, whose aim is to take pressure off GPs, and our primary care services face incredible pressure.

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point, which completely blows apart many of the arguments that the Government have advanced in recent years.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Given the clustering of pharmacies, does the hon. Gentleman believe that no better way of funding the service can be envisaged?
Jonathan Ashworth: The cuts are not aimed at clusters. They are completely arbitrary, and they will result in the closure of many pharmacies in some of the most deprived parts of the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I want to make a bit of progress, because I know that many other Members wish to speak.

The cuts will mean that patients, many of them elderly and unable to travel long distances, will be forced to go elsewhere for essential medical advice and support. What we need from the Minister now are the details of how many pharmacies will close. The previous Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire, told us that up to 3,000 community pharmacies—a quarter of all pharmacies—could close.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It may be helpful if I make a brief intervention at this stage. I gave an estimate which was based on what we thought was a possible worst-case scenario. The Department never had any plans to close pharmacies. It was the best estimate that I had at the time, but it was not a definitive figure.

Jonathan Ashworth: The right hon. Gentleman is an extremely experienced former Health Minister, possibly the most extreme—[Laughter.] He is definitely not an extremist, but he is possibly the most experienced Conservative former Health Minister apart from, perhaps, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). It is very noble of him to try to get the Minister off the hook, but the fact remains that he was the one who said that 3,000 pharmacies would close, and we will continue to remind Ministers of that.

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the former Chief Whip, but then I will make some progress.

Dame Rosie Winterton: Doncaster pharmacists have told me that at least 20 pharmacies in the town will close as a result of the cuts. That is their estimate, on the ground. They have also told me that the Government should sit down with pharmacists and engage in meaningful discussions about pharmacy delivery. For example, setting up a minor ailments service and cutting the drugs budget could possibly save the NHS £5 million in Doncaster and £650 million overall.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. She was not only an exceptional Chief Whip but an exceptional pharmacies Minister in the last Labour Government, and she knows how foolhardy it would be to make cuts in the pharmacy sector.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: I should like to make a bit of progress, if I may. As I said earlier, I am extremely conscious that other Members wish to speak.

As we have heard, the former Health Minister said that 3,000 community pharmacies could close. When pressed about the figures last month, the current Minister said “no community will be left without a pharmacy.”—[Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615.] I hope he will confirm that he still stands by that statement. He also claimed: “Nobody is talking about thousands of pharmacies closing”.—[Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 602-3] He obviously did not receive the memo from the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire. But what did he say when he was pressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) about the number of closures? What soothing, reassuring words did he offer to all our constituents? He said, “I do not know.”

I am sorry that the Minister has not got a clue, but I hope that when he winds up the debate he will be able to tell us how many pharmacies will close as a result of these cuts. If he is not prepared to tell us that, will he tell us how many services will be cut?

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy, but then I must make progress.

Oliver Colvile: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the number of pharmacies has increased by 18% over the past 10 years?

Jonathan Ashworth: I know that the hon. Gentleman works tirelessly as a champion for pharmacies, but he knows that these proposals will mean cuts in many services.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Many pharmacies in Halewood deliver medication, up to 8.30 pm, to elderly and vulnerable people who cannot get out of the house, and to care homes. What does my hon. Friend think will happen if those pharmacies have to close?

Jonathan Ashworth: I do not need to say what I think; I need to say what the sector thinks, and the sector has made it clear today that it will have to cut services such as the delivery of medicines to some of the most elderly and vulnerable members of society.

Dr Murrison rose—

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter, but then I really must make some progress.

Mr Bradshaw: Although the Government say that they want to devote a greater proportion of overall health spending to primary care, our Health Committee’s report on primary care, published in the summer, showed that a smaller proportion was being devoted to the primary care sector, which, of course, includes pharmacies.
Is that not the ultimate false economy? If we do not invest more in primary care, all the pressure goes into the acute sector.

Jonathan Ashworth: My right hon. Friend is another experienced former Health Minister, and he is right. As we learned this week, the Health Committee has completely blown apart the Government’s figures on the financing of the NHS.

Dr Murrison: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jonathan Ashworth: If I may, I shall make some progress. I promise to give way to the hon. Gentleman in a few moments, but I know that others wish to speak.

The Government will say that they are mitigating the cuts by introducing a pharmacy access scheme, but the scheme takes no account of the needs of the most deprived communities. The four constituencies that top the health deprivation and disability indices are Liverpool Walton, Blackpool South, Manchester Central and Blackley and Broughton. Not one pharmacy in those constituencies is eligible for the pharmacy access scheme. The least deprived constituencies are Chesham and Amersham and Wokingham. In Chesham and Amersham, 28% of pharmacies are eligible for this mitigating scheme, while in Wokingham 35% are eligible. [Interruption.] The Minister says that it is a disgrace, but those are the figures. Only this Department, which spins figures all the time and which has been discredited for the way in which it uses them, can call a pharmacy cuts package an “access scheme”.

Today, in an article in The Times, the Minister himself focuses on cities such as Leicester and Birmingham. He claims that if you walk “along roads in Leicester you will see 12 pharmacies within ten minutes of each other”.

As the Member of Parliament for Leicester South, I walk along roads in Leicester every day. I do not know whether the Minister has actually walked along any of those roads; he has never told me that he has. Let me therefore extend an invitation to him to come to Leicester, where he will see numerous community pharmacists in areas with a high proportion of black and ethnic minority communities providing specialist services for families who have relied on them for 20 or 30 years, often dealing with elderly people and speaking to them in Gujarati, Urdu and Punjabi. Many of those people will have to go to GPs’ surgeries and A & E departments if the pharmacies are closed. The Government’s assessment takes no account of the disproportionate effect that the cuts will have on black and ethnic minority communities in cities such as Leicester and Birmingham.

Dr Murrison rose—

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I give way to the hon. Member for Newark.

Robert Jenrick: Will the hon. Gentleman at least acknowledge that we all support community pharmacies? The town I live in has 3,500 residents and there are four pharmacies within a quarter of a mile. Will he at least acknowledge that a model that gives a block grant of £25,000 to each of those pharmacies purely for establishing themselves regardless of demand obviously needs review?

Jonathan Ashworth: If the hon. Gentleman wants to tell his constituents he is in favour of closing pharmacies, good luck to him.

Of course it is not just pharmacy closures that we will see. The National Pharmacy Association has reported today that that 81% of community pharmacies will have to restrict services that help elderly people and 86% will have to restrict free services such as delivering medicine to housebound patients. Does that not confirm that the elderly and the most vulnerable will be hit the hardest by the cuts to community pharmacies, and the Government are entirely to blame?

Dr Murrison rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has been very patient.

Dr Murrison: Surely the hon. Gentleman accepts that we have to get the most efficiencies we possibly can from the system? His party colleague the right hon. Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton) made a serious point about engaging with pharmacies to see how we can do it better. Does he agree—I would be interested to know why this is not in his motion—that category M clawbacks, which are levied exclusively on small independent pharmacies, might be extended to vertically integrated wholesalers as a way of making sure the system is more efficient than at present?

Jonathan Ashworth: The hon. Gentleman talks of efficiencies; he will presumably have seen the research that says if people cannot get to a pharmacy one in four will go to a GP. We will see greater demand on GP surgeries and A&E departments. That is not efficient. It is a false economy, which is why the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee has said the proposals are “founded on ignorance of the value of pharmacies to local communities, to the NHS, and to social care, and will do great damage to all three. We cannot accept them.”

It is why the chief executive of Pharmacy Voice described the decision as “incoherent, self-defeating and wholly unacceptable”, and it is why charities such as Age UK have said the plans are “out of step with messages encouraging people to make more use of their community pharmacists, to relieve pressure on overstretched A&E departments and GP surgeries.”

Age UK has hit the nail on the head: these cuts to community pharmacies completely contradict everything we have been told by Ministers over recent years and will lead to increased pressures and increased demands on GP surgeries and A&E departments.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has made some crucial points about how the funding has been allocated across our country. There are 129 community pharmacies across the whole of Liverpool, yet just two of them will be eligible for this payment. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is absolutely outrageous and will impact on the entire population of Liverpool?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right, and even after this scheme is in place pharmacists who are eligible for the mitigating funds are still saying that they will have to close despite them.
We believe in the importance of community pharmacies, because
“pharmacies have a big role to play in this, as one in 11 or
12 A and E appointments could be dealt with at a pharmacy”—[Official
Report, 25 February 2014; Vol. 576, c. 162.]
and:
“Pharmacies have an important role to play, because they
could save a significant number of A and E and GP visits.”—[Official
Report, 23 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 1049.]
Those are not my words: they are the words of the
Health Secretary, said from that Dispatch Box over the
last two years.
If the message the Health Secretary has been giving
at that Dispatch Box is that community pharmacies are a
way of relieving pressure on A&Es and GP surgeries,
why is he now coming to the House to support cutting
community pharmacies? It is a complete false economy.
I will give way if he wants to explain that. He does not,
probably because he knows it is a completely false
economy.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Arundhati Patel runs the Jamaica Road pharmacy in
my constituency and an alcohol cessation service is one of
the services it provides to the local community. He
pointed out there were 1,400 hospital stays in Southwark
due to alcohol harm. On the point about efficiencies and
avoiding visits to hospital that Members have talked
about, is this not another example of what my right
hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) called a false economy?

Jonathan Ashworth: My hon. Friend is right, and
Government Ministers, including the Health Secretary
even on Monday, justify these as part of a package of
efficiencies. Indeed when I raised this a few months ago
with the previous Minister, the right hon. Member for
North East Bedfordshire, he told me in correspondence
that these cuts were necessary as part of delivering the
£22 billion-worth of efficiency savings. So this is more
proof that when they talk of efficiency savings, they are
actually talking of cuts to frontline services.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) rose—

Jonathan Ashworth: I am sorry, but I need to make
progress.

The NHS is going through the worst financial crisis
in its 68-year history. Even the previous Health Secretary,
who is now in the other place, said he did not expect
another five years of such tight budgets for the NHS.

The black hole in hospital finances last year was
£2.45 billion. Under Labour, we spent the European
average on health as a proportion of GDP; we are now
spending less than Greece. We are seeing a huge financial
squeeze on the NHS and the cuts are part of that
squeeze agenda.

We want the Government to think again on the cuts,
because they will lead to more pressures on GP surgeries
and A&E departments. There is a consensus not just
among the Labour party, but among our constituents,
the sector, clinicians and indeed Conservative Members
against the cuts. It is Ministers who stand outside that
consensus. The hon. Member for Stevenage (Stephen
McPartland) has said:
“It does not make sense that we are encouraging pharmacies to
take on a bigger role in the NHS, while potentially reducing the
number of them.”

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)
has said:
“I do not think this 4% cut is a wise move.”—[Official Report,
20 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 974.]

The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said
“when our A&Es are under so much pressure, we need community
pharmacies”.—[Official Report, 17 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 598.]

I agree and our message to Conservative Members who
want to stand up for their constituents and who have
been lobbied by pharmacists is, “Join us in the Division
Lobbies and get Ministers to think again on these
damaging cuts.” I commend the motion to the House.

1.16 pm
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health
(David Mowat): I beg to move an amendment, to leave
out from “NHS services” to the end of the Question
and add:
“welcomes the Government’s proposals to further integrate
community pharmacy into the NHS, including through the Pharmacy Integration
Fund, and make better use of pharmacists’ clinical expertise,
including investing £112 million to deliver a further 1,500 pharmacists in
general practice by 2020; supports the need to reform the
funding system to ensure better value for the taxpayer; and
welcomes the establishment of a Pharmacy Access Scheme which
will ensure all patients in all parts of the country continue to
enjoy good access to a local community pharmacy.”

I welcome the opportunity to set out again the
Government’s approach to pharmacy in general and
community pharmacy in particular over the next few
years. I will also address some of the points that we just
heard, which were, frankly, alarmist scare-mongering.

The proposals I announced two weeks ago are directed
at four main areas: first, the need to better integrate
pharmacy with GPs, primary care and the NHS more
widely; secondly, the need for the existing community
pharmacy network to move from a dispensing-based
model to a value-added services-based model; thirdly,
the need to continue to work with NHS England to
ensure value for every penny we spend on the NHS; and
fourthly, the need to ensure that, as we undertake these
reforms, everybody in the country continues to have
ready access to a community pharmacy.

First, on integration with the NHS, especially in
general practice, over the weekend Simon Stevens, the
NHS England chief executive, again reiterated the
importance of that and why he supports this process.
We know we need to expand the number of GPs, and by
2020 we will have a further 5,000 doctors working in
this area, but as well as recruiting and retaining more
doctors, we need to provide them with further support.
The “General Practice Forward View”, published by
NHS England, has set out fully costed plans to recruit a
further 1,500 clinical pharmacists into GP practices by
2020. By then there will be one pharmacist working
within a GP practice for every 30,000 of population.
Most of these will be prescribing pharmacists, and all
will have a role in performing medicine reviews and leveraging GP time. This is a major investment and it is already happening.

Huw Merriman: The point I wanted to make when trying to intervene on the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) was that I recently went to a pharmacy in my town of Bexhill, and it is making deliveries to every single customer who asks for a delivery, not just the vulnerable and the elderly. It does so because if it did not Lloyds would put it out of business. Does the Minister agree that that shows that there are efficiencies to be made, and the fact that those efficiencies are recycled in the health service has got to be good for all our constituents?

David Mowat: It does show that. This is a competitive business. My hon. Friend mentions Lloyds; it is one of the two big players in this industry, in which two players own 30% of all pharmacies.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister talks about moving away from a dispensing model to a value-added model. I shall say something about healthy living if I get the opportunity to speak in the debate, but in relation to that shift, what is his view on warehouse pharmacies?

David Mowat: Our view on the structure of the industry is that it is up to individual companies within the sector to organise themselves and to provide their services as efficiently as possible. It is true that 70% of all pharmacies are either chains, multiples or public companies, and I will address that point later.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I want to make some progress.

Secondly, we want to see an enhanced role for the community pharmacy network in providing value-added services. This is an aspiration that we share with the network and its representatives. To that end, NHS England has commissioned Richard Murray of the King’s Fund to produce an evidence-based report to determine which types of primary care services are best done by pharmacists over the next two or three years. The report, which will be published later this year, will inform NHS England’s decisions on how to use the integration fund of £42 million that I announced two weeks ago. There are many candidate areas, including long-term conditions, minor ailments service, better care home support and more medicine reviews, as well as the work that pharmacists do in public health.

Maria Eagle: Many of the pharmacies in my constituency already provide such services, but they are now threatened by the Government’s proposals. Does the Minister not realise that, according to research carried out by Pharmacy Voice, in a constituency such as mine, which is No. 20 on the list of deprived areas, four in five people who cannot see a pharmacist will end up going to their GP? Does he not agree that that will achieve exactly the opposite of what he wants?

David Mowat: The impact review, which was published at the same time as my statement two weeks ago, estimated that the amount of extra time that people would have to spend going to a pharmacy would be a matter of seconds, even if we had, say, 100 closures. The impact review sets that out in some detail. Did someone sitting behind me wish to intervene?

Mr Speaker: Perhaps the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) could detach himself from his device for a matter of seconds. It is very good of him to drop in on us and to take a continuing interest in our proceedings. They certainly interested him greatly a few seconds ago.

Oliver Colvile: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was just trying to find something that was going to inform my intervention. Is my hon. Friend the Minister aware that in Devon, about £5.5 million is wasted on unused medicines? We need to do something about that.

David Mowat: I do realise that, and I mentioned the fact that the King’s Fund is looking into medicine reviews.

As I have said before in the Chamber, the model that is adopted for pharmacies in Scotland has a lot to commend it, even though we might not adopt it in its entirety. I hope that we will get a chance to discuss that later.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: Before I give way, I should like to quote the chief pharmacist himself, Dr Keith Ridge has confirmed that the review “will support community pharmacy to develop new clinical pharmacy services, working practices and online support to meet the public’s expectations for a modern NHS.” Two weeks ago, I announced two initiatives that will proceed in advance of the King’s Fund report. From 1 December, phone calls made to NHS 111 for urgent repeat prescriptions will be directed not to an out-of-hours GP service as at present but to a community pharmacy. This will amount to some 200,000 calls a year, resulting in further revenue streams, for the consultations and for supplying the medicine. NHS England has also committed to encouraging national coverage of a locally commissioned NHS minor ailments service. Some areas, including West Yorkshire, already do this, and we will roll it out to the whole country by April 2018. Both those initiatives will relieve pressure on surgeries and emergency care centres. Both will result in additional incremental revenue for pharmacies, but they are very much only the start.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the Minister accept the view expressed in the impact assessment that independent pharmacies, which are often micro-businesses, and small chains of up to 20 pharmacies will be at a higher risk of closure than the larger chains?

David Mowat: In terms of these proposals, we have to be blind to the ownership of pharmacies. The fact is that the average pharmacy sells for something like £750,000. I do not accept that the proposals will cause closures in those segments, if that was the thrust of the right hon. Gentleman’s question.

Several hon. Members rose—
David Mowat: I want to continue.

The third area I wish to address is value for money, and I make no apology for doing this. According to recent OECD analysis, the UK now spends above the OECD average on healthcare, but however much money we spend, every penny needs to be spent as efficiently as possible. If that does not happen, waiting lists can become too long, treatments can be denied to patients and drugs might not be available. We also know that efficiency savings are required of every part of the NHS, and community pharmacy must play a role in contributing to the £22 billion of savings that we need to find. I do not apologise for that.

Dr Murrison: I certainly support the amendment on the Order Paper today, but does the Minister agree that, in relation to efficiencies, the issue of category M clawback is an important one? I tried to extract an answer to that question from the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) earlier. Also, I ask the Minister to think again about the ownership-blind point that he just made. There is not an equal playing field at the moment, and there is a real risk that small independent pharmacies will continue to be done in.

David Mowat: I do accept that point. We are working on the category M clawback, and I hope to be able to make some progress on that matter soon.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): If anybody can square this circle, it is the Minister, given his extensive experience in this area. I genuinely believe that we have to sort out this issue. I am not happy to subsidise large private companies through the system—some of the chains have already been mentioned—so it is right to look at where the clusters occur. The Minister is well aware of the Kennet pharmacy in my constituency, and we all have really value-added pharmacies that are doing very valuable work. How can we help him, over the review period, to identify and support the services that those pharmacies provide? They must not be allowed to close as a result of this policy.

David Mowat: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have set out the work that we are doing, and the fact that we are providing more money for services, over and above all the money involved in the cuts and efficiency savings that we have had to make, will help that process.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Further to that point, the Minister knows that our pharmacists are a highly skilled and professional resource that has long been underused in the NHS. He has mentioned the ongoing Murray review, and a sustainability and transformation plan process is also going on around the country. My concern is that the closures will come about in a random way, rather than through a planned process based on identifying skills in particular areas. Will he consider delaying them until we have all the reports in place and we can consider the matter on an area-by-area basis?

David Mowat: The access scheme is the device that will ensure that pharmacies are not closed in a random way. I want to address the point about closures head on. It is my belief that there will be a minimal number of closures. The impact analysis talks about 100 and it models 100. The average pharmacy has a margin of 15%, and the amount of efficiency savings that we are asking pharmacies to make over two years is 7%. In addition, the average pharmacy is trading for £750,000 when it closes or merges, even after we announced these efficiency savings a year ago. That value is being retained.

Jonathan Ashworth: The previous Minister put a figure on this. Will the hon. Gentleman tell us what he means by a “minimal” number of closures? What is the number?

David Mowat: These are private businesses, each with a different business model and a different amount of income from the NHS, from other retail activities and from services. Each is financed in a different way. Indeed, 30% of them are owned by two public companies, and 70% of them are multiples.

Victoria Borwick (Kensington) (Con): Can reassurance be given that local pharmacies are the frontline of primary care? Will the Minister extend the work and responsibility of those local pharmacies, particularly in deprived areas, and reassure us that that is the focus of this debate?

David Mowat: I spoke to 500 pharmacists this morning and gave them that precise reassurance. The changes that we are making to transform the sector into a service-based, not dispensing-based, economy will do just that. That is where pharmacies need to go and it is where they want to go. Frankly, it has taken too long.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I need to make some progress. I will give way in a moment.

At present, the average pharmacy receives NHS income of £220,000 a year, which is based on throughput of £1 million from the NHS. That translates into a value of the order of £750,000 for each pharmacy. When pharmacies merge or are sold, that is what they are traded for and the changes will not make a significant difference.

Returning to an earlier point, 40% of all pharmacies are located within a 10-minute walk of at least two others. Instances exist of a dozen or more pharmacies located within half a mile of each other. As I noted earlier, each one will most likely be receiving £25,000 a year just for being there.

Jonathan Ashworth: Has the Minister been to Leicester?

David Mowat: I was brought up on the outskirts of Leicester, so I am delighted to tell the hon. Gentleman that I have indeed been there. Giving all these clusters £25,000 of national health service money is not the best way to spend precious resources.

In addition, the extra services that pharmacies will choose to provide, such as winter flu jabs and public health services, are commissioned separately and will be unaffected by the reset. For example, 600,000 flu jabs have been given in community pharmacies this year—more than all of last winter.

Several hon. Members rose—
David Mowat: I need to make progress.

Mr Speaker: Order. I think it is fair to say that the Minister is being what I would call—if it does not sound a contradiction in terms—courteously harangued to give way, but it is perfectly evident to me that he is not giving way at the moment. Members will therefore have to exercise their judgment as to the frequency with which they make further attempts.

David Mowat: I will continue to make some progress and then give way towards the end of my remarks.

I do not want to downplay the impact of the change on the private businesses that own and operate the network. The pharmacy sector is a mixed economy with 70% of the market made up of multiples and chains and 30% owned by independents. It is hard to accurately predict the impact of the changes on those individual business models. What I can say, however, is that the savings we are making will be entirely recycled back into the NHS. Every penny of the efficiency savings that we are asking of community pharmacies will be spent on better patient care, better drugs and better GP access.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I totally understand the importance of trying to get as much bang for your buck from pharmacy services, but does this not actually amount to a significant cut in spending on preventive services? That seems completely counter to the Government’s aim.

David Mowat: When one takes into account the £112 million that we are spending on getting more pharmacists into GP practices, the right hon. Gentleman’s point is incorrect.

Luciana Berger: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment.

Finally, I want to talk about the work that we are doing to ensure that everyone in the country has access to a community pharmacy. We have developed a scheme with two components. First, all pharmacies that are in the highest 25% by prescription volume, and that are in the highest 25% by prescription volume, and that are in the 20% most deprived areas in the country can apply to be reviewed by NHS England as a special case. The final safeguard is that NHS England has a continuing duty to ensure the adequate provision of services. Its role is to commission a new pharmacy in any area where it believes access is inadequate. That duty will continue.

Luciana Berger: I thank the Minister for very kindly giving way. Will he correct the record on something? Pharmacies are not all private enterprises. Many co-operatives across our country provide community pharmacies, often in rural and isolated areas. For the purposes of this debate, will he clarify his understanding of the distinction between a community pharmacy and a GP pharmacy? That has not been clear in his remarks so far.

David Mowat: The distinction is that a community pharmacy is part of a privately owned business that dispenses and is paid in that way. The ones that we are hiring into GP practices will leverage GP time and do medicine reviews, and I expect them to enable the pharmacy network in an area to work more cohesively. It is a welcome and, frankly, overdue step forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mowat: I need to continue.

Taken as a whole, I am confident that the three measures I have talked about for protecting access will ensure that everyone has access to a community pharmacy in much the same way as they do at present. The future for pharmacy is bright. The change we are implementing of a 7.4% efficiency requirement over two years is proportionate and will continue to orientate the profession towards services and—for the first time—quality and away from a remuneration model based on dispensing.

I will finish by again quoting the chief pharmacist, who said:

“The public can be reassured that while efficiencies are being asked of community pharmacy just as they are of other parts of the NHS, there is still sufficient funding to ensure there are accessible and convenient local NHS pharmacy services across England. The NHS is committed to a positive future for pharmacists and community pharmacy.”

Every penny that we save as a result of the efficiency reviews will be spent within the NHS on better care, better drugs and on quicker treatment. I urge Members to support the amendment later today.
Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. People who go into a community pharmacy today will see a special treatment room where they can get phlebotomy, advice on blood pressure and all sorts of other things. Is it not perverse, cruel and utterly irrational to say to a group of professionals, who have done all this work to change the way they deliver their services, “Now we are finished with you. Out you go. You’ve done your bit. We are going to put you out and close down your pharmacy”?

Dr Whitford: I agree with the Government about looking for more services, but this is not the way to work with the profession, given that they want those in it to do more work and to work differently. Sadly, during my time in the House, we have repeatedly seen the Government not sitting down with a profession and saying, “Why not look for where savings can be made?”, but simply making a cut.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I was going to intervene on the Minister to follow up the point made by the Chair of the Health Committee. We are looking at bottom-up planning in England for the first time for a number of years with the sustainability and transformation plan process, so this is completely the wrong time to be making these irrational and random cuts.

Dr Whitford: We recently debated STPs and the potential they provide. The danger is that at the moment we are seeing finance-centred care, instead of patient-centred care. Going back to place-based planning, which is what we have kept in Scotland, where we still have health boards, means that we can look at integrating services, and pharmacies definitely need to be part of that. They have the potential to be a significant front-line player.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I am interested in the experience in Scotland, although we do not have the same system in England. What does the hon. Lady think about moving pharmacists into GP surgeries? I think that it is a mistake. I would much prefer the same system in England. What does the hon. Lady experience in Scotland, although we do not have the same system in England. What does the hon. Lady think about moving pharmacists into GP surgeries? I think that it is a mistake. I would much prefer the same system in England.

Dr Whitford: Scotland actually has both. We do have pharmacists who are in a consulting room within a practice, and our Government have put £85 million into taking on an additional 140 pharmacists who work in primary care with GPs. We are not, as has been done in the past, saying, “Everyone on drug A must change to drug B because it is cheaper,” without giving any thought to how that affects the patient. We are consulting patients, who are often on 10 or 15 medications, all of which interact and have different side effects, and then rationalising that and giving the patient advice. We are therefore providing a clinical service rather than just a changeover service.

Our community pharmacy system has been running for 10 years, so it is quite mature. Patients register with a pharmacist in the same way as they register with a GP. The aim is for all people to be registered with whomever they consider their local pharmacist to be, as that means that they can access minor ailment treatment. It also means that people who are on chronic medication have a chronic medication service, with their prescription sent electronically to the pharmacy, which then keeps track of when it is due and therefore ensures that patients do not run out of medication. The pharmacies also provide an acute medication service for people who have not signed up to the other service but suddenly find they have no tablets, as they had not thought to re-order them with their GP. If they are regulars at the pharmacy, a single round of drugs can be prescribed for them there so that they do not have a gap in their treatment. The important thing is that our vision is to have all our pharmacists as prescribers by 2023, and to have our public registered with pharmacists by 2020.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes two important points: this move is cuts-led, rather than well planned; and just as communities rely on their doctor, they rely on the facilities at their pharmacy. That is particularly true of elderly people and those with disabilities, who may have to travel miles, depending on where the pharmacy is.

Dr Whitford: It is crucial that the service covers all areas, including those that are deprived and those that do not have good public transport. Distance is not everything; this is also about how people travel that distance. In many places, the distance involved might not be that great, but there simply may not be a bus going in the required direction.

Catherine McKinnell: I wanted to make this point to the Minister: the closure of community pharmacies will clearly lead to a poorer service, a loss of patient choice and poorer health outcomes for those in more deprived parts of the country. Is this not just another example of Government short-term cuts that will cost us more in the long term?

Dr Whitford: If this is introduced badly, the cost will be greater in the long term. When the Minister talks about a more service-based approach, I think that he aspires to something more like the Scottish model, which I would commend. I just feel that this is being done “backside forward”.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Dr Whitford: I need to make a bit of progress.

We need to design the services with the people who work in them. Some 18% of Scotland’s population—nearly 1 million people—are registered with and do access the minor ailment service, which takes pressure off accident and emergency, because there is availability out of hours, and GPs. The fourth service that we have is the public health service, with 70% of all smoking cessation work in primary care being carried out in our community pharmacies. These four services together—minor ailments, chronic medication, acute medication and public health—represent a huge breadth of service for a community. It is important that pharmacies in England that are currently just retail and dispensing pharmacies are encouraged to go in that direction, because it brings benefit for the NHS.

My biggest concern is the random nature of how this process might develop. If the Government simply cut and let the dice fall where they will, the problem is that
they will not end up with an integrated service. Scotland still has health boards, so if a community pharmacy is to open there, an application needs to be made to the health board. When the project started, the boards decided which places got to become community pharmacies, and they decide whether there is a need to open a new community pharmacy. The biggest mistake in this scheme is its randomness.

One issue raised by the hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr. Murrison) was the profits made when drugs are sold on. The Government could look at the vertically integrated wholesalers—the big chains. In the mid-2000s, they were not considered. The Government do not know how much profit they make or where that profit is made, and the system is totally unregulated. These chains control about 40% of the pharmacy market. One of the biggest chains, Walgreens Boots Alliance, has declared profits of almost £1 billion, yet it has somehow been able to reduce its tax bill by more than £1 billion in this country. We are talking about people who are make almost half their profit from taxpayers yet do not pay their full share of tax. I absolutely agree that under this proposal the big chains will survive and the small, independent, very community-based pharmacies will be lost.

Neil Coyle: The Minister accused those who highlight concerns of “scaremongering”. Atul, who runs St George’s pharmacy at the Elephant and Castle in my constituency, says:

“We may survive the first set of”—

in-year—

“cuts by compromising on our services. But the second set of cuts next April will most definitely place us at a real risk of closure.”

Does the hon. Lady agree with Atul that it is right for us to highlight our concerns, especially in constituencies such as mine, where we face losing 18 community pharmacies?

Dr Whitford: Losing that many pharmacies in any area would be a disaster. This is a bit like groundhog day, because this is our third discussion on this topic in as many weeks. The Minister said that there absolutely would be protection, but the pharmacy access scheme still largely comes down to the amount of dispensing that is done and the distances. It does not take account of which pharmacies are providing a good service, which ones are set up to provide a good service and how to encourage others to develop. This is what is completely wrong in the Government’s approach. They are just slicing money off and leaving individual businesses to decide whether they think they will be profitable. The danger would be that we get a whole lot of pharmacies deciding to sell out and walk, instead of someone saying for a particular area, “Eighteen is too many”—especially if they are all around one town square—“so which ones are best able to develop a service? Let them bid for it and let them be inspected, and let’s see how they take it forward.”

The Government could make a lot of savings by addressing the wholesalers. In Scotland, we have margin sharing, which means that a price control group looks at the profit that is made at various stages, and some of it has to be shared back. We do have people who are trading on the open market and moving drugs around, especially in the big chains. As we heard earlier, we would get a better result by sitting down with the profession and designing a service. STPs could provide the model within which to look at how many community pharmacies there should be and where they should be, and then it would be a case of working backwards.

The danger of the Government’s approach is that it is the wrong way round. Just calling something an “efficiency cut” does not make it efficient, and the danger is that we just slash something and it falls over. The pharmacy access scheme is not enough of a protection or of an intervention. There needs to be planning. I commend the idea of a proper services-based pharmacy system, but the aspiration should be not just that a few pharmacies choose to do it and others do not. It should be that a patient who walks into a community pharmacy will know what services they can get, and we should aim to have that right across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the next speaker, let me say that there will be a limit of five minutes on Back-Bench speeches. There are 25 people who are trying to take part in this debate, so it may be necessary to drop down that time a bit further later on, but let us start with five minutes.

1.51 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is a shame that the Front-Bench speakers took so long because many colleagues want to contribute to the debate.

I agree with the Minister’s thrust of ensuring that we get the greatest efficiency for the taxpayer and the best possible health service for our constituents. We cannot afford to waste money in any way, shape or form, but if we can find ways to redirect money into NHS front-line services, I agree that we should do so. As the Minister said, the NHS chief pharmacist has been very clear throughout the consultation that the current way in which community pharmacy is paid and organised needs to be reformed, so it is right that we should look at it.

The NHS is labouring under huge financial pressures, so we should look at any areas in which inefficiencies or duplications lead to precious resources being distributed inefficiently. The public want the money that could be saved through this measure to be reinvested in front-line NHS services. I am glad that the Minister has taken the opportunity to reassure us about that.

My own West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust struggles under a massive deficit that has been growing year on year. Its latest financial report revealed that it had a revenue deficit of £41.2 million by 2015-16. We cannot fail to tackle the huge financial pressures on the NHS, but just throwing money at the problem will never be enough if we do not seek to tackle the system at the same time. Surely the Opposition cannot be asserting that these matters should never be looked into. Their manifesto pledged £6 billion less than this Government have committed, so I am really intrigued to know how on earth they would keep this system in its entirety and, at the same time, put more money into NHS services, which is what I would like to happen.

I, like many, want the biggest bang for the taxpayer’s buck. I want the Health Minister to succeed in his aim of delivering the very best pharmacy service, with facilities that help to keep patients out of A&E and doctors’
[Mrs Anne Main]
surgeries and, at the same time, promote good health within communities. I agree that it is important to integrate community pharmacies into the NHS urgent care system and GP services.

I welcomed the Government’s announcement in October that the pharmacy integration fund will provide up to £42 million “to improve on how pharmacists, their teams and community pharmacy operates within the NHS as a whole.”

If we are looking at an establishment payment of £25,000 to pharmacies, we must ensure that we get the right result. When it comes to the closure of small pharmacies, we must protect residents who live in more rural or sparsely populated areas, as well as those who do not have access to cars. The Minister has said that the existing funding system does not do enough to promote efficiency and quality, or to promote integration with the rest of the NHS. He has also said that in most cases the NHS is giving each of these pharmacies a guaranteed fixed payment of £25,000 per year regardless of their size, quality or local demand, and that in total the average pharmacy receives nearly £1 million for the NHS goods and services that it provides, of which around £220,000 is direct income.

Our pharmacy provision varies greatly across the country. The Quadrant pharmacy in St Albans, which I am due to visit on Friday, is situated in a small parade of shops and provides a valued local service. Other pharmacies are located as concessions in huge supermarkets such as Sainsbury’s in London Colney, which have the added attraction of longer opening hours, a large car park, being surrounded by other out-of-town superstores, and a huge footfall of shoppers who can get their prescriptions along with the dog food and Sunday roast. As many concessions are operated by the bigger chains, such as LloydsPharmacy, we must ensure that they do not extinguish the light of the smaller pharmacy that also operates in London Colney, just around the corner from the doctor’s surgery. It is important that we get this right.

I accept that there is an inefficient allocation of NHS funds when Government figures show that 40% of pharmacies are now in clusters of three or more. That means that two fifths are within 10 minutes’ walk of two or more other pharmacies, and I know that that is the case in certain areas of my own constituency. In the St Albans high street shopping area, there are five dispensing pharmacies within a half-mile area. Some are just over the road from each other, some have only yards between them, and some are also operating fairly near to that tightly packed city zone. That cannot be a good idea. St Albans is certainly very well served by pharmacies—not surprisingly St Albans is also the home of the National Pharmacy Association.

It is important that we look at the proposal on offer, but we must get this right. I hope that quality can be provided, that nobody is left behind when pharmacy services are streamlined, and that everyone has access to good services.

1.56 pm

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I should say that I am chair of the all-party pharmacy group. I am sure that many of my colleagues will today talk about the savings and services that community pharmacies provide to the national health service. Although that is an important point, it is also essential that we highlight the good that they provide to patients. They do so much more than just deliver prescriptions to people. Let me just highlight the scale of their operations. Some 11,800 community pharmacies dispensed more than 1 billion prescription items in 2015.

Community pharmacists are well prepared to adapt to many different problems with which they are presented. They help people to give up smoking, alter their diets, become healthier and manage their cholesterol. Effectively, they are on the frontline as far as the health of the public is concerned.

Anna Turley: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. Pharmacies are right at the heart of their communities. As has already been mentioned today, access to those services is vital. In some areas—such as our two constituencies—bus services are being cut and people are finding it increasingly difficult to access services. It is nonsense for the Minister to say that it is a matter of seconds between pharmacies. Will my right hon. Friend comment on how important access to pharmacies is to our communities?

Kevin Barron: It is very important, and the mechanism that has been put in place will not solve everything. We may get Boots at Gatwick airport supporting it, but there is the potential that others may drop off the line because they are just outside the geographical area. We need to look at that.

Let me turn to population health. This cannot be done by central distribution centres or a pharmacy-based miles away, as they have no link with the locality. I am pleased that the idea of major companies getting involved in prescribing has been dropped. Pharmacists know their customers well and are familiar with their medications and, consequently, the customers feel confident in asking them for their advice.

The Government’s figures show that the £170 million cut could force up to 3,000 community pharmacies—one in four across the country—to close their doors to the public, so people would have to travel a lot further to their pharmacist and not have the local connection that I mentioned previously. Community pharmacy is the gateway to health for some 1.6 million patients each day. If anything, that is something we need to get a grip on.

A core component of current pharmacy services supports the public to stay well, live healthier lives and self-care. Pharmacists play a central role in the management of long-term conditions. They carry out medicines use reviews, for example. We must remember that more than 70% of expenditure on our national health service at both primary and acute level is spent on people with long-term conditions. There could not be a better gateway for those people to get the assistance they need to manage those conditions than through local pharmacies.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right. Community pharmacies are at the heart of the gateway. Does he agree that there is a danger that the proposed cuts might end up costing more money than they save?
Kevin Barron: That is a danger. We do not know what is going to happen.

Community pharmacies attract patients who will not access health care anywhere else. People greatly value the fact that they do not need an appointment at a pharmacy. The long opening hours, too, are appealing. People from deprived populations who may not access conventional NHS services do access community pharmacies, which helps to improve the health of the local population and to reduce health inequalities.

I know that there is some weighting of the figures in relation to the assessment scheme. We need to see how that will work. I hope that we will take it into account that where there are higher levels of deprivation, large numbers of pharmacies might not be inconsistent with need.

I was contacted by a pharmacist in my constituency to highlight two examples from the past week that showed the vital role of a local community pharmacy. In the first example, a 34-year-old lady with epilepsy had run out of her essential medication, owing to a visit lasting longer than she had anticipated. She went along to the local walk-in centre but was denied a supply because of the lack of prescription evidence. As we all know, records are not as joined-up as they should be. The lady then visited her local pharmacy, which, thanks to local record access, was able to determine that her request was genuine and gave her a short-term supply. A lengthy and stressful visit to A&E was therefore avoided and the risk of potentially harmful seizures was averted as well.

In the second example, the pharmacist described spending 45 minutes with the parents of a one-year-old baby who presented with a voided and the risk of potentially harmful seizures was averted as well.

The difficulty in collecting such examples is that so many pharmacists see this simply as what they do, rather than as great examples of care for patients. They do not moan about it, worry about whether they get paid to do it or pass the buck; they just deal with the situation and improve patient care for the individual in front of them.

As well as providing extra services, community pharmacies are taking on more of the clinical roles that have traditionally been undertaken by doctors, such as the management of asthma and diabetes and blood pressure testing. That should be welcomed, as it reduces the pressure on GPs. It is usually so much easier for people to visit their local pharmacy for these services than to wait at their GP’s surgery. Because of the greater amount of time that they can spend with each patient, community pharmacists can respond to patients’ symptoms and advise on medicines that have been prescribed or are for sale in pharmacies.

The public support for local pharmacies and the services that they provide is huge. I was one of a number of Members from both sides of the House who presented a petition to No. 10 a few weeks ago that now has some 2.2 million signatures. It is the biggest health petition that we have ever had here in the UK.

I shall finish with a quote from a pharmacist in Rotherham, who said, “I do what I do to make a positive difference to patients’ health and wellbeing every single day. How many things would I be able to pick up post-cuts? Probably not as many, as we will have to cut back on staff and I won’t have as much patient-facing time.” The all-party group will be looking at the proposals. I do not say that we should move away from a dispensing model, but we need reassurance that any move will not affect our community pharmacies and patients’ needs.

2.4 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), who runs the all-party parliamentary group extremely well. I agree with much of what he says about the value of community pharmacy.

I start my brief remarks by thanking the people I was involved with in pharmacy for their immense courtesy at all times, even though we were talking about some very difficult things. Those people included my local pharmacists, Arif and Raj in Wootton; Graham Phillips of Harpenden, who spent a large amount of time showing me his shops and is still very engaged with me; those on Bedford local pharmaceutical committee, who invited me at a most difficult time to launch their healthy living pharmacies in the area; and of course my team in the Department of Health.

Instead of repeating the Minister’s statement and his commitment to pharmacy, I shall say a little about why we are where we are and what I found when I was dealing with pharmacy, and look ahead to the future. This is the sort of debate where the previous Minister finds that, owing to pressing parliamentary business, he is not able to attend and he is somewhere else because all this is now nothing to do with him, guv. I thought that would be most unfair and I wanted to be here to support my hon. Friend and to give a little background.

The process started with the settlement made in 2015 between the Department of Health and the Treasury. In that settlement, extra money was released for the NHS, particularly in my portfolio—adult social care, mental health and primary care—but as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) in speaking for the Opposition, efficiency cuts were required throughout the NHS, as advocated by Simon Stevens. Part of that involved £170 million off the £2.8 billion for pharmacy. I thought that this was appropriate and that, once it was announced, we could work through it.

I regret the 3,000 figure that I gave to the right hon. Member for Rother Valley at a meeting with the APPG. It was a worst-case estimate, taking no account of what changes pharmacies might make to accommodate any reductions in finance, and therefore it was absolutely top-end. The reason that I gave it in conversation with colleagues—it was open and public and I have no objection to the figure being used—was to indicate that I was aware of the difficulty and that we wanted to work very hard to mitigate it, which we then started to do. But the 3,000 figure took on a life of its own. With hindsight, it might have been wiser if I had stuck to exactly what the Minister says, which is that we do not know because the Government do not have a plan to close pharmacies. They are not in a position to do that and we do not know what will happen.

I do not believe for an instant that the outcome will be as dramatic as Opposition Members have suggested, because businesses do adapt. One of the things that I found when I arrived, as several Members have said, is
that 18% growth had taken place in 10 years. Pharmacies are a business and pharmacists will make adaptations to their business to cope, so we will have to wait and see what happens. I would not use the 3,000 figure again.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): As Health Minister, the right hon. Gentleman said that 3,000 of the 12,000 pharmacies could close. That has come from pharmacies, not from politicians, so does he not accept that that is the real situation, as he said himself?

Alistair Burt: No. I said it, so I know why I said it. I said it because it was an estimate, and it took no account of any business change that people might make. It was a top-end estimate and I said it to indicate that I was aware that there might be closures and that we accordingly wanted to mitigate the effects. With hindsight, I would not have given that figure, because everyone has said that the Minister said that so many pharmacies would close. No, I did not. That figure does not represent the pharmacies that will close. They might have done if we had not had mitigating measures and if businesses had not made changes themselves. I wanted to put that on the record.

Let me say what I found when I took on the role. There was a discussion in pharmacy about its future. There were plenty of voices in pharmacy which said that the funding model that values volume and establishment but not necessarily quality of service was not the right way for pharmacy to go. The pharmacy profession wanted to see some changes. I thought that was relevant. There were differing voices in pharmacy. The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee represents some, but there are other voices.

The integration fund we suggested as a way to look at how pharmacy was changing to come into GPs' surgeries was warmly welcomed. There were innovations all over the country in pharmacy in general. There was a growing move towards healthy living pharmacies providing more services. All this was going on at the same time as we were talking about what changes we needed to make to provide the extra funds for the NHS.

So where are we going to go in the future? I think that we will get through this process. I remember saying to stakeholders in December 2015, “The future of pharmacy will not be decided by this letter. The future of pharmacy in 2020, 2025 and 2030 is still to be decided. It won’t all rest on this; it will rest on changes and progress to be made.”

First, the PSNC consultation process needs to be changed; I am not sure whether it works well when other voices are excluded, and that should be looked at. Secondly, the differing voices in pharmacy should find a way to get together and present a view beyond what is happening on the high street to show where pharmacy is going.

Thirdly, the integration of the NHS could be done better. Why are there not pharmacists on every single clinical commissioning group? There should be more commissioning of services, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) was absolutely right that we need to do more, but the NHS needs to do more, with better commissioning and pharmacists being involved.

Fourthly, there needs to be a thorough review of what pharmacy can do and provide in the future, and that should be a springboard. Sometimes innovation comes out of pressure, not out of great resources, which we would love to see in a perfect world. Finally, we should ensure there is long-term support for a locally based network—there are models that would remove more from the locally based network that we should all resist—and such an approach would be the start of a good future for pharmacy.

2.11 pm

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who tried to be extremely helpful to the current Minister—most ex-Ministers have ex-Ministeritis and tend to be extremely unhelpful to current Ministers, but not so the right hon. Gentleman. However, he did use that figure of 3,000 pharmacies—one in four—facing closure. He has attempted to qualify it now, and his defence seems to be that he made the estimate without properly thinking it through. To that extent, there is remarkable continuity with his successor, who makes a number of assertions without remotely thinking them through. However, if we are now told that we have to disregard what the previous Minister said, why on earth we should believe what the incumbent says? Who is to say that, in a year's time, after some reshuffle, the Minister's successor will not come to the House and tell us at the Dispatch Box, "You don’t want to pay any attention to what the fellow before me said. He never knew what he was talking about."?

The Government's impact assessment is worth closer examination, because it states: “the potential impacts...are assessed on the basis that there is a scenario where no pharmacy closes”—not one. That scenario is not shared by anyone else. Even the Minister, when asked how many would close, told the House, “I do not know.” The impact assessment goes on to concede: “There is no reliable way of estimating the number of pharmacies that may close as a result of this policy.”

The Department literally has no idea. According to the impact assessment, the Department is officially clueless as to the impact on pharmacies.

Anna Turley: Does my hon. Friend agree that an impact assessment of the knock-on effects for the NHS more broadly would have been useful? One in four patients will probably seek with a GP an appointment they would have sought with a pharmacist. We have heard nothing from the Government about what the knock-on effect would be or what investigation they have done into that.

Michael Dugher: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It would have been helpful to have had an impact assessment as the basis for debate, rather than having something that was published on the day of the announcement.

My hon. Friend alludes to the fact that the impact assessment on community pharmacy says that cuts to community pharmacies will increase patient health benefits “by reallocating savings from community pharmacy funding to other uses”—
a point the Minister made—
“ensuring that patient health is unaffected”.

Yet, polling commissioned by Pharmacy Voice shows that one in four patients would make an appointment at a GP if their local chemist was closed—a figure rising to four in five in more deprived communities such as my own in Barnsley.

There is no consideration whatever in the Government’s assessment of the potential downstream costs to other parts of the NHS budget, such as the pressure on GPs and A&E. The Department’s impact assessment does say that these cuts are “expected to lead to reductions in the employment of pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and other pharmacy staff”, so the Government are clear at least that local pharmacists—the people many of our constituents rely on—will go because of these cuts.

The impact assessment predicts that there will be a “corresponding increase” in other NHS employee numbers, so there will be “no net effect” on the NHS. That is completely without foundation. Are the Government really trying to tell us today that, for all their talk about the importance of community pharmacies and all the evidence about the pressures that will result on GPs and A&Es, which are already overstretched, the work of pharmacists in our local communities will, and should be, taken up by a corresponding increase in other NHS staff?

The impact assessment says:
“the modelling does not take any account of potential reduction in opening hours which may also affect access.”

You bet! New research published today and carried out by the National Pharmacy Association shows that, when faced with the Government’s budgetary cuts, 86% of community pharmacies are likely to limit or remove the home delivery of medicines to housebound patients; 77% of chemists say they will probably become more retail focused to deal with funding shortages—exactly the opposite of what the Minister hopes to achieve; and 54%—more than half—are likely to reduce their opening hours, which will limit patient access and put more strain on our already overstretched GP surgeries and A&E departments.

To sum up, the Government’s own impact assessment, which is well worth a read, if only for comedy value, reads as though it was written in haste on the back of a cigarette packet. The Government—rather like the Minister—are making up the policy as they go along. What Ministers are actually asking us to do today is to make a leap of faith: to turn a blind eye to all the evidence; to disregard all the warnings; to ignore the unanswered questions, the contradictory statements and the glaring omissions in the Government’s own case; to brush away expert opinion; and to dismiss the concerns of the public. Based on the Department’s own impact assessment, how can any right hon. or hon. Member possibly support the Government in the Lobby today?

2.16 pm

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): As we have already heard in the debate, many of us have seen the considerable value that local community pharmacies provide in our constituencies. I have seen that myself with the Manor pharmacy in Elstree, which is run by Graham Philips, to whom my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) paid tribute. I would urge the Minister to meet him; he really is a pool of expertise on this issue. The same is true of those at the Crown pharmacy at Borehamwood and Shenley.

What we see time and time again in these places is that the commitment to the customers goes way beyond what we would see from a normal retailer. There is a genuine understanding of the needs, health and wellbeing of the people who use such pharmacies. The services range from dementia-friendly services, picking up the early stages of the disease; healthy living advice, including assistance with drugs and weight management; and smoking cessation services.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Would my hon. Friend add to his list Nick Kaye in my constituency? He is carrying out some excellent work to collaborate with local GPs and to find innovative ways to deal with patients. Does my hon. Friend agree that pharmacies are particularly important in tourist areas, as the frontline that can deal with tourists who have health problems, and take pressure off the other health services?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that pharmacies play a crucial role in relieving the frontline of NHS services. However, that does not mean that reforms are not necessary. Of course we need to incentivise the kind of advantageous behaviour we have talked about; but we also need to recognise some of the problems with the provision of pharmaceutical services.

We know the basic problem; it has been referred to by other Members. The pharmacy budget has increased by 40% over the last decade. Even taking into account all the changes that the Government are proposing, funding for community pharmacies will still be 30% higher than when this Government first came to office in 2010. Equally, we have the problem of excessive clustering—a situation where there are many pharmacies within a short distance of one another.

Those who argue that there is no need for reform really need to explain where the money will come from. If we are not recycling these services to the frontline, we need to look for other savings, or we need to look at lower levels of service in the frontline of the NHS, whether that is services for diabetes or for cancer. There is no magic money tree. We have to take these difficult decisions in order to provide for the frontline, so I completely agree with the overall thrust of Government policy.

We can take an intelligent approach towards this issue. As we have heard, there is a big difference between various types of pharmacies. At one end of the scale, there are the very large pharmacies that are often in large retail outlets such as supermarkets and sit at the very back of the store. They are there, in essence, to encourage customers to go through the rest of the store to purchase other goods. They could easily take a larger cut than is being proposed, because they are just operating as loss leaders for those stores to get customers in the door in the first place.

Maria Caulfield: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. I was slightly disappointed that the shadow Minister did not really understand the principle of vertically integrated pharmacies. Some big national companies are making a lot of money out of pharmacy at the moment.
Oliver Dowden: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Equally, many such pharmacies do not provide any of the wider community health benefits. In essence, they are just dispensing services.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Is it not estimated, however, that those will be the ones that survive, purely because they are big, while the small, high-service pharmacies in communities are more vulnerable?

Oliver Dowden: That is precisely the point that I am coming to. As we proceed with these reforms, hon. Members need to recognise that we will need further savings in this area. I am not attacking large retailers because of their size; it is because of the lack of such wider provisions. We need to look at ways of securing further savings from them which we can plough back into the community pharmacies that are providing the services on which all our constituents rely. I completely accept that pharmacies that are purely dispensing services are very inefficient as such. They are highly labour-intensive; it is just a very expensive way of delivering drugs. We need to identify ways in which we can bifurcate the two different types of providers.

I pay tribute to what the Minister has announced so far. He clearly demonstrates an understanding of the situation, as we have seen in relation to the protection of key local pharmacies through the community access scheme. For example, in my constituency, the services in places such as Elstree and Shenley, where we have small, rural communities, often with an elderly population, will be protected. Equally, the quality payment scheme recognises some of these wider community benefits.

However, I urge the Minister to do more in that area. Let me make two brief suggestions. First, we need more detailed recording of the sorts of services that are provided by pharmacies which take pressure off the NHS. As I understand it, there is no systematic way in which these additional benefits are recorded, and we are all working on the basis of estimates. We could have a system whereby the community pharmacies systematically recorded the benefit that they provided, and then they could be better rewarded for those benefits. At the same time, there would be a means by which we could penalise, or find further cuts from, the pharmacies that did not provide those additional services.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) rightly commented on the common ailments scheme that operates in Scotland. The Minister indicated that the Government are moving down that route. I urge the Government to go further on this. There is absolutely no reason why patients suffering from things such as common cold and flu symptoms or head lice could not be referred directly from their GPs, such as common cold and flu symptoms or head lice, or find further cuts from, the pharmacies that did not provide any of the wider community health benefits. In essence, they are just dispensing services.

When I speak and listen to my constituents, it is clear that they trust the community pharmacies that they engage with, and also develop very close relationships with the people who work in them. I see that for myself when I go to collect my prescriptions locally. They are enormously busy places. I note that the hon. Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) said that they just deliver drugs, but they do so much more than that within our communities.

Oliver Dowden: That was not my point; I was saying that many large-scale dispensaries, particularly in supermarkets, do little more than deliver drugs, but we need to focus on the community pharmacies that provide the wider services.

Luciana Berger: The hon. Gentleman has just spoken in support of the Opposition motion.

When we had an urgent question on this subject, I listened closely to the Minister, who talked particularly about how far he expected people to travel and said that lots of community pharmacies were not very busy. Over recent weeks, I have made a point of looking through the windows of my local community pharmacies to see whether any of them are in fact empty, and it is fair to say that none of them are at any point. The statistics show how busy our local community pharmacies actually are. The figures speak for themselves. The average community pharmacy sees, on average, 137 people every single day. They dispense 87,000 prescription items over the course of a year. They support, on average, 250 people with diabetes, 389 people with asthma, 463 unpaid carers, 805 older people, 1,317 with a mental health condition, and 1,416 people discharged from hospital. The last figure is particularly important. I will not presuppose what the Health Committee report that comes out tomorrow might say about pressures on our winter A&E services, but it is fair to say that many people are expecting, following a summer crisis in the A&Es in our hospitals, that our local hospital services will be under enormous amounts of pressure. Our community pharmacies already do a really important job in supporting our constituents who have been discharged from hospital.

I have had the opportunity to listen to members of my local pharmaceutical committee. When I asked them what the local stats and figures were so that I was equipped for this debate, I was very struck by what they said. Hon. Members have already mentioned to the Minister—it is regrettable that he is no longer in his place—the pharmacy assessment scheme and how it has been put together. It is enormously regrettable, to put it politely, that it does not take account of deprivation. That means that the pharmacies in the most deprived areas of our country, where patients have greater health needs, are not entitled to claim the payment. I made this point earlier, and I make it again: in Liverpool, we have some of the highest levels of deprivation; Kensington ward is in the top 20 in the country. No pharmacies in my constituency are eligible for the pharmacy assessment
scheme payment, and just two across the whole of Liverpool are eligible—one in Croxteth and one in Netherley. That means that all the other 129 community pharmacies across Liverpool, and six distance-selling pharmacies, face the full funding cut. That puts at risk the very vital service that they offer to my constituents and people across Liverpool.

The funding cut in this financial year has already had an impact on our local pharmacies. Some have already curtailed their free, but unfunded, delivery service to patients. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East highlighted the hours in which those services are often provided. They are a lifeline for house-bound and vulnerable patients across our country.

Other pharmacies are already in the process of making staff redundant, so they will have to survive on fewer staff. Pharmacist in some of our community pharmacies will, therefore, inevitably be tied more to the dispensing bench rather than undertaking the enhanced clinical role that NHS England, the Department of Health and Ministers expect them to deliver under the five year forward view.

The point about deprivation is so important. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said in his important opening remarks, it is outrageous that the pharmacy assessment scheme will further widen health inequalities in our country. We will have a specific debate about that issue next Tuesday, so I ask the Minister to reflect on it. In 2016, we have a responsibility to close the gap, not promote schemes that will widen it. I note in particular that the scheme makes no provision for patients and communities with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

I know that many other hon. Members wish to speak, so I will make a very brief point in the 13 seconds that I have left. Some Members, including the Minister, keep calling community pharmacies “private enterprises,” but there are many co-operatives that provide these services, often in rural and isolated areas across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I am afraid that the limit has to be dropped to four minutes.

2.31 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): Like many Members, I have been fortunate over the years to see the brilliant services provided by local pharmacies in my constituency, including in the communities of Haxby and Wigginton, Fulford and Poppleton, to name but a few. I have also witnessed the very important role that pharmacies play in delivering care in the community. We must ensure that they are properly incorporated into the delivery of primary care.

I have the utmost respect for the new Minister and I wish him well in his new role, but I fear that he has been given a hospital pass. Having said that, I understand why he wants to make reforms. I agree that we need to improve the service offered to patients, allocate resources more efficiently. I note in particular that the scheme is not in one of the 20% most deprived areas, either. As a result, I fear that the 3,000 residents of Fulford could lose access to that fantastic service, given that the next nearest pharmacy is some distance away in Fishergate. May I encourage the Minister to consider introducing a pharmacy access scheme in theEquality Act 2010?

In the short time that I have left, I will cite an example in my constituency. Fulford pharmacy, which is a small, independent business and is not part of a large chain, sits only 80 metres away from the one-mile rule and is, therefore, ineligible for the pharmacy access scheme. It is not in one of the 20% most deprived areas, either. As a result, I fear that the 3,000 residents of Fulford could lose access to that fantastic service, given that the next nearest pharmacy is some distance away in Fishergate. May I encourage the Minister to consider introducing flexibility or a case-by-case assessment to ensure that pharmacies that serve specific communities do not fall by the wayside?

I will reinforce that point in the last few seconds that I have left. I am told that two branches of Boots pharmacy in terminals 3 and 5 of Heathrow airport will receive pharmacy access scheme payments, as they are more than a mile apart, despite clearly not serving any specific community.

2.35 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): This debate could not come at a more important time for my constituents, because a potential 25% of the 42 community pharmacies in my constituency face closure due to the funding deal that this short-sighted Government imposed last week.

Pharmacies in Bradford West play a vital role in the total holistic healthcare services on offer to my constituents. My constituency is the fourth most deprived in the country, and we have one of the most diverse communities. Constituents face genuine day-to-day struggles to access the services and advice that they require. The 2014 patient survey report showed that more than a quarter of them could not access a GP appointment when they needed it.

We acknowledge the essential and diverse service that our community pharmacies perform and, in an attempt to maximise their impact, Bradford trialled the minor
aliments scheme, which the Minister has referred to, in 2014. I spoke to Mr Ajmal Amin of my local pharmacy, Sahara, only this morning, and he explained that, in addition to the more than 100 people a week who walk through his door, an average 50 a week do so as part of the minor ailments scheme. Even if one in four people end up going to a GP appointment, that means 90,000 extra GP appointments a year in my constituency alone, at a cost of more than £4 million.

Bradford has a higher incidence of cancer, diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease, and that is because poverty, deprivation and ill health go hand in hand—there is a clear correlation between them.

I will give a recent personal example. Over the past few months, my mother has suffered three transient ischaemic attacks. One of them was a potential stroke and she has already had cancer. Only last week, she was admitted to Luton hospital with an acute kidney infection. On Monday morning, it took 42 attempts for me to get through to my GP practice to make an appointment, but by the time I got through at 23 minutes past 8, all the appointments had gone. That experience is not unique to me; it is happening across the country. If we close community pharmacies, GPs will come under extra pressure. I have not seen a Government plan to give my constituency—which is one of five in Bradford—£4 million for another 90,000 appointments a year.

The reality is that the proposals will disproportionately affect those who need healthcare the most. Yes, we have lots of pharmacies, but the Government’s proposals do not take into account diverse communities with complex health needs.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is interesting to hear what is happening in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Five of the 23 pharmacies in my constituency of Wirral West are at risk of closure because of the Government cuts. Given the huge pressures that NHS services are under, does my hon. Friend share my concerns that the cuts that they have already experienced. This is not about GP practices not delivering what they can; it is simply that they do not have the resources. We do not have enough GPs as it is, and taking away pharmacies will not help.

I urge the Government to revisit this proposal, which has not been clearly thought through and does not take into account constituencies such as mine. I urge the Government to abolish it and bring something else to the table, because it is clearly not going to work.

2.40 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): We are all aware of the letter received by pharmacists on 17 December last year, in which the Department of Health discussed the potential for far greater use of community pharmacies and pharmacists. The letter referred to community pharmacists’ role in preventive care, in support for healthy living, in support for self-care for minor ailments and long-term conditions, in medication reviews in care homes and as part of a more integrated local care model. The letter also informed us of plans to reduce funding by £170 million.

I was fortunate enough to be the first MP to raise the matter in a Westminster Hall debate at the beginning of this year. I raised the concerns of community pharmacists about their funding as the plan progressed, as it was intended to do by October 2016. That all came about because the issue was raised in a constituency surgery that I held in St Ives at the start of January. Since then, the general public have been very engaged in this, and they are concerned about the future of their pharmacies.

I joined others in this House to present a petition with 2 million signatures to No. 10 in the summer.

I represent a Cornish seat where every effort is being made to integrate health and social care, and community pharmacists see themselves as essential players in a new, modern national health service that is equipped to meet the demands placed on it by today’s society. Community pharmacy is valued and depended on, and it can embrace new clinical responsibilities and meet the demands of an ageing population, but the sector is looking to Government for some reassurance about its future, particularly regarding funding for community pharmacy.

In my constituency, I have several independent community pharmacists. That is because my patch is large and includes areas of social deprivation, which has an inherent impact on health. A car journey from the north to the south of my constituency takes an hour, and a journey from the most westerly point to the most southerly point takes an hour and nine minutes. In a rural area such as mine, community pharmacists provide invaluable access to the NHS and invaluable support to vulnerable people. I am reassured by the fact that the Government have indicated that some protection will be given to rural pharmacies and those in deprived rural areas. That is welcome indeed.

However, funding of community pharmacy remains a concern, and the community pharmacy sector has called for the Department of Health to use funds cut from the community pharmacy budget to fund a minor ailments service from 2017. The service would allow eligible people with a list of common health complaints to visit their pharmacy for advice and, where appropriate, medicines at no cost. That could create significant savings for the NHS by ensuring that patients with minor conditions use pharmacies, thereby preventing unnecessary GP appointments and A&E attendances.
I am well aware of the need to secure better value for money in areas of the NHS. In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly we are actively involved in drawing up our STP, as directed by NHS England. The NHS has outlined this approach to ensure that health and care services are built around the needs of local populations. I believe that provides the best opportunity to integrate health and social care in a meaningful way, reduce the pressure on acute services and avoid unnecessary hospital admissions. I also believe that the community pharmacy is central to achieving that objective.

I am aware of the time, so I will just ask a few questions of the Minister. Can the Minister give more details about what support will be given to rural independent community pharmacies and those in deprived areas, many of which operate in Cornwall? Will the Minister comment on the community pharmacy forward view, and the Department’s response to the vision set out by community pharmacy—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order.

2.44 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Here we are again, debating more slash-and-burn cuts to vital public services. Generations and decades of investment are being eroded in just a few short years. What will be left?

I think we all accept that if we can make savings in the public sector, we should do so, because we should use the money to the best possible effect. But it is short-sighted to take money away from community services when the accepted logic is that those services save money in the long run. It beggars belief that we are debating this again.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): In my constituency, local pharmacies and GPs are working collaboratively to build an integrated health centre in Haydock. Does my hon. Friend agree that although the Government say they want to encourage such working, their actions, as usual, do not match their words, because they are cutting the funding that would make that long-term, sustainable investment worthwhile?

Jim McMahon: I share that view entirely. My preferred option would be to devolve that power with fair funding to local areas, so that they can decide. The Government have proved time and again that they do not understand or value the public services that our communities rely on.

Let me tell Members what it is like in Oldham. We have 57 community pharmacies, nine of which have 100-hour contracts and four of which offer delivery services. That is about 25 pharmacies per 100,000 residents. Ask the public how they perceive those pharmacies, and 93% say that those pharmacies are doing a good job, while 88% of people in Oldham use those pharmacies. They are respected, and they are used by the community. When asked, the main reason people gave for using those pharmacies was their proximity and location. People could get to those pharmacies to access the services that they needed.

The truth is that we do not need fewer pharmacies; we need more, because demand is going up. I am not the only one who says so. The local health and wellbeing board says so in a 90-page review of pharmaceutical support in Oldham. It says that we have enough pharmacies to meet current demand, but that demand is going up because people are living longer, because the population is increasing and because new homes are—as the Government want—being built in the area to support new families. That requires the infrastructure to be in place.

Many wards in the borough do not have pharmacies that are open at weekends, so it is not as though we have a gold-plated service. We are just about getting by. It is not as though pharmacists are twiddling their thumbs behind the counter waiting for somebody to walk through the door. The average number of prescriptions dispensed by those outlets is 7,000 a month. We really need to think about what we are doing, whether the money is in the best possible place and whether we are valuing the real saving that can be derived further down the line.

I am not the only one who says that pharmacies can help us to achieve savings. PwC, which is hardly a standard bearer for public services, has said that pharmacies in the community save £3 billion a year. Why? Because people do not have to go to the GP or present to A&E, and because prevention is far better than cure. That is exactly what community pharmacists are there to do.

I really worry about what we are going to do to the industry and to the profession—that community service—which people aspire to be part of. I can tell Members what community pharmacists are saying, because I have a letter from a local pharmacist who lives in the Werneth area of my constituency. Mr Khan studied hard through school, sixth-form college and university to set up his own pharmacy. He works very long hours; although he is funded to work 40 hours a week, he actually works 50 hours a week—10 hours a week free of charge to the NHS—because he believes in a community service. He provides a delivery service, which is not paid for by the NHS, where he takes prescriptions out to the public. For a lot of the people he meets, he might be the only person they see during the week. According to the estimates in the report that I referred to, 15,000 more people in my borough will be living alone by 2017. Loneliness and isolation are real issues and such community infrastructure is an important way of combating them.

I want to read out an important quote from the pharmacist I have mentioned. He said:

“Many of us, however, feel betrayed, angry and confused right now because the government who promised to make Pharmacy at the heart of the NHS; has ripped the very heart out of Pharmacy.”

It is not me or the Labour party saying that, but a pharmacist. They have studied hard and worked hard to set up their own business, and they work hard every day for their community, but they are being let down by this callous Government.

2.49 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I declare an interest, as my wife works as a community pharmacist just outside my constituency. It is probably fair to say that from my discussions with her and with my local pharmacists, I know the valuable work they do and the pressures on them, as well as the changes that they would like so that they can give a better service.

The Public Accounts Committee has had nine or 10 inquiries in the past year or so looking at the pressure on NHS finances and the various deficits in the system. It is therefore quite hard to stand up and say that the Government are completely wrong to try to
find some efficiency savings from the pharmacy budget, or that we should just ignore the £3 billion or so paid to pharmacies each year without trying to find some savings. If we are going to hit the efficiency target across the NHS of £22 billion during this Parliament, while having all the services we want, we will have to accept such savings in every area, although it is not going to be easy wherever they fall. I can therefore see the logic of why the Government need to look at the pharmacy budget.

I also accept the logic that although the system we have ended up with, in which we give each pharmacy a fixed establishment payment, may well have been suitable when we had a very controlled regime, under which a licence had to be got to open a new pharmacy, it probably did not fit well with the old 100-hour regime, under which there was a vast expansion in the number of pharmacies across the country. It is right to look at that system. It may also be right to look at the 100-hour pharmacies to see exactly what the rules for them should be.

I welcome the pharmacy access scheme, which is a very welcome improvement on what was originally suggested for this round of cuts. Two pharmacies in my constituency will benefit from it. I met both pharmacists when the cuts were first announced. Those pharmacies provide the only health provision in the villages they serve, so it is vital for them to be saved.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is a false economy to cut services, given that the knock-on effects on GP services and the NHS will cost more, and that it will do nothing to alleviate the problem of health inequalities in this country?

Nigel Mills: It would clearly be a false economy if it resulted in losing pharmacies in areas where we need them. Equally, we would have to say to GPs, “I’m sorry. We can’t take the money off the pharmacies. We are taking it off you instead.” That would make it harder for them to deliver the services that they want to deliver. I do not think there are any easy answers. The system is under so much financial pressure that we must find savings wherever we can.

I have a few areas on which I want the Minister to comment when he winds up. The first is the hub-and-spoke model. Such a model would have been a complete disaster for community pharmacies. If the system is to work, we need pharmacists who know and are trusted by their patients so that they can deliver to patients the extra services that they need. If we moved to a hub-and-spoke model, in which the pharmacy knows almost nothing about the patients—the drugs are just prepared in a factory somewhere and then turn up for the patient—we would not have the community advantages from the pharmacy network that we all want. I hope that that idea, which may have been raised by some management consultants, can safely be binned—where most such ideas are probably worth sending.

The second area is the provision of services by pharmacists. I know that my local pharmacies are very keen to deliver more value-added services. They see that as right for the NHS and in the best interests of their patients. As I found out five years ago, when we went through the clinical commissioning group reform, they are not quite so sure that local GPs are keen on commissioning new services from pharmacies, rather than carrying out those services and taking the revenue themselves. We know that there is pressure in the GP sector, so we can see the point of that.

We need to have a vision throughout the country about what core services should be commissioned from pharmacies. I think the word the Government use about the minor ailments scheme, which I generally support, is that we should “encourage” all CCGs to commission such a scheme. I hope we can do something a little stronger than encourage, and that we can have a broader list of services for CCGs to commission from pharmacies.

I have seen great work done on that in my constituency. Permission has been given for syringe driver services to be carried out by some pharmacies, rather than hospitals, so that they can be got to the patients needing them much more quickly and cheaply. Some pharmacies do warfarin testing, because it is much more convenient for patients to go to their local pharmacy than to have to trek to the nearest hospital or to their GP. Those services are very patchy and do not even cover a whole constituency, so I hope we will draw up a core list of services that can be done better by pharmacies and which will be used.

I will quickly touch on the third area, which is the variety of opening hours. Quite rightly, we are to start directing patients from the 111 service to their pharmacy rather than to out-of-hours doctors as the first port of call for emergency repeat prescriptions. However, there is an interesting mix in that some pharmacies open for 100 hours a week—perhaps opening at 6 am and closing at midnight—and other pharmacies open from 9 o’clock to 5 o’clock from Monday to Friday and may open for a couple of hours on Saturday morning. How will we commission all pharmacies to carry out such a service if some do not open out of hours? On the flipside, we still require many of them to open for 100 hours a week, even though it is not economic for them to do so during many of those hours. There is therefore scope for a review of the hours during which we expect pharmacies to open.

2.54 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were to walk along a busy shopping street in Bedminster in my Bristol South constituency today, you would pass seven pharmacies within a mile or so. However, if you were to walk through the Knowle West estate or Hartcliffe, which are two of the most deprived wards in the country, you would see many fewer pharmacies.

I have spent time in pharmacies in Filwood Broadway and Bedminster, and like most hon. Members, I have been contacted by pharmacists and constituents who are worried about the plans. The greatest fear in my constituency, which has a relatively high density of pharmacies, is its severe problem with GP recruitment. As hon. Members have said, we all know the valuable role that pharmacies play in our communities. This is not just about the damage to healthcare as a result of some of the cuts, but about the impact on our wider economy in some of our most deprived areas.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were to wander around my constituency in two years’ time, how many pharmacies—and, crucially, which ones—would still
exist? As hon. Members are aware, the NHS-wide process of sustainability and transformation planning is currently being undertaken with the aim, finally, of taking a strategic overview of the whole system. This is the first bottom-up, system-wide planning that has taken place since the disastrous Health and Social Care Act 2012. We are bringing back planning to the system, which is long overdue. This is also about saving a lot of money.

In that context, the delayed Government funding announcements on pharmacies, followed by rushed ones, are the opposite of the STP process. It shows an absence of planning, and a failure to include the vital role that the community pharmacy can play. Where is the sense, when communities need stability, in forcing through a cut of this magnitude at this time? The Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), said that earlier.

In my area, the local pharmacy committee is represented on the STP board. All the local players are working hard, collaboratively, in the best interests of patients, to find a solution to our local healthcare needs. However, as has been said by the chair of the LPC, Lisa Fisher, who runs a pharmacy at Whitchurch in my constituency, this measure is a “devastating blow”. It runs totally counter to the process that Ministers want to succeed.

The Bristol CCG reported earlier this year on the root cause of the waste of medicines, and made recommendations to address the problems in the system. The figures are eye-watering. It estimates that medicine waste amounts to £5.7 million a year in Bristol, and that we can save £2.8 million a year. It made 15 recommendations for such work, but none covers having fewer pharmacies in our community.

The Minister may stand in front of pharmacies and lament the way in which the market has produced clusters in some areas, but will a large supermarket chain housing a pharmacy decide the floor space is better utilised for a café, and will the pharmacy that does the most deliveries in areas of greatest health need and that offers the most self-care advice close? How does he know? He does not. Crucially, how will my constituents know, and how can they influence the service provided to them?

In Ministers’ minds, is any consideration being given to starting from community need, not from market forces at such a time? If they were putting forward a new model that was genuinely built on pharmacies forces at such a time? If they were putting forward a package, but a fig leaf. It is a missed opportunity, and that offers the most self-care advice close? How does he know? He does not. Crucially, how will my constituents know, and how can they influence the service provided to them?

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As a number of hon. Members have done, I have been to A&E and seen people who have not had an accident or do not appear to be an emergency, so it is right to look at how we push people towards GP services. However, there seems to be less discussion in public about encouraging people to look to their pharmacist, rather than to their GP, for healthy lifestyle advice, minor ailments care and routine support. The all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy heard some great evidence from the LloydsPharmacy group about its diabetes foot service and inhaler check service, which enable people to get the most out of their treatment and can make their medication far more effective. Those kinds of extra services make community pharmacies incredibly valuable.

Oliver Colville: Does my hon. Friend recognise that we need to make greater use of things such as opticians as well?

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Independent pharmacies in Sutton conduct medicine reviews, which we have heard about, and often deliver to their patients’ homes. They therefore see people in their own environment, rather than in a GP surgery. They get to see what is left in the bathroom cabinet, forgotten about or set aside. Ignoring or forgetting to take prescribed medicines causes such a lot of waste. There is an estimated £300 million a year that could go to other front-line services. By seeing the patient in their own environment, the pharmacist can make an assessment based on the patient’s everyday life, rather than just a snapshot, which might be affected by things such as white coat syndrome.

Consultation room services, such as sexual health, smoking cessation and minor ailment services, have to be a good thing for the NHS and should be encouraged. From what I have seen in pharmacies, there is still too much of a disconnect in the exchange of patient information between GPs and pharmacists. If advice and treatment are to work, they must be done in full knowledge of the patient’s background and medical history.

I understand the concerns that have driven the review and the changes that we are debating. The current funding system encourages pharmacy companies to open numerous low prescription volume sites, especially with the guaranteed fixed payment of £25,000 a year, regardless of size, quality or local demand. Some 40% of pharmacies are in clusters of two or more, with 20% being within 10 minutes’ walk of at least two others. That is reflected in Sutton. There are three in Worcester Park, four in north Cheam and six in and around Sutton High Street.

My concern is that any closures that result from these changes are more likely to come from the independent portion—those pharmacists who go beyond the corporate approach, often offering services at no cost or at a loss, because it is the right thing to do; those who prioritise the service that patients need, rather than shareholder value. Responding to customers on a personal basis...
allows independent pharmacists to consider savings such as generic substitution. We talk about a seven-day NHS, but pharmacists need to be set free to offer a high street NHS.

The Government’s changes recognise much of what pharmacists’ bodies have been raising. The changes seek to move pharmacists away from being reliant primarily on dispensing income, which is more vulnerable in the long term, towards services. Repeat prescriptions and those who come in via the 111 service will be directed to pharmacies, rather than out-of-hours GPs. For the first time, pharmacies will be paid for the quality of the services they provide, not just the volume. There is much to be welcomed, but I urge the Minister to keep the impact of the changes on independent pharmacies, which are often family run, under constant review.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend is speaking very well for the independent pharmacy sector. It is those pharmacies that we should be protecting the most, because they are the first triage that saves the NHS money down the line. They can save a lot of money for the general NHS drugs bill by knowing their patients well, knowing the GPs and suggesting something cheaper. I am not convinced that the Government have looked into that aspect closely enough.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I have spoken about generic substitution and some of the things LloydsPharmacy and family-run services are doing in the consultation room. Those things are to be welcomed, encouraged and boosted.

I urge the Minister, in the coming months and years, to keep the impact of the changes on independent, often family-run pharmacists under constant review, because I and many others in this place certainly will.

3.4 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I support the Opposition motion and pay tribute to the great campaigning leadership shown by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher) and the shadow Health Secretary in bringing this matter to public attention and opposing the £170 million of cuts, the 12% reduction in funding and the further 7% reduction next year, and the threat to shorten the working hours in pharmacies and to strip out jobs in local pharmacies, which will have an impact, particularly in high-poverty communities. We are having this debate on the day that the Resolution Foundation reports that tax cuts since 2010 have taken £32 billion out of the Exchequer, so this debate is about political choice. It is about where we put public funds and whether we support the impact on high-poverty communities that the Opposition believe these cuts to pharmacies will engender.

I will focus briefly on the situation in Stoke-on-Trent. My constituency has a very good Miltons chemist in Stoke and the Norfolk Street pharmacy in Hanley, which is a former pub that was converted into an excellent community pharmacy. Those pharmacies are very concerned about the impact of the proposed cuts. Earlier this week in the Chamber, the Secretary of State for Health acknowledged the stress on healthcare in Stoke-on-Trent. He is coming to the city to see the Royal Stoke hospital because the closure of Stafford hospital and the community hospitals at Longton, Cheadle and Bradwell, and the pressure on our GPs, are putting immense pressure on it.

Part of the answer has to be ensuring that we have primary preventive care, of which pharmacies are an essential component. Everything we have heard in this Chamber is about the enormous contribution they make and should make to healthcare provision, yet the trajectory of Government policy is to undermine that provision. We know that if people do not have access to pharmacies, they try to get appointments at the GP. We know that in disadvantaged communities, more and more people would seek to do that.

We have addressed the issue of clustering, with too many pharmacies being clustered together. However, we know from the Durham University report that this is a particular issue in high-poverty communities. As the shadow Health Secretary put it, pharmacies have a particular value in local communities in terms of the language skills they offer black and minority ethnic communities, their opening hours and the trust and confidence engendered by the professionals running these operations. To strip that out will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, wreak enormous costs down the line through the impact on healthcare.

I urge the Minister, who is financially astute, to understand that it will be a gross disservice if those who are hardest hit by these reforms are the family-run community pharmacies, while highly indebted, highly leveraged multinational pharmacies, whose taxes are not always located in the UK, somehow do not take the hit. Family pharmacies that contribute to the UK through their taxes and their community role should not be the victims of this change.

I agree with reform to the NHS. I do not have some Ken Loach fetishisation of the past. I believe in modernisation and reform. There was much that I agreed with in what the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said about reforms in pharmacies. However, we must ensure that this modernisation is built around progressive reform, particularly for low-income communities such as Stoke-on-Trent, and is not simply based on cost and political choice, which the Resolution Foundation has highlighted today.

3.8 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I will not go through the many arguments made by hon. Members, but the reason I do not support the Opposition motion is that I do not agree with their argument about funding. The current funding system for pharmacies in this country is not working. Pharmacies have grown organically in a haphazard way, not necessarily meeting the needs of patients or the changing demands of healthcare.

I find it extraordinary that Opposition Members are satisfied that big national companies such as Sainsbury’s, Boots and Asda, many of which make profits of £1 billion a year, are being funded with NHS money, which goes to each and every one of their branches. That is completely unacceptable. [Interruption.] I will not give way because there is not enough time. I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the money that is saved through these changes must go to community pharmacies and away from big business.
I have severe concerns about the proposals on the table, however, and I have met the Minister to raise them. The first is my fear that the role of the pharmacist is not properly understood. As a practising nurse, I see at first hand every day the role that pharmacists play in safeguarding patients. Doctors often make out prescriptions that are wrong or do not take into account current medications a patient is on. That is where the pharmacist comes in. Thinking that pharmacists simply stand at a counter, pick a box off a shelf and put a sticker on it is misguided; they do a huge amount more.

Another concern is the proposal or recommendation that we move towards either GP dispensing or GP practices housing pharmacists. I know from talking to my GP practices that they are bursting at the seams. It is not as simple as installing a pharmacist at a practice; pharmacists need storage space for their medication, temperature-controlled rooms and space to make up that medication. I know that my GP practices do not have that space right now. I also have concerns about GPs' taking on dispensing; as I have said, pharmacists have a crucial role in safeguarding patients. Who will pick up those mistakes, or look at patient medication or drug interaction if no pharmacist is there?

My biggest concern—again, this point was made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire—is that this is a huge missed opportunity. We are doing things the wrong way round. We should be looking at the system and at patients’ needs. We should follow the excellent model currently running in Scotland and learn from it, rather than thinking, “We need to save money. How can we best do that?”

As many Members have mentioned, there is some obvious stuff that pharmacists are doing now.

**Jim McMahon:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Maria Caulfield:** I will not—as I have said, time is short.

Right now, pharmacists are running clinics for asthma, blood pressure and thyroid issues. But we are not seeing what pharmacists could do. They are highly experienced and highly qualified. They should have registers of patients and be referring people to clinicians and hospitals themselves. They should be a second point of primary medical care. I cannot support the Opposition, because they are wrong that this is only about saving money. It is much bigger than that, and should be an opportunity to improve primary care overall.

3.11 pm

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): My central argument is that this is a cut to preventive healthcare and as such is completely irrational, makes no sense and will be a false economy. It will end up with fewer people accessing pharmacies than at the moment, resulting in more pressure on GPs and A&E departments.

I have made the point to the Government before that, by all means, they should do more to get more bang for their buck, to ensure that money is working effectively and that people get good preventive care in their communities, but they should not cut the budget for preventive care. In response to my earlier intervention, the Minister said that the cut was compensated for by the extra investment in GP practices, but that is misleading because the total investment in GP practices for pharmacies will be £112 million between now and 2020, yet in one year, by 2017-18, this budget will be down by £208 million. It is a massive cut to preventive care. It makes no sense at all and is the precise opposite of what the Government claim they seek to do on shifting resources within the NHS.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): When I surveyed pharmacists in my community, they told me, among other things, that in what is probably England’s most rural county, more than 80% of pharmacies do not qualify for the rural pharmacy access scheme, and for those that do, that money will be blown away by the larger cuts. Given that staff are already being laid off, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the greatest areas of damage will be to small, rural pharmacies in areas such as ours?

**Norman Lamb:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that point; it was the second one that I was going to make. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made clear earlier, the impact will be arbitrary, and disadvantaged communities and rural areas will feel it most. Only four of the 15 pharmacists in my community will benefit from the pharmacy access scheme; all the others will not, yet they are needed by their local community.

**Greg Mulholland:** There were some outrageous comments earlier suggesting that some of those smaller pharmacies are simply there for dispensing, when they have trained pharmacists helping people. As well as the important village and rural pharmacies—I have village pharmacies in Pool and Bramhope that do excellent work—communities in suburbs rely on smaller pharmacies; those communities will lose that service.

**Norman Lamb:** Absolutely. It is the arbitrary impact of the cut that concerns me so much.

The other aspect of that arbitrariness is—again, a point made by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire—that the big boys will be fine. They will survive. Surely, the Government should be addressing the excess profits of those organisations, rather than putting in danger—as their own impact assessment says—the small independent pharmacies and small chains. It is completely irrational and makes no sense.

The final issue I want to raise is that, instead of going about cutting preventive care, protecting the big boys and putting small pharmacies at risk, the Government ought to be undertaking a major programme to increase what pharmacies do. We heard earlier about what is happening in Scotland; that is the approach that should be taken. There should be more work on smoking cessation, on sexual health, on substance misuse and on screening and immunisation, and more should be done to promote independent living, encourage healthy lifestyles and support people in their self-care.

The Government’s approach makes no sense. The bottom line is that, as the Government scrape around trying to find enough resources to prop up the NHS, which, as we know, is expecting to receive a reducing percentage of our national income between now and 2020, they are making stupid decisions such as cutting spending on health education, on public health and on community pharmacies. The Government are in a complete mess. We need extra resources for the NHS and a new long-term settlement. The sooner the Government recognise that, the better.
3.16 pm

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): As many hon. Members have already described, our community pharmacies play a vital role in all our communities. When my mum was seriously ill and housebound, her local pharmacist and all his staff were amazing. Nothing was too much trouble, whether it was changing her medicines at the last minute and delivering them to her home, or offering to deliver things like toothpaste and loo rolls at the same time. That is what community pharmacists are all about—being at the centre of the community, wherever they are.

Being part of the local community is even more important in rural areas, especially for the elderly who are often housebound, or have limited access to cars and so rely on public transport. That is why I welcome the pharmacy access scheme that the Minister has put in place. It should safeguard those pharmacies that are more than a mile apart and, more importantly, protect their patients. The Minister has gone further by adding in areas with high health needs. That must be welcomed, but I would like more specific information to help to reassure pharmacies in my constituency.

We all know that pharmacists can and want to do more. It is imperative that every community pharmacy across the country plays its part in providing first-class healthcare outside the hospital setting. Pharmacists are highly trained professionals with a wealth of knowledge that must be used to its fullest. As we hear time and again, our GPs are under a great deal of pressure. Our pharmacists are a group of professionals who can and do shoulder some of that workload. To name just a few of the services they can provide, they can give flu jabs, test cholesterol, monitor warfarin and check blood pressure. There is no reason why they cannot carry out other simple tests, such as point of care C-reactive protein tests to distinguish between viral and bacterial infections, and so play their role in combating antimicrobial resistance.

I have a request for the Minister. He should be more ambitious with the timescale for roll-out of the minor ailments service. We have already heard from the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about just how successful that service is in Scotland. We must combat any barriers that the CCGs put forward, as my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) suggested.

The 18% increase in the number of pharmacies over the past 10 years has in many instances led to clusters of three or more pharmacies within just one location. Each gets a guaranteed payment of £25,000 every year regardless of the quality of service they offer, the number of prescriptions they process or whether increased capacity in the area was needed when they actually opened. I am sure many of my constituents will think that is wrong and wonder whether it is the right way to spend taxpayers’ money.

**Dr Philippa Whitford**: Does the hon. Lady recognise that pharmacies were allowed to open simply because they were willing to be open for 100 hours? The growth was random, and my concern is that this cut is random. Planning is the issue.

**Maggie Throup**: I completely agree that growth has not been controlled. We need to go back a number of years to learn from what happened and ensure it does not happen again. We also need to ensure that we put the right reforms in place now.

It is important that the £25,000, just for opening the doors, is not offered to other retail stores on the high street. It is vital we get the best possible deal for the taxpayer and the patient. The patient must be at the heart of everything. We must also remember that every pound saved by these changes will be invested back into the NHS. We need to get the important message out that, whether it is for cancer treatment or other life-saving treatment, every penny counts.

If the proposed reforms reward quality, pay pharmacists for their value added services and fully embed community pharmacists into the urgent care pathway, they will be welcome. However, we need to ensure they do what they are intended to do, and that we do not, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, end up with what we have now.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker** (Natascha Engel): I give advance notice that, after the next speech, we will have to drop the time limit for speeches to three minutes. Even then, things will be quite tight if Members use all their intervention time.

3.21 pm

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): In my constituency, there are 22 pharmacies. Some 60% are not eligible for the pharmacy access scheme, which, I understand, is based on distance between pharmacies and does not take into consideration deprivation and other health issues. It is predicted that of the 22, six will close. In the Durham, Darlington and Tees area, there are 271 pharmacies, issuing 2.5 million prescriptions a month and covering a population of 1.2 million. The Government want to take £170 million out of community pharmacies, which is equivalent to £14,500 a pharmacy. That is a total of a third of a million pounds out of community pharmacies in my constituency or £4 million across the Durham, Darlington and Tees area.

A new pharmacy integration fund has also been announced. This was originally allocated £300 million over five years. I now believe that the figure will be £42 million over two years. The Government have admitted that these proposals in total will lead to the closure of 3,000 community pharmacies. Pharmacy closures will only place further strain on those pharmacies that remain open. More people will use GP surgeries and A&E departments when they need not do so. Pharmacies could be forced to scale back services, while being under increased pressure.

The proposal to encourage people to contact the 111 service for emergency referrals on repeat prescriptions, which will then be referred to a chemist, was described by one pharmacy in Trimdon in my constituency as “ludicrous” because

“It will place an extra burden on the 111 service, and ignores the fact most people who require an emergency supply of their regular medication will go to their local pharmacy who have their records, and who will bend over backwards to help. In the case of people from out of the area needing an emergency supply of regular medication in Trimdon this only happens around three or four times a year. Ultimately, the 111 service is designed to help people who do not know what is wrong with them, not to assist those who know exactly what is wrong with them and are already being treated for it.”
The Government’s impact assessment states: “there is no reliable way of estimating the number of pharmacies that may close as a result of this policy”. However, the figure of 3,000 has been mentioned and the question then arises: is that figure a minimum? Pharmacies offer important services to their local communities, the elderly, the disabled and those with long-term illness, and offer vital support to overstretched GPs and hospitals. I looked at the statistics: there are 11,700 community pharmacies and 1.6 million people visit a pharmacy every day. Some 79% of people have visited a pharmacy at least once in the last 12 months, with 75% of adults visiting the same pharmacy, and 2.7 million items are dispensed every day.

Pharmacies are increasingly seen as a referral mechanism to GPs for patients with possible early symptoms of cancer. Two in five of the pharmacies in my constituency may be protected—I say “may be”—but three out of the five will not be. They face an unsettled and uncertain future in an area with some of the worst health, deprivation and disability statistics in the country. More importantly, the tens of thousands of my constituents who use pharmacies will be affected the most. They will feel that uncertainty the most and will feel unsettled the most. With all that in mind, only this Government would introduce a strategy to close the pharmacies on which so many of my constituents rely.

3.25 pm

**Oliver Colvile** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): The first time I became involved in this area of policy was in the 1990s. I was working commercially for pharmacies on the Community Pharmacy Action Group resale price maintenance campaign. One of my very great friends who was very much involved in that campaign, Sharon Buckle, is on the English Pharmacy Board and has been incredibly helpful in providing me with advice. I am vice-chair of the all-party pharmacy group and the Government’s pharmacy champion, which is a great honour and privilege.

My concern is that we seem to be discussing buildings and pharmacies, rather than talking about how we can protect pharmacists. I understand that the Department of Health and Keith Ridge, the chief pharmaceutical officer, are very keen to ensure the pharmacists, the people who serve and have the expertise, are looked after, rather than the buildings. That is very important. We need to ensure there is significantly better integration between the NHS and pharmacies, including on summary care records, when the Government will deliver on decriminalisation for dispensing errors and so on.

Finally, if the likes of Boots will be expected to release their leases, could they kindly have a condition that those leases cannot be re-let to other pharmacies? What we do not need is to end up replacing one form of pharmacy with another. If that is not possible, it is very important that those leases are given to independent community pharmacies rather than the big boys.

I represent a constituency with real deprivation. There is a 11-year gap in life expectancy between one part of my constituency and another. I therefore know at first hand what the issues are. We need to ensure that pharmacies work more closely together, so they can work together on delivering medicines.

3.28 pm

**Graham Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): As many colleagues have pointed out, not just today, but in previous Westminster Hall and other debates, cuts of £170 million to pharmacy funding will decimate NHS primary care. It could force up to 3,000 pharmacies to close their doors to the public. In Lancashire alone, 387 pharmacies are at risk. I am deeply concerned about that. It will put an intolerable amount of pressure on front-line NHS services. When we look at the evidence, we find that 25% of the 2 million people who normally seek advice from their community pharmacy would visit their GP instead if they could not get it from their pharmacy. Other NHS services, which are already facing sustained attack from the Health Secretary, will become even more stretched.

I am particularly concerned about the impact on innovative and pioneering models of primary care that are provided through pharmacies. My local pharmacy in Baxenden, for example, is a healthy living pharmacy, ensuring that its provision is localised and preventive. I believe that all pharmacies should look to achieve such added value. This tiered commissioning framework, of which healthy living pharmacies are part, has been praised by the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee for its successes in reducing smoking, alcoholism and obesity. The majority of users do not have to go elsewhere for their health advice; they can use their local pharmacy instead of their local GP. Indeed, 70% of people who visit pharmacies do not regularly access other healthcare services. The healthy living pharmacy framework should be rolled out across Lancashire and should be part of the primary care review.

**Jim McMahon** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the pharmacy access scheme is more about the Tories buying off their Back Benchers than delivering the services that he mentions?

**Graham Jones**: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, which was also made by our Front-Bench spokesperson, who rightly observed that most of the cuts will fall in deprived areas, while the exemptions will be mostly in wealthy areas. The Government must address why they favour those who have the fewest health issues and are almost punishing those who face the greatest health challenges. The cuts will do precisely the opposite of what the Minister claims. The value-added local pharmacies in those areas will be undermined completely by the cuts. As a result, community centre provision in some of the most deprived areas might well be eroded, reduced or lost altogether. The personal relationship between patient and pharmacist will be lost, which brings me to my final point.

If these cuts go ahead, what will be the future of primary care? My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) has stated on several occasions that an Amazon model of delivery could take the place of community-centred pharmacies. Remote warehouses with box shifters driven by profit are proliferating. They are unable to provide a localised service and are unwilling to carry out primary care. They could be a dangerous replacement for community pharmacies, and that is on top of the cuts that the Government are making. This is a double whammy. Instead of promoting a primary care model that includes pharmacies at the centre, we are undermining it with these cuts.
Pharmacies in my constituency have expressed concern about this trend. They inform me that some of the warehouse pharmacies have already used patients' personal data for marketing purposes. I have seen evidence from a company called Pharmacy4U—a mail order company—of feigned official NHS letters targeting repeat prescription users, many of whom were vulnerable. In reality, these letters were switch approval forms. This is a worrying sign of things to come if the cuts go ahead. I urge the Government to think again.

3.32 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Last year, when the Government put out to consultation the proposed cuts to pharmacies, I went out to speak to many of the small pharmacists in my constituency—in Kearsley, Over Hulton, Little Lever, Farnworth, Deane and Daubhill. What they all said—most are individually owned pharmacies—is that they do a number of things for which they are not paid. Completing all the pill boxes for the elderly and long-term unwell people is one example. We know that there are increasing numbers of old people, so there are a tremendous number of boxes to prepare every day and every week, yet they get paid nothing for doing that. People come to them to ask about various ailments and health issues, and the pharmacists often recommend non-prescription medications, thus saving enormous amounts of GPs' time and, of course, helping to prevent people from going to A&E. On the one hand, we might save a few hundred million pounds from the proposals, but on the other, expenses for GPs, A&E and hospitals will go up, so it is a completely false economy.

Such pharmacies also deliver the medication to many long-term unwell and elderly people. I am told by my pharmacists that they are often the only people whom such people ever see and talk to. Often people talk to their pharmacist about other health issues, and other minor ailments are dealt with. Pharmacists will contact the GPs or alert somebody in their surgeries to what is happening. The pharmacists are providing all these services, but they will not be able to do any of it if they face cuts, because they will not have the necessary financial resources.

Pharmacies provide a lot of advice, as I mentioned. The only people who will benefit from these cuts will be the big companies such as Boots and others, because they can buy their medication at wholesale prices. The NHS may pay them £20 per medication, but they have probably been able to buy that medication for £5, thus benefiting by £15. A small pharmacy will probably pay £20 and be paid £20, so it will make hardly any profits. As a result, most of the small pharmacies that are responsive to local needs will be forced to stop operating, and customers will have to travel further to find alternatives. It is possible that the only remaining pharmacies will be those owned by Boots and other big companies. I ask the Government to think again about their policy, because it will not save money, and it will do a disservice to people.

I thank the pharmacists in my constituency for all their work. Let me make a personal declaration. My mother, who is 84, lives near one of the nicest pharmacists in the area, who regularly provides the many different types of medication that she takes and who looks after her. He is not an exception, however; many other pharmacists do the same for people.

3.35 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Let me begin by thanking Greg Burke of County Durham & Darlington local pharmaceutical committee for his valiant efforts in bringing the issue of cuts in community pharmacies to my attention. I also thank him for arranging my visit to Bowburn pharmacy, where I met Phyllis Whitburn, Nigel Nimmo, Len Britten and Hieu Truong Van. The visit reinforced my view that community pharmacies are vital to our communities, and especially to those in the ex-mining villages in my constituency, where they often provide a lifeline. The Minister has said that many pharmacies are within a 10-minute walk of two or more others, but that is simply not the case in many parts of my constituency.

I had hoped that all the lobbying that took place earlier this year, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), would remind the Government of the excellent services that community pharmacies offer and how much money they ultimately save the NHS, and that that might persuade them to abandon the cuts agenda. It was therefore with great sadness that I listened to the Minister’s statement on 20 October, in which he outlined the cuts. No rationale for them was presented, and it seems odd that the Government have instigated them without waiting for the outcome of either the King’s Fund review or the Royal Pharmaceutical Society’s review of community pharmacy services.

Let me also draw the Minister’s attention to the large body of research on community pharmacies that has been carried out by Durham University. It has established that they are very well placed to address health inequalities, that they are most prevalent and most used in the most disadvantaged areas, and, indeed, that 100% of people in most deprived areas could have access to one. It is very odd that the Government are cutting services that benefit those areas. The same point has also been made by the Local Government Association, the Pharmacist’s Defence Association and others. According to the LGA, the closure of community pharmacies could leave many isolated and vulnerable residents struggling to gain access to pharmacies, particularly in deprived and rural areas. The LGA has also drawn attention to the knock-on effect on local government services, which are suffering cuts as well.

The Minister ought to take up some of the points made in the PDA briefing that was sent to all of us before the debate. The Government should be thinking about regulating the wholesale margins, reviewing the margins of some of the larger companies, and reviewing the way in which community pharmacies and the pharmaceutical wholesale industry are organised. They should not be making these cuts in community pharmacy services.

3.38 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): We in Scotland recognise just how important community pharmacies are. They are part of the fabric of our local communities, providing crucial access to the NHS and
support for some of our most vulnerable people. In fact, the community pharmacy model that has been adopted in Scotland has been recognised by the Health Minister as one to aspire to, which makes the mess that the UK Government have made of community pharmacies all the more difficult to understand.

Community pharmacies in Scotland not only have a vital role in dispensing medicines, but provide other important services. Simply popping in to have their blood pressure checked can give people an early warning of other possible health concerns. The SNP in Scotland has a coherent vision for the pharmaceutical sector, and we want pharmacists to play a crucial role in the wider health team. Ensuring that pharmacists, including those who work in community pharmacies—as well as Community Pharmacy Scotland—are consulted is a key priority for the Scottish Government.

Unlike the UK Government, we would be looking to ensure that any decisions that would have a major impact on the industry were for the benefit of the industry as well as the patients. By contrast, the UK Government appear determined to alienate as many medical professionals as possible. Much of the Government’s argument for these cuts appears to be based on their objection to “clusters” of community pharmacies. Rather than take a planned approach to the spread of services and the levels of provision needed in specific areas, their solution seems to be to slash the funding and see who stays afloat.

When vital services are provided on a commercial model, it is disadvantaged communities that suffer the most. To take such an attitude to an entire industry at the same time as trying to get it on board with providing more of the services that free up time in GP surgeries and A&E departments suggests that an extremely short-term view is being taken to the provision of care. It also suggests a complete disregard to savings in the NHS in the long term.

It would seem from the rhetoric used by the Government on this issue that they know community pharmacies are part of the solution to England’s creaking health service, but they just cannot stop themselves treating them like they are part of the problem.

3.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This issue is about a very important cog in the grand scheme of our health service. Some might look at pharmacies as small businesses who get most of their custom from the NHS, but that is not the case. The reason why they are funded is that they are vital organs in the body of the NHS. Local community pharmacies take some of the pressure from GP surgeries. Some 14.2 million people had to wait over a week to see their GP in 2015; without the minor injuries service, how many more people would be waiting that long? How much of the doctor’s time would be taken up with issues that could be handled by a pharmacist?

There are 549 registered pharmacies in Northern Ireland and 2,300 pharmacists. They dispense both medication and advice, and that advice is important. The widespread locations of community pharmacies across Northern Ireland, where people live, shop and work, means that they are readily accessible to the public. Each year community pharmacies in Northern Ireland safely dispense approximately 40 million prescription items, including through the repeat dispensing service. They provide advice to help us look after and care for ourselves and help patients take their medicines more effectively by improving patient knowledge and adherence and use of their medicines. This service has initially been commissioned for patients living with asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and diabetes, and it is hoped that it will be extended to other long-term conditions in the future. So the role of pharmacies can be even greater than it is at present.

The minor ailments service supports the use of the community pharmacy as the first point of call for health advice. Pharmacists can use their professional skills to provide advice and if necessary recommend appropriate treatment or refer to another healthcare professional. Other services include the smoking cessation service, which supports nearly 70% of quit attempts every year.

For constituencies such as Strangford which contain rural areas where GP surgeries are few and far between, the provision of a pharmacy is essential. If every mother with a young child takes an appointment with the doctor because the child has a cold and they are rightly worried, our surgeries, which prioritise child appointments, would never have time to check the lady with a small lump under her arm or the man who has had a problem with toiletting needs, both of whom are too embarrassed to push for an appointment when everyone is too busy.

These cuts are too harsh. We need community pharmacists to play their vital role in order to allow GPs to focus on what they need to do. I say yes, make savings; yes, trim the fat if there is any; but do not ask for cuts that can only be achieved by cutting vital services. I support the Labour motion.

3.44 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is my pleasure to respond to this interesting debate. I was not feeling very well today so on my way here I called at my community pharmacy, and I am feeling much better now. This is a very important subject. I wish first to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (James Duddridge) for his sterling work in standing up for community pharmacy, and to the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), for ensuring that the contribution of pharmacy is always recognised.

I have to say that this subject is very dear to my heart. I worked with my husband, who is a pharmacist in community pharmacy, for 24 years. I must make it clear that I no longer own a community pharmacy, but I do have a clear understanding of the contribution that community pharmacies make to patients, communities and the wider NHS. Many members have spoken powerfully today about the pharmacies in their constituencies and how much they mean to the people they serve. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Hyndburn (Graham Jones), for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Bristol South (Karim Sadiq), for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Tristram Hunt), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods).

Make no mistake, community pharmacy is for many the gateway to the NHS, providing far more than prescriptions and paracetamol. As my hon. Friend the
Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) pointed out, it is a lifeline for many people. The Minister spoke last week about the need to move to a focus on quality and not just on the volume of scripts dispensed. He also spoke of the desirability of community pharmacies becoming an integrated part of the primary care team. I say to him that that has been happening for years. The fact that he does not know this is in itself proof that he needs to take his plans back to the drawing board.

The typical community pharmacy, whether it serves a rural or an urban population, provides a wide range of services to support the sick, the elderly and the disabled, together with a host of initiatives to promote health and wellbeing in the community. Community pharmacies have close working relationships with other members of the primary care teams, including GPs. Of all those health professionals, the community pharmacist, who employs a no-appointment-necessary approach, is the most accessible and often provides the only continuity of care in a health service that is struggling to recruit and retain staff.

On the subject of NHS staff, the promise of more than 1,000 additional pharmacists in GPs’ surgeries is a red herring. It is a separate issue and will do nothing to mitigate the loss of local community pharmacies. The Minister spoke last week of the need for pharmacists to move to a more clinical approach to healthcare. Again I say to him that that has been happening for years. All community pharmacies have consulting areas where patients can speak privately. They also provide a perfect space for the provision of a variety of important services. There is an ever-expanding list of services which a number of Members have described in their speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) mentioned the fact that pharmacists often go above and beyond the call of duty, sometimes delivering prescriptions at 8.30 in the evening. I well recognise that situation. The list is limited only by the Government’s unwillingness to engage and the clinical commissioning groups’ lack of funding to commission services.

Let me make it clear that community pharmacies, far from being a costly drain on NHS resources, actually save the NHS money through a variety of schemes, some of which have been mentioned today. The minor ailments service is already available in some areas, and I welcome the Minister’s suggestion that it will have a full roll-out. Medication use reviews carried out in the pharmacy often identify medicines that are routinely ordered but are no longer taken, and wasteful stockpiling of such items can therefore be avoided. In addition to the specific services, every prescription item dispensed presents the opportunity for a productive health intervention. Given that the average community pharmacy dispenses thousands of prescriptions each month, the potential impact is enormous and the professional advice of the pharmacist is undoubtedly invaluable in the promotion of health and wellbeing. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) rightly identified the prevention work that pharmacists do, and mentioned the fact that the promotion of health and wellbeing can reduce demand on the NHS overall.

Despite statements to the contrary, community pharmacies have been making substantial efficiency savings in recent years. The vice-chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile), mentioned a 40% increase in funding over the past 10 years, but he omitted to mention that prescription numbers have increased by 50% during the same period and that pharmacy funding has been static for the past two years.

Under the Government’s current plans, pharmacies would have to implement a year’s worth of cuts in four months with only six weeks’ notice. As someone with considerable experience of community pharmacy, I know that the plans will force the closure of many pharmacies and a service reduction in others. I do not know how many will close and neither does the Minister. The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) suggested that the number could be as high as 3,000, and I can assure the Minister it will not be the large pharmacy chains that close but the small independents, the owners of many of which have put their heart and soul into providing an excellent service to the community.

Those that do not close will reduce services. An NPA survey of 250 pharmacies found that 76% are likely to reduce services from April 2017 if the cuts go ahead. The assessment of the financial impact of the closures is flawed and provides no evidence to support the Department of Health’s claim that access to services will not be compromised. It is clear that community pharmacies satisfy an ever-growing demand for services. When they close, that demand will not just disappear. Where will all the patients go? Some will pack out their GP surgery and others will head straight to A&E. The NHS is already in the throes of a staffing and funding crisis. Forcing community pharmacies to cut back services and close down is short-sighted in the extreme and could be catastrophic in the long term.

The Minister has frowned on the growth of pharmacy clusters, but he really needs to understand that clusters have grown, often in the most deprived areas, in response to considerable demand. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West outlined examples of such areas of deprivation. Is the Minister really suggesting that forcing the closure of such pharmacies is the most effective way to reduce demand for healthcare in deprived communities? The Minister has got this wrong. The proposals on the table are short-sighted and will do more harm than good. They will have a negative impact on patient care and will force extra demand on already stretched GP surgeries and hospitals. The proposals will not save money. They will not reduce the number of patients with long-term conditions or the number of medicines they require.

It is right to review the situation. I agree with the Government Members who said that it is right to examine the funding issues, but instead of forcing through damaging changes to a service that the Government clearly do not understand, I ask the Minister to listen to pharmacists and sit down with them to discuss how pharmacies can help to ease the burden on the wider NHS in a planned and cost-effective way. I ask the Minister to listen to his Conservative colleagues who spoke against these simplistic cuts, which have not been properly planned. I ask him to recognise that the access scheme will do little to protect the long-term future of urban or rural community pharmacies.

The Government have shown time and again an unwillingness to listen to professionals. I urge the Minister to listen to community pharmacists, to the pleas of...
Members and to people across the country, and to rethink the funding cut. I ask him to sit down with pharmacists and their representatives and work with them to develop and extend services that will take the burden off GPs and off the NHS. I ask that he do so now before he makes a decision that will devastate a whole sector and bring even more pressure to bear on our overstretched health service. I ask Members to support the motion.

3.53 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper). I was interested to learn of her personal experience in the sector. She gave a well-informed speech that was in stark contrast to that of her boss, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth). She was generous to contributions from Opposition Members, but it is only fair to say that Members on both sides of the House expressed considerable confusion, mostly among Opposition Members, about what the proposals deliver. The average pharmacy will see a reduction in taxpayer subsidy of £16,000 a year. The largest element of that is a reduction in the establishment payment, which is a fixed payment of between £23,000 and £25,000 that most pharmacies receive just for being there. It will be reduced by 20% from 1 December, which equates to a reduction of just over £400 per month, or £100 a week. From April, it will decrease by a further £400 per month, to £200 a week. Those are not huge reductions for private businesses. This element is a 40% reduction in the only fixed taxpayer subsidy that I am aware of that is paid to private businesses up and down retail high streets in England.

Meanwhile, pharmacies will still receive £1.13 for every prescription item they dispense, with the average pharmacy dispensing 87,000 items a year, as was said by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), who is, sadly, not in her place.

Luciana Berger: I am here.

Mr Dunne: Oh, she is—I apologise. We are also introducing a new quality payment scheme worth up to £6,400 a year, so that the amount of NHS funding community pharmacies will be receiving will remain very significant.

In addition to payments from the NHS, pharmacies can earn extra income from a range of sources other than dispensing fees. About half the clinical commissioning groups in England already commission minor ailment services from pharmacies. These services include: flu vaccinations, which are topical today; stop-smoking schemes, which were topical last month, in Stoptober; and emergency hormonal contraception. All of those provide an additional source of income for community pharmacies. I believe the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) referred to healthy living pharmacies, and they will now qualify for this new quality payment, whereas they have not in the past—I hope he will welcome that. The Local Government Association’s briefing ahead of this debate echoed that fact, saying that “there are significant opportunities for councils to commission public health services from community pharmacies as a key element of their health improvement strategies.”

In addition to those two alternative sources from NHS and non-NHS public bodies, in many cases pharmacies get a whole section of private sector income from non-publicly funded elements. That has not been referred to at all, but it is a significant element in the profitability of many pharmacies.

The Government’s vision in these reforms is to bring pharmacy into the heart of the NHS. The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Leicester South, gave what appears, from his early outings at the Dispatch Box, to be becoming a trademark speech in his new role, seeking to scare the public about the proposals without demonstrating a genuine understanding of how community pharmacies are funded or owned, or what is proposed by the measures. Since 2005-06, there has been an 18% increase in the number of pharmacies, so that today some 1,800 more operate in England than did so 10 years ago. Next year, pharmacies in England will receive £2.6 billion in funding from the NHS. NHS England supports the developments that we are proposing. The suggestion is that we will decimate NHS services because we will push a large number of people out of community pharmacies to their GP, but that is not the belief of NHS England. This is not about pharmacy closures—the point made by almost every Opposition Member who spoke—but about securing better value from the funding that we provide, modernising the way in which we do it so that pharmacies are not the only sector in the country that receives direct taxpayer subsidy for opening premises on the high street, and encouraging them, through increasing payments in the future, to provide more services to help patients in every community.

Community pharmacies are already much more than the place to which we go to get our medicines. They are an essential front-line service, providing care direct to patients and increasingly advising on a wide range of public health issues, for which, as I have indicated, they are paid separately from their dispensing fees. In doing so, they can relieve, and are relieving, pressures on other parts of the NHS.

Our package of reforms are about advancing that agenda, by rewarding quality for the first time, and moving to an enhanced role for the community pharmacy network in providing value-added services, as well as dispensing prescriptions. Yes, it does include making efficiencies in the way that these pharmacies are funded—I am talking about a reduction of £200 a week from next April—but those savings can be made within community pharmacies without compromising the quality of services or the public’s access to them. A key element of our proposals is that we will protect those pharmacies on which communities depend the most through the pharmacy access scheme, which has been supported by many hon. Members. A review of eligibility will assess the impact on those pharmacies in 20% of the most deprived areas, close to the one-mile test. That review opened yesterday and lasts for six weeks.
The hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) referred to the pharmacy access scheme. He admitted that, by his calculation, 40% of the pharmacies in his constituency will benefit from the scheme. I can update him on that. Nine out of the 20 pharmacies—or 45%—in his constituency will benefit. Indeed, his constituency will be one of the biggest beneficiaries of this scheme.

In summary, the reforms are what the NHS needs and what patients and taxpayers expect. I am confident that we will see a community pharmacy sector that is more efficient and better integrated with the rest of the healthcare system and delivering better services for patients as a result. I urge colleagues to support the amendment to this motion.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 211, Noes 305.

Division No. 75] [4.2 pm

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Question accordingly negatived.

**Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)).**

That the proposed words be there added.

**Question agreed to.**

**Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.**

Resolved.

That this House notes that community pharmacies are valued assets that offer face-to-face healthcare advice which relieves pressure on other NHS services; welcomes the Government’s proposals to further integrate community pharmacy into the NHS, including through the Pharmacy Integration Fund, and make better use of pharmacists’ clinical expertise, including investing £112 million to deliver a further 1,500 pharmacists in general practice by 2020; supports the need to reform the funding system of a Pharmacy Access Scheme which will ensure all patients in all parts of the country continue to enjoy good access to a local community pharmacy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

**Police Officer Safety**

4.20 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern the estimated 23,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales each year; and calls on the Government to implement statutory guidance on sentencing uniformly across the country which reflects the seriousness of the issue, to accurately record the number of assaults on police officers in England and Wales and, noting the fall in numbers of police officers by 20,000 since 2010, to ensure that police officer numbers and funding are not cut further.

The Opposition have called for this debate because the question of assaults on the police is an important matter that has received too little attention, and we are happy to begin to correct that. For too long, police victims of violence have felt like second-class victims, but there is no more important duty than their duty to protect our citizens, and there is a social contract between the public and police officers, which can be summarised as follows: society as a whole confers on policemen the unique powers of detection, prevention, arrest and detention in order to uphold the rule of law and all our rights; in return, police officers are entitled to all reasonable co-operation from the public, free from violence and the threat of violence. Any assault on any police officer is a breach of that social contract and an injury to all of us.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend surprised to learn that, in relatively peaceful Devon and Cornwall, there were 267 assaults on the police in the last year, more than doubling the associated costs in one year? Does she agree that one of the reasons that the police and other services are so vulnerable is that, because of cuts, they are increasingly operating on their own and not in pairs?

Ms Abbott: I thank my right hon. Friend for his important intervention. I agree with him and will come to cuts in police numbers later.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that another problem is that we are simply not robust enough in collecting data on the number of assaults on police, and that we need to do that in order to find a solution?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend will not be surprised to hear that I will come to the question of data later.

I must acknowledge the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who raised this issue in an earlier debate and has arranged for representatives of the Police Federation to be here today.

Sadly, the police are not the only group of dedicated public service workers who are coming under physical attack. Violence against NHS staff has rocketed in the past five years, with 186 attacks on doctors, nurses and paramedics every day.
Robert Fello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Fire crews, which attend emergencies and save people’s lives, are also coming under attack. It is outrageous that our police, fire and emergency ambulance services, which are all on the frontline, are being discussed not because of the positive work that they do, but because people think that it is fair game to attack them.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend must be clairvoyant, because the next thing I was going to say was that fire crews in the UK have come under attack 1,000 times in the past two years, and attacks on ambulance workers are also on the rise. Although the main purpose of this debate is to discuss violence against the police, I could not let it pass without referring to other blue-light services with similar issues. All assaults on the police are unacceptable, and we will discuss how to address them. The sad thing is that, as my hon. Friend mentioned, there is no clear, reliable evidence of the number of assaults on the police, because the data are still recorded in a haphazard and irregular fashion.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): On Merseyside, the most recent figures equate to almost 16% of the entire force being subjected to an attack in one year. Not all those attacks would have resulted in injury, but very many of them did. Does my hon. Friend think that it is an urgent matter for the Government to collect proper statistics on such assaults?

Ms Abbott: It is indeed urgent that the Government collect proper statistics. We need reliable, uniform data so that we are clear about the extent of the problem, the trends over time and the differences between forces. To address a problem, it is first necessary to identify it correctly.

There is a further point in relation to the collection of data. Even without data that are as robust as we would like on assaults, there are things that we could do now to address violence against the police to the benefit of the police force and for the reassurance of the public. One of those things is the adoption of body-worn cameras by all police officers who come into contact with the public. I will return to that subject later.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Abbott: I will make a little more progress. There were 9,055 recorded assaults on police officers in 2015, and the number of convictions was 7,629. That represents an increase on the 2014 figures, but the 2014 total was the lowest that it had been for a number of years. However, according to the Home Office there were 23,000 assaults on police officers in 2015-16, including assault without injury and including the British Transport police. There are big discrepancies in those data. No one claims—I do not imagine that the Minister will do so—that the data are wholly reliable. Obviously, we hope that the latest rise in assaults may possibly be a consequence of higher levels of reporting, and that the long-term downward trend will resume. The data on assaults without injury to a constable are more robust, because there is more uniformity in their collection across forces. They have fallen over the long term, even though there was a rise last year. It would be surprising if assaults without injury fell consistently, but assaults resulting in injury were on the rise.

One thing we can be sure of is that the data need to be more reliable and robust. There is a clear and simple reform that we can introduce. We can insist that all police forces, working with the Home Office and the Office for National Statistics, provide the highest quality data on assaults on the police. It is a serious matter, and it needs to be taken seriously.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): May I, too, pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her outstanding work in bringing this debate to the Floor of the House of Commons? In the West Midlands police service, where the statistics are sound, 2,000 police officers have gone, violent crime is up by 20% and three police officers a day are being assaulted. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) agree that the price being paid, as a consequence of Government cuts, for the thin blue line becoming ever thinner is not just putting the public at risk—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The point about interventions is that they are meant to be short. We have a very large number of people who want to make speeches this afternoon. If people make interventions, it prevents other people from making speeches. May I also point out that in this debate, it is expected that they will remain in the Chamber for most of the debate and be here for the wind-ups? I am not looking particularly at the hon. Gentleman, who is an extremely well-behaved Member of Parliament, but I am just pointing out that it is extremely discourteous to take up time in a very short debate by making a long intervention and then to leave. Nor am I criticising the hon. Lady, who is perfectly right to take interventions because that is what makes the debate interesting.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that there is a correlation between cuts in police numbers, the rising tide of crime and the increasing number of assaults on police officers. Whatever the precise quantum of the data on assaults and whatever the precise trends over time, we have a duty to foster the social contract between the police and the public—I mentioned that at the beginning of my remarks—and to protect them both. I want to tell the House about the very important eight-point plan recently adopted by the Metropolitan police. It reflects an initiative by the Hampshire Police Federation, and the Met has called it Operation Hampshire. We hope that this very important plan will be rolled out across all police forces. The Met’s plan states that a member of the operational command unit’s senior leadership team should be informed of all assaults; a MetAir form should be filled in for every assault; the leadership team should be informed of all assaults; a MetAir form should be filled in for every assault; the total victim care and victim codes of practice should be presented; learning from each assault should be captured; and being assaulted should not be seen as part of the job. It is excellent that the Met has adopted this plan, and I hope it will be rolled out in every police force around the country.

In the light of that plan, I am interested in the new developments with body-worn cameras for police officers. The Metropolitan police, under the leadership of
Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe and my former right hon. Friend the Member for Tooting, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has embarked on a programme of rolling out body-worn video across the London boroughs. Where that has been trialled elsewhere, there has been a sharp reduction in the number of complaints against the police. There can be little doubt that the presence of a camera will lead to an improvement in behaviour by all parties in what are often stressful or even dangerous incidents. The police can be reassured that any assailant will be recorded, and of course members of the public should be reassured that the actions of the police officer are also being recorded.

As a party, we believe in investment, not austerity. We believe that capital investment in our policing will improve it. Investment in body-worn cameras will save money by reducing the number of complaints against the police and the costs of evidence collection. There is of course a need for safeguards on the use of body-worn cameras—in relation to civil liberties, such as whether their use should be compulsory, and who has access to what is filmed—but the principle is correct. Body-worn video leads to better policing and fewer complaints against the police.

There have been several studies on the use of body-worn cameras, and I will give a flavour of some of the results. One US study showed a 50% reduction in the police use of force. A UK study showed greater levels of prosecution in cases of domestic violence. In a Scottish study, there was a higher incidence of early guilty pleas. In many cases, there has been a reduction in the number of complaints against the police, while in many others, there has been a lower level of assaults against the police. That is why we are raising this question in this important debate. We need better processes and procedures—that is what the Metropolitan police is seeking to introduce—but we need capital investment, in the Met and in police forces up and down the country, in things such as body-worn cameras.

This is not humorous; this is about police officer safety. There can be little doubt that the presence of a camera will lead to an improvement in behaviour by all parties in what are often stressful or even dangerous incidents. The police can be reassured that any assailant will be recorded, and of course members of the public should be reassured that the actions of the police officer are also being recorded.

We believe that the issue of assaults on police officers is very serious. It needs to be taken seriously, including in the gathering and collating of reliable data that are consistent across all police forces. While that is in progress, we should address measures that will tackle such assaults now, such as the introduction of body-worn cameras across all police forces in England and Wales, and encourage our colleagues in the devolved Assemblies to do the same.

Before I conclude my remarks, I congratulate the chair of the Hampshire Police Federation, John Apter, on his work. I am sure that we will not always agree, but his campaigning on the issue of violence against the police deserves the commendation of the whole House. We need to protect the protectors. The Opposition are glad to have brought this issue to the Floor of the House and we urge Ministers to consider some of the measures that I have suggested.

4.36 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Brandon Lewis): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “notes” to the end of the Question and add:

“that any assault on a police officer is unacceptable and welcomes the work of the independent Sentencing Council in producing guidelines that specifically highlight the increased seriousness of an offence committed against anyone providing a public service; further welcomes the Government’s commitment to accurately record the number of assaults on police officers in England and Wales to better understand the scale of this issue; and further notes that the Government has protected police spending in real terms over the Spending Review period.”

I welcome the opportunity to debate such an important subject as police safety. I join the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and others in congratulating the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on the work she has done. I am sure that the Adjournment debate on this subject played a part in bringing about this debate. It is important to raise this issue, and she is right to stand up for her constituency force.

As I told the House in a recent debate on police assaults, called by the hon. Member for Halifax, this is an area that I have great concern about. I am determined that we have a clear position that unites us across the House. I want to ensure that we are doing all that we can to support front-line police officers and police staff, as well as the public sector more generally. There needs to be a clear message that assaults on and bad behaviour towards people who are serving the public is unacceptable in any form.

I was delighted a few weeks ago to join the Home Secretary in celebrating achievements in all areas of policing at the annual Ferrers awards, which celebrate the achievements of special constables, cadets and the whole police volunteer family. Along with the police bravery awards, they are undoubtedly among the highlights of the policing calendar. Both events give us the chance to pay tribute to the brave men and women and the cadets for all they do, whether in a voluntary capacity or as full police officers and staff, day in, day out, to keep our country and our residents safe.

Just last night, I attended a police training exercise in Wiltshire, where I saw at first hand how officers prepare to deal with attacks against them by protesters. I was hugely impressed by the way in which officers handled themselves in fast-paced scenarios based on spontaneous...
public order situations and was struck by the level they must train to, to be ready for the kind of attack that can come upon them from members of the public. It was a stark reminder of the way in which they put themselves at risk every day for us.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that in such situations, police dogs and horses are sometimes attacked and that police officers can be bitten and spat at? Does he agree that people who spit at and bite police officers should be automatically given blood tests to check whether they have transmittable diseases and that there should be sanctions for people who attack police dogs and horses?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman’s point relates to something that may be considered by the Backbench Business Committee as part of the petitions process following the petition on Finn’s law. I am keen to meet the organiser of that for a conversation. Any kind of assault on police officers or on the animals and people who work with them is completely unacceptable. He mentioned spitting and there has been coverage recently of the view that the Mayor of London has taken on that. I think that any such behaviour is completely unacceptable.

I have talked quite a lot in recent speeches about the value we should place on policing as a profession. It should attract not just the bold and the brave but the brightest and the best. The new recruits taking their first steps in policing following the tremendous recent recruitment drive made possible by this Government are doing so at an exciting time.

I am afraid the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington got her figures a little confused in a few areas. I suggest that she look at the difference between recorded crime and actual crime, and crime and assaults against police officers rather than overall crime—and indeed the figures on police funding, which I will come to directly in a minute, where I am afraid her facts were a little off.

The crime survey of England and Wales shows that crime is down by more than a quarter. It is at its lowest level since that independent survey began some 35 years ago. But we recognise that crime is changing. Although this Government have always been clear that we do not seek to run policing, nor to decide from the centre how many officers are needed in Hackney or in Halifax, we seek to run policing, nor to decide from the centre how many officers are at the right level—London is at the right level, as, in effect, the highest funded police force in the country—but that sort of training. The College of Policing has a hugely important part to play, which I will come to in a moment. Changes in crime bring with them a need for officers who can adapt—who have up-to-date skills and the energy and innovation to keep renewing them, who are committed to protecting the most vulnerable in our society, who can follow criminals online as well as they can on our streets and who put victims at the heart of what they do.

I do not underestimate the job of our police forces. They are widely and rightly acknowledged as the best in the world. Policing is a hugely challenging career. Police officers will see more than most people would ever wish to. It is clearly not a job for the fainthearted; it needs strength, resilience and a commitment to making our society a better and safer place. But that does not mean that getting assaulted in the workplace is part of the deal or that being abused or hurt while doing the job should be part of the cost of doing business as a police officer. It is not and must not be.

Only this morning, a police officer was seriously injured after an incident in Lancashire. My thoughts—and, I hope, those of the whole House—are with the officer involved and his family. Just yesterday, it was reported that officers were attacked with fireworks by a group of youths in north London. That incident is obviously now being investigated by the police.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): The Minister has just raised a really interesting point—namely, attacks by youths. Will he comment on the fact that sentencing guidelines with respect to aggravated offences for assaults on police officers do not apply to young people under the age of 18?

Brandon Lewis: If the hon. Gentleman bears with me, I will come to sentencing in a few moments.

Those kinds of assaults, and assaults of any kind, are unacceptable at all levels. Unfortunately, they happen in all parts of the country: whether in Worcester, South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire or Warwickshire, there have been examples in just the past few months of assaults that people should not have to put up with and we should not tolerate as a country. Let me be very clear, then, that assaulting a police officer is completely unacceptable, and anyone found guilty should expect to face the full force of the law.

I assure the hon. Members for Hackney North and Stoke Newington and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) that tough penalties are available to the courts for those who assault police officers. Sentencing guidelines rightly provide for assault on a police officer to be treated more severely in appropriate cases. I note the hon. Gentleman’s point about youths, and I will touch on that in a moment. However, it is right that we remember that courts are independent and must have discretion to take account of all the circumstances of each case in determining an appropriate sentence.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Why, if there is no discretion in relation to victims of knife crime, does the Minister believe the police deserve less protection than that?
Brandon Lewis: I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises that the point I am making is that the police deserve our protection and that the sentencing is in place to ensure they have the right protection. Sentencing is not only about protection, but ensuring people who commit an unacceptable offence against a public servant feel the full force of the law. I will come on to that in a bit more detail.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I do not doubt the Minister's sincerity and fine words, but there is a gap between them and the reality. Today, I spoke to Bryn Hughes, the father of Nicola Hughes, who, as the Minister will know, was murdered in Greater Manchester a couple of years ago. I do not know if he has seen the Daily Mirror today, but the headline is “Cop killer’s life of luxury behind bars”. What message does he think that sends out to people who commit these appalling acts against police officers? I do not doubt his sincerity, but he needs to act on the reality, which is that those people are not being treated harshly enough.

Brandon Lewis: I will hold my hands up and say I have not read the Daily Mirror today. I appreciate that that might be a shock to the right hon. Gentleman, and I will make sure I read it later. That offender is in prison. I am happy to look at an individual case and talk to colleagues at the Ministry of Justice about what is happening in that prison, if he thinks that there is an issue, but it is clear that the offender went to prison and it is right that people face the full force of the law. I was slightly surprised by comments made by the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. If the right hon. Gentleman speaks later, perhaps he could outline why the data she referred to as being haphazard were not dealt with in 13 years of Labour government. I will come on to that in more detail in a moment.

We will continue to provide the Sentencing Council with data and evidence on assaults on police officers, as the council reviews its guidelines. We need to better understand the circumstances surrounding assaults. The College of Policing has provided financial support to fund a project, as the hon. Lady rightly outlined, led by Hampshire police to gather and analyse a sample of internal records of assaults against officers. I am working with ministerial colleagues across the Government, such as the Solicitor General, on a range of these issues to encourage the sort of discussion we are having here and taking some more interventions.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister mentions 13 years of Labour government. When Labour left office, there were 143,734 officers. There are now 124,000 officers. I should know that because I was the Police Minister in the last Labour Government. I will tell him this, too, while I am on my feet. Under the Labour Government, body cameras were trialled and introduced, with a plan for them to be rolled out in full. I know that, because I was the Police Minister in the last year of that Labour Government. Why do we not have body cameras on all officers, when the plans were there in 2009 to achieve that objective?

Brandon Lewis: I will come on to body cameras in a moment, but I can only confirm what the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said, which is that the data are not there. I do not know what the right hon. Gentleman and other Labour Ministers were doing in not collecting the data, but I will come on to that.

Mr Hanson: Will the Minister give way?

Brandon Lewis: I will finish answering the right hon. Gentleman's question. He can stand up all he likes, but I will finish answering his question whether he likes it or not.

As a first step, we published provisional statistics on officer assaults in July, despite the limitations of the data. The figures indicated that there were an estimated 23,000 assaults on officers across all forces in 2015-16. The data also indicated that nearly 8,000 of those assaults involved injury reported by officers, with 270 reported by police community support officers. On the right hon. Gentleman's initial point, he might be right about the police numbers, but he has to accept that crime is down since 2010, when he left office.

Mr Hanson: The Minister should know, in his role, that policing is not just about crime. Policing is about public order. Policing is about flooding. Policing is about dealing with public issues on the streets with people who are alcohol-intoxicated but have not yet committed a crime. Policing is not just about solving criminal activity. If there are fewer police on our streets, that is more dangerous, particularly if shifts are not working double-manned because of the cut in numbers.

Brandon Lewis: Crime is down; the police are working more efficiently and effectively; they are finding new and different ways to work. That is a good thing, and I think the police should feel proud of their work.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab) rose—

Brandon Lewis: Let me make a bit of progress before taking some more interventions.

We are publishing these provisional statistics because it is important to shine a spotlight on this issue and help to encourage the sort of discussion we are having here today. However, to improve the accuracy of these data, the Home Office has continued to work with police forces to build on this work, and I can announce that from next year we are asking police forces to provide data on the number of assaults with injury on a police officer as part of their recorded crime data. Creating this new crime classification is an important step in providing a more complete picture of assaults experienced by police officers. This additional information will help chief officers to understand what is happening in their forces and to protect their officers and staff.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that here in Westminster we are often accustomed to seeing police officers dressed rather as we would have expected Jack Warner to dress in Dock Green. However, what I think is encouraging is that within Walsome across police officers out in Hampshire, for example, we find them dressed and protected against the very assaults to which my right hon. Friend has referred. That is vital.
Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, which goes part of the way to answer an earlier point: it is important that we do not control policing centrally; we should resist the urge to centralise everything on the assumption that we know best. It is for local police forces and local chief constables to know their areas best and to look at what they need to do with their police forces for the benefit of their community and indeed their staff.

It is the responsibility of chief constables, as employers, to keep their workforce safe. In that aim, we fully support their making best use of new technology, wherever possible. Although it is an operational decision for chief officers, the use of body-worn video can be a powerful tool. As rightly outlined by the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington—we do not often agree, but we agree on this—it can provide reassurance to both the police and indeed the public about the way in which both parties are working and acting.

In this vital task of keeping their workforce safe, chief constables are held to account by their democratically elected police and crime commissioners, and supported by the College of Policing, which sets the standards that the chief constables are charged with implementing. That is why I have written today to Chief Constable Sara Thornton, the chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, to encourage forces to adopt the new crime classification as soon as possible. In my letter, I have taken the opportunity to stress the importance that this Government place on police officer safety, as I did in my conversation with her earlier today.

Jack Dromey: Will the Minister for Policing put right what he said a few moments ago? It is not true that crime is falling; crime is changing. The Office for National Statistics includes online fraud and cybercrime in its figures. The figures are clear: crime is near doubling on the one hand, at a time when the police service is being cut by 20,000 on the other hand. This is the legacy of the Prime Minister from when she was Home Secretary.

Brandon Lewis: I know that the hon. Gentleman would not consciously get something wrong, so let me suggest that he look again at the facts. He is completely wrong. The ONS is for the first time publishing the figures on cybercrime. This is not extra crime; it is crime that has never been published in the figures before. I have to tell him, and right hon. Members that recorded crime going up is a good thing, showing that the public are gaining more confidence in reporting crime. The reporting of crime is getting better, but actual crime is down since 2010.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I apologise to both Front-Bench teams, as I will miss their closing speeches on account of my son’s parents’ evening. I would like to press the Minister on what the Government are doing about body-worn cameras. Given the evidence that such cameras not only reduce the incidence of assaults on police officers about which we are all so concerned, but improve detection and make for a better response to victims of crime, and in light of the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) that plans were in place to try to roll out the provision, what is going to be done now and how fast will it be rolled out everywhere?

Brandon Lewis: I agree with the right hon. Lady, in that I believe body-worn cameras could be a vital tool, providing a good example of a technology that can help. However, it is a matter for the police and crime commissioners and chief constables to decide what is right locally. We do not run policing from the Home Office. Although the transformation fund comes from the Home Office, and is enabling police forces, chief constables and police and crime commissioners to work together closely on IT development for the future, it is for them to decide how to do that, and how to spread the fund and share best practice.

Several hon. Members rose—

Brandon Lewis: I will take some more interventions in a few moments.

I welcome the work that is being led by chief officers, and by the College of Policing under the leadership of Deputy Chief Constable Andy Rhodes, to consider the broader health and wellbeing of officers who are undertaking a stressful and demanding job on a daily basis. It is encouraging to note that all forces have signed up to the workplace wellbeing charter, and to hear about DCC Rhodes’s work with the charity Mind to give officers better access to the care that they need. Last week I was delighted to meet Gill Scott-Moore, chief executive officer of the Police Dependents’ Trust, to discuss, among other things, the mental health and wellbeing of police officers. Home Office officials will continue to work with those organisations and with the Department of Health, and to consider what more we can do.

There has already been a great deal of talk about resources today. I am proud of the Government’s record on tackling the deficit, and I am clear about the fact that policing has its role to play in meeting that challenge. I remind the House that in 2016-17—notwithstanding what the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington may believe—police spending has been protected, and no police and crime commissioners who maximised their precepts have seen a reduction in their cash funding. That is a good deal for policing. Moreover, on top of that protection of direct resource funding for PCCs, counter-terrorism police funding increased in real terms to £670 million in 2016-17, and transformation funding provides an opportunity to invest in digitalisation, a diverse and flexible workforce, and new and more efficient capabilities to tackle cybercrime and other emerging crimes and threats. Ultimately, all decisions about local policing resources and roles are for chief constables, held to account by their directly accountable police and crime commissioners.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I commend the Minister for telling us that the funding situation is great while keeping a straight face—it is an admirable performance—but how can he possibly square that with the fact that chief constables, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, borough commanders and the Mayor of London all agree that funding and resources are the key challenge to tackling street crime and the other crimes about which my constituents complain?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman has raised a key point. First, we have protected funding in real, cash terms, as is clear from the spending review, so if PCCs are using their precepts, they have that opportunity.
Indeed, in certain areas we have increased funding. What really matters is not the tired old debate about officer numbers, much as some people may want to engage in it. What people should be thinking about is the way in which officers, staff and volunteers are deployed, and the results of that approach are showing in the fall in crime that has been taking place since 2010.

Mr Hanson rose—

Brandon Lewis: I know that the right hon. Gentleman is very keen to intervene again. I look forward to the speech that he is bound to make later this evening.

Chief officers also have their sights set firmly on how effectively they are using their resources. We should, I think, be focusing on what the police are doing with their time. The proportion of officers in front-line roles has increased across England and Wales since 2010 to 93% in March 2016, and more than 50% of all police officers now work in local policing functions. We have seen forces across the country collaborating to make savings and pooling resources to improve effectiveness without sacrificing local accountability and identity, and they should be proud of having done that.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Does the Minister not recognise the following description? According to the Nottinghamshire Police Federation, officers “are more often on their own dealing with these situations with back up miles away and with no TASER resources anywhere near them”. Is that not the reality? Front-line police officers are trying to deal with things, but they do not have sufficient numbers to be properly backed up.

Brandon Lewis: Obviously, the crewing and structure of any organisation is rightly the responsibility of the chief constable, along with the police and crime commissioner. We have ensured that the necessary funding and protection are there this year.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that all Members of Parliament who have any concerns about police being attacked have a responsibility not to address organisations that claim that there is a problem with police brutality, as some Members of the Opposition Front Bench have done?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend has front-line experience of what police deal with every day, and I congratulate him and everybody who takes on these roles both in that capacity and any other. That goes to the heart of why the changes I announced earlier today are so important. I told the Police Federation what I would do when I first met it just a few months ago, and I am delighted that we will be able to deliver on that. It will give us the information and the certainty the police need and want.

I have been impressed by the speed at which policing has taken the lead in driving the police transformation fund, which provided £23 million for transformation work in August and £13.8 million in October. It is right that the sector takes ownership of law enforcement transformation, shaping the needs of the future. The fund provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform policing through direct investment into a wide range of projects from body-worn cameras to workforce diversity to increasing digitalisation and technology.

As I have said, the Home Office does not believe it runs policing—or should it. It is for police and crime commissioners and chief constables, working together in the interests of policing as a whole, to lead and implement the next stage of police reform. The Government will continue to provide support to the police, doing what only we can, such as making the important change I have announced today. We will look to police leaders to play their full part in keeping the police, as well as the public whom we all serve, safe. That is why I ask the House to support the amendment.
5.4 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): First, I want to thank my Front-Bench colleagues for putting this issue into the spotlight by making it the subject of our Opposition day debate today. I also want to join the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) in paying tribute to the brave officer who was attacked in Lancashire only this morning. That attack is a stark reminder of just how important today’s debate really is. To those who attended my Adjournment debate on police officer safety on 11 October, I apologise for repeating myself.

My interest in this issue stems from the time I spent with West Yorkshire police in my constituency over the summer recess. On Friday 5 August, I joined the police in Calderdale for a 2 pm to 10 pm shift to get front-line experience and to see how the demands on our local police are changing. I was keen to see for myself how well police officers on the frontline in West Yorkshire were coping with cuts of £160 million over five years, resulting in the loss of 1,200 police officers—a reduction of 20% of the force. I spent the afternoon visiting community projects with neighbourhood policing, but I moved over to respond policing in the evening, where I joined PC Craig Gallant in reacting to 999 calls.

I had already discussed with the Police Federation and senior officers my concern that, due to a combination of reduced numbers and the ever-expanding responsibilities of the police, officers are regularly being asked to respond to emergency calls on their own as a single crew. Only days before my shift, a female police officer had responded to a domestic call in my district and, disgracefully, been head-butted by an offender, breaking her eye socket and knocking out her teeth. It was not long into my time with PC Gallant before we attempted to stop a vehicle and speak to the driver. The driver initially sped away but after a short chase he eventually stopped. When PC Gallant got out of the car to speak to him, the situation quickly escalated and he was surrounded and forced to draw his baton. I was so concerned for his safety that I rang 999 myself, believing that that was the fastest way to make contact with the control room and stress just how urgently he needed back-up. Thankfully, other officers arrived at the scene to help to manage the situation. Amazingly, no injuries resulting in the loss of 1,200 police officers—a reduction of 20% of the force. I spent the afternoon visiting community projects with neighbourhood policing, but I moved over to respond policing in the evening, where I joined PC Craig Gallant in reacting to 999 calls.

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weather staggering cuts at a time when their case load is becoming increasingly complicated. I have seen the thin blue line stretched desperately thin as the demands on officers continue to grow. Any officer will say that one of the biggest challenges that is putting additional pressure on the police is the changing nature of dealing with vulnerable young people and adults. In the 24 hours leading up to my time on duty, Calderdale police had safely recovered nine vulnerable missing people, and they were involved in looking for an additional seven the following day. The weekly average for missing people in Calderdale is 43, with 416 a week going missing across the force, 114 of which are deemed to be high-risk individuals.

I have done a series of shifts with front-line services in my constituency and I would recommend it to all MPs. Just last Saturday I spent the evening with off-hours mental health services—a whole other debate for another day—and two people were detained under the Mental Health Act, with police crews unable to leave either patient. One patient who had already been assessed required an appropriate bed, and the second required an assessment suite. With neither available owing to pressures on mental health services, the police officers were tied up all night, putting extra pressure on their colleagues who had to prioritise 999 calls on a Saturday night on Halloween weekend.

We have a responsibility to the most vulnerable people to keep them from harm and away from exploitation, but the police cannot be the catch-all for every problem. That is simply not sustainable with reduced numbers. To be honest, they are also not the most appropriate agency to be doing that work. The reality of not having the right answers to such questions is that the police are stretched like never before and, as a result, lone officers—single crews—are regularly asked to attend emergencies and potentially dangerous situations on their own or with fewer officers than are necessary to safely manage the situation.

I want to return to the unpleasant issue of spitting, which I covered in my Adjournment debate. I am all for informed debate about the use of spit hoods as a means of protecting officers from spitting but, to reiterate what I said in that debate, if we are politically uncomfortable with the use of spit hoods, I promise that a police officer somewhere right now will be being spat at and is even more uncomfortable. As well as being thoroughly unpleasant, spitting blood and saliva at another human being can pose a real risk of transmitting a range of infectious diseases, some of which have life-changing or even lethal consequences. We have a duty of care to protect officers from that, wherever possible. Hon. Members should be aware of the tragic case of a policewoman in Kiev in Ukraine, who died earlier this year after having contracted TB from an offender who spat at her while she was arresting him. Only this week in West Yorkshire, a man with hepatitis C was jailed for eight weeks for spitting in the eye of a police officer. If the answer is not spit hoods, it could again be tougher sentencing, but let us know if the answer is not.

It worries me that the ever-growing demands on the police, combined with cuts in numbers, are undermining their ability to do even some of the basics. I call on the Home Secretary and the Minister for Policing to recognise that officers are routinely deployed on their own. When an officer calls for back-up, only boots on the ground will do and numbers matter. I urge all hon. and right hon. Members to support the motion and help to keep our police officers safe.

5.14 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I rise to support the Government’s amendment, and in doing so I mean no disrespect to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is a good person leading a good campaign on police officer safety. As a barrister, I have represented numerous police officers in courts and tribunals, which has brought me into contact with many police officers and cases where they have done work in exceptionally challenging circumstances, day in, day out. Since becoming an MP, I have focused my work with the police in Kingston, and I wish to put on the record my thanks to the Metropolitan police officers there, led by borough commander Glenn Tustall. They do an amazing job keeping us safe, day in, day out, and this year Kingston became London’s safest borough. We are not as good as we should be at publicising the everyday heroism and excellence of our police officers, which I saw when I went on a ride-along with PCs Donna Hatton and Sarah Skultety, two fine officers who are a credit to policing.

Police officers volunteer to do a fundamentally dangerous job—to walk towards danger where most of us would run away—but they are entitled to have the best protection possible, through kit, training and legislation, and through the full weight of the law being felt by those who assault them.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Kent police and our excellent police commissioner have ensured that all police officers have body-worn cameras to ensure that their safety is taken into account and that those who commit the crimes we are talking about are brought to account. As a result, the number of complaints against the police has also been cut. Does my hon. Friend think all police forces should do that?

James Berry: I most certainly do; this is a matter for local police and crime commissioners, but there has been a reduction in the number of complaints against the police when body-worn cameras have been used, because people know that they cannot try it on when there is evidence. These cameras also provide fantastic evidence in court when a police officer is assaulted. There has been a big improvement in the personal
I hope that when the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) winds up, she will reflect on how the hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) came across to police officers when she made a litany of complaints about that Bill at the Dispatch Box yesterday. How will police officers have felt about that when this Government are trying, through that Bill, to give them the tools they need to do their job—the powers that they have asked this Government to provide for them? For my part, I will continue to support our brave police officers, and I know that the hon. Member for Halifax will as well. I will continue to ask the House to give the police the tools they need, and I will support the Government’s amendment tonight, to do our bit to keep our brave police officers safe, so that when those officers face danger, they know that our laws and our politicians are behind them to keep them safe.

5.21 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to make my maiden speech.

I was not elected in a conventional way, and it was in the darkest of circumstances, through the loss of my friend and inspiration Jo Cox, that I came to be here. What happened was not only an attack on a woman, a family and a community; it was an assault on the principles and basis of our democracy. That is why I must first pay tribute to all the political parties that did not stand in the by-election out of respect. I also thank the voters in Batley and Spen—those who normally support my party and those who do not—who lent me their vote this time because, as one woman said with quiet determination:

“We can’t let them win.”

As the manager of a local bar told me while fringe parties leafleted outside her pub:

“That’s not who we are, or what we believe.”

The loss of all those deposits on election night confirmed it, and I will stand tall against those whose only mission is to divide our community.

The election result was a victory for democracy, and the acts of kindness that I saw along the way defined this campaign. Many in this House came to help with the campaign, and they will have seen our vibrant and dedicated voluntary and community sector, which shines even brighter than ever before. They will have seen it in the cups of tea; the cake; the pakoras and samosas; the smiles and the tears; the people in the polling station who donated that day’s pay to Jo’s charitable fund; the stories of Jo’s kindness; and the quiet determination of our community to not let hate divide us. So many groups give support, friendship, assistance and opportunities to others. As one woman from the local Salvation Army put it:

“We have two hands, one to help ourselves and one to help others.”

That is the attitude of our constituency. We understand and enjoy our obligations to each other.

One special highlight during the election campaign was the Walky Talky community event organised by leaders of all faiths, Kirklees Council and Batley Bulldogs.
People of all faith and none walked alongside each other, chatting in the sunshine from the town centre to the rugby stadium. When it was finished, people did not want to leave; they were hanging around, not ready to let this warm moment of community connection end. It was in her maiden speech that Jo said that “what surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[Official Report, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

It was true then and it is even more the case now. We will never forget the difference that Jo has made and, through her legacy, continues to make. She was and is unforgettable. One gentleman from the community reflected, “Jo was a small woman with a big kick.” I witnessed that kick campaigning alongside Jo and the community to successfully defend Batley and Birstall’s local libraries.

This was a personal campaign for me. As a child growing up in a two-bedroomed council flat, those libraries were my solace, and anyone who is a fan of Ken Loach’s films will notice that more often than not, the turning point for the hero is always when he or she goes to a library to find the information they need. As the world gets ever more confusing and decisions taken about our lives seem further out of our hands, we need those libraries now more than ever.

I also think back to the time when I was six and our local council prevented my family from becoming homeless. Dad had been unemployed for a while and we had fallen behind in the mortgage repayments, so my mum had to hand back the keys to the building society. We would have been homeless had it not been for the council, who found us a roof over our head. But that was not an act of charity. It was a combination of political will and solidarity from local and nationally elected representatives. Today, there are now 14,000 people on the council house waiting list in Kirklees. Affordable housing is further out of reach than ever, and I will work hard to ensure that other families do not suffer the stress and anxiety that we did.

As someone with unique experience in the arts, as an actor and writer, culture will be of particular interest to me, and I know that it can be an engine of change for communities, bringing regeneration and jobs. Our young people in particular deserve nothing less. During the campaign I visited West Yorkshire Drama Academy, watching many working-class kids find their confidence and their voice. I saw myself there.

When I was a young actor and I went to castings, I would be asked where I was from. When I said, “Batley”, more often than not people would say, “Oh yeah, Batley Variety Club!” The fact that this little club could attract international stars such as Louis Armstrong, Shirley Bassey and the Bee Gees meant that there must be something about us that others want! Young people’s futures are more uncertain than ever, but whatever their ambitions, we must give them hope and belief that they can be the best. We have the power and responsibility in this place to help.

I am determined to use my time in this place to do everything I can for our community, whether campaigning to retain access to local NHS services, pursuing policies to end the need for food banks, or doing whatever I can to bring decent jobs and new investment to the constituency. Like so many in this House, I want to create a society where everyone can contribute and reach their full potential.

Jo continues to inspire me and so many others every day, as does the dignity shown by her husband Brendan and her loving family. I am among her friends, of whom there are many in the constituency, her trade union and this House.

I make this speech during a debate on policing, so I wish to finish with a tribute to the brave officers of West Yorkshire police, who reacted so swiftly and professionally on that awful day in June. A community that could have become overrun with panic, with such a terrible act taking place in broad daylight in the sleepy village that I grew up in, was looked after admiringly by our police, in no small part because of the swiftness with which they made an arrest. What happened in Batley and Spen was a violent attack on a Member of this House, but I would like to take this moment to thank the police officers themselves who put their lives on the line every single day. I would also like to congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her hard work on raising this issue.

I take this moment to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your excellent leadership in the aftermath of Jo’s tragic death. Coming to Batley, recalling Parliament, arranging ceremonies and giving people space to grieve and mourn together was a kindness much appreciated by all in this House and beyond.

I am honoured to have the opportunity to do my bit and give a voice to my constituents through this Parliament of ours. That day will stay with everyone in Batley and Spen for the rest of our lives, but Batley and Spen will be defined not by the one person who took from us, but by the many who give. [Applause.]

5.29 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). I think I speak for the whole House when I say that that was a truly outstanding maiden speech, and done in the best traditions of the House. Thinking back to my maiden speech, I wish I could have made it as well and as competently as that.

I also ought to say that the hon. Lady showed a massive amount of dignity in the election campaign she fought—not just in the campaign itself, but particularly at the count, when she faced some deeply unpleasant barracking during her speech, which she should not have had to experience. She should probably get used to that in this place, but she certainly should not have had to put up with it then.

Having listened to the hon. Lady’s speech, it is fair to say that Jo Cox could not have hoped for a better successor, and I am sure the people of Batley and Spen feel that they could not have hoped for a better successor to Jo Cox. She clearly is going to be a rising star on the Labour Benches, and somebody the Conservative party will have to watch out for in years to come. I commend her on an excellent first speech.

This is a very important subject for me. I asked for a debate on assaults on police officers in business questions a few months ago, and on the back of that I wrote an article on the issue for the Yorkshire Post. Therefore, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Halifax
(Holly Lynch), who has done a fantastic amount of work on the issue—I commend her wholeheartedly—has persuaded her party to have a debate on it, and I commend the Labour party for that.

I have to say right from the outset that I am rather sad that the Government have tabled an amendment to the Labour party motion; it seems to be rather splitting hairs, if I may say so. This was an opportunity for the House to speak as one on police assaults. I welcome the fact that the Government have committed not to cut police funding any further, but I do not really see why they could not have supported the motion. Therefore, if we do divide on this issue, I will happily vote for the Labour party motion, because I cannot see anything in it with which I disagree.

I should also say at the start that I actually voted against any cuts to the police budget every year when cuts were proposed, because I believe that the first duty of the Government is to protect the public, and the police budget was not the budget the Government should have been cutting. I therefore endorse everything the Labour party has said on this issue.

Like the hon. Member for Halifax, I have spent an awful lot of days going out with West Yorkshire police—about 60 or 70 since I first got elected. I have the greatest respect for the officers and the sacrifices they make on a daily basis keeping us safe. One of the most serious consequences of being a police officer is the threat of personal injury, or actual injury, and occasionally worse, in the line of duty.

As has been mentioned, the recording of assaults is not necessarily uniform, and is clearly a bit haphazard. The charging procedure also makes it difficult to follow through on the number of assaults that there actually are. An assault on a police officer will be charged as an assault on a police officer only if it meets certain criteria; otherwise, it could be charged as another violence against the person offence, even though the facts show that the victim was a police officer.

I put in a freedom of information request about two months ago to the Metropolitan police, who showed that there have been broadly 2,000 assaults on police officers in the Metropolitan police area every year for the last three years. When we take those in which injury occurred, there seems to have been an increase from 536 in 2013 to a worrying 869 in 2015, and that is just in London. The figures also show that the most serious incidents—wounding or grievous bodily harm—have increased from 81 in 2013 to 211 in 2015. I have been trying to establish the relevant number in West Yorkshire but have not had as much joy. I have also been wondering whether there should be a specific offence of assaulting a police officer that would cover all assaults and not just some. The name of the offence could encapsulate all offences against police officers. This would certainly make identifying the numbers involved easier, so at least we would know the true picture.

Crucial in this is sentencing. My biggest concern is that while we want to get the numbers right, it is also very important to make sure that the sentencing of such offenders matches the seriousness of the offence. I called for a debate on this not long ago. Again, having one offence could help, but whatever happens, we need tougher sentences. The sentencing guidelines relating to assaulting a police officer were amended a few years ago. We should all be concerned about those guidelines.

At the time, I was told that someone who committed an assault on a police officer that involved a punch to the stomach that winded the officer, where there was an attempt to evade arrest, and where the individual had previous convictions, could in theory be punished only with a fine. I was concerned about that then and I am concerned about it now.

David T. C. Davies: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: Yes, briefly.

David T. C. Davies: My hon. Friend and I have spent probably 10 years calling for tougher sentences and often being rubbished and criticised by Members in various parts of this House. Is he surprised that so many people are now calling for tougher sentences and saying that prison works and offers a deterrent?

Philip Davies: I am delighted that people are calling for more people to be sent to prison. I have been arguing that case for an awfully long time, and I am delighted that I seem to be getting some traction on it.

The problem with the sentencing guidelines is just the tip of the iceberg. I have asked parliamentary questions about this for a while, and have been shocked to find out that only one in seven criminals convicted of an assault on a police constable in the execution of their duty received a prison sentence at all. In the latest year shown in the figures, 7,829 assaults on police officers were recorded as being dealt with in our courts where the offender pleaded guilty or was found guilty, and yet only 1,002 of the offenders were actually sent to prison. That is completely and utterly unacceptable.

Other parliamentary questions I have asked revealed that someone with an astonishing 36 previous convictions for assaulting a police officer managed to avoid being sent to prison for a further assault on a police officer.

Rehman Chishti: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: I am going to press on, if my hon. Friends do not mind, because other people want to speak and I want to crack on.

This kind of soft, lily-livered approach to sentencing is simply not on. I want to mention a recent example of a case before Bradford Crown court that was not charged as an assault against a PC because of the nature of the incident. It demonstrates the problem that we have. The hon. Member for Halifax mentioned this issue, but I want to emphasise it. Sergeant Andrew Heald, who was arresting a criminal who had an armful of previous convictions and was out of prison on licence, had acid thrown in his face and feared that he had been blinded or disfigured. I cannot imagine how frightening that must have been for that police officer doing his job of protecting the public. The sentence handed down to the lowlife who threw the acid in Sergeant Heald’s face was 20 months for the attack and a further 10 months for the offence for which he was trying to arrest him.

I want to be clear that this derisory sentence was not the fault of the judge, as having looked carefully at the sentencing guidelines, it is obvious that he had acted to the best of his ability given the constraints that the guidelines placed on him. This meant that because he
[Philip Davies]

was out on licence, this thug, who should not even have been out of prison in the first place, will serve just 10 months in prison for this vicious attack on a police officer doing his job. There should be a clearly defined additional sentence for anyone who attacks our police officers, and generally the sentences need to be much more severe. The police put their lives at risk to protect us, and the least we can do in this place is to make sure that the law better protects them.

I have also been looking at the use of Tasers by the police. It seems to me that Tasers are currently underused and that if more police had them they might be better able to prevent assaults on themselves in the first place. According to my recent FOI request, just 13% of police officers in West Yorkshire are authorised to carry a Taser. If the police want to carry a Taser to better protect themselves, we should make sure that that is facilitated.

The motion touches on police numbers. As I have made clear, I have voted against cuts to the police budget every year they have been proposed. This should be a priority for the police. If the Government had to save money—which they did—they would have been far better off cutting the overseas aid budget, which lines the pockets of corrupt politicians around the world than cutting the police budget when the first duty of the Government is to protect the public. The fact is that police officer numbers in West Yorkshire have fallen from 5,817 in May 2010 to 4,552 today. That is just not good enough or at all helpful. We need more police officers.

In conclusion, every attack on an officer should always act as a reminder of the bravery of our police and the price that they sometimes pay to protect us. It is only right that the Government and Parliament totally support them in return. Clearly, establishing how many police officers are assaulted is helpful, but toughening up the sentences of those who attack the police as they do their duty is the best thing that this House could do, and this debate is a very good start. For those reasons, I support the Labour motion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank very warmly the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for a quite outstanding maiden speech, and I would like in turn very warmly to thank the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for a typically gracious and poignant response to it.

I am afraid that it will be necessary now to impose a very tight time limit to try to accommodate colleagues, for which I apologise. Some senior Members are affected, but I think they are gracious in acknowledging the need. Four minutes.

5.41 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The outstanding speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) was a truly memorable parliamentary occasion, as was the fine speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). I do not often say this, but the other side of the Pennines has a lot to be proud of, including even the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). To elicit from him an emotional reaction and support for the Labour party is a truly big achievement, and my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen has managed that today.

This is an important and well-timed debate, because it provides me with an opportunity to put into proper context the recent work that I have been doing on policing. I am sure that some people might see challenging past injustice as in some way anti-police, but nothing could be further from the truth, and I am glad to have the chance to say that. I am pro-police, and I want to do whatever I can to strengthen the position of those out there on the frontline.

There are three ways in which we can do that. The first relates to police numbers and funding, and the second to protecting police officers through the powers we give them and through sentencing. The third is that we can build public trust in our police force by challenging past misdeeds. Unresolved past injustice can infect the present and unfairly leave a cloud hanging over officers on the frontline. It is right to remove it.

I want to touch on each of those three issues briefly. First, on funding, I am afraid that the Minister is wrong to say that the police budget has been protected. It has not been protected; it has been cut in real terms. Greater Manchester police’s revenue support grant was cut by £8.5 million this year, and the precept powers that it was given raised only £3.5 million. Let us get these facts straight, because otherwise the public will get confused. About 1,800 officers have already been lost from the frontline. We cannot take these cuts anymore. A story in The Mail on Sunday over the weekend said that the thin blue line of Greater Manchester is the thinnest of them all—it is the thinnest in the country. The cuts cannot continue. We need a commitment from the Government to honour their promise of no real-terms cuts to police budgets, because that has not happened.

Secondly, on protection for police officers, body-worn cameras need to be introduced now, because they can protect police officers today. We need a debate about the greater use of Tasers, and we really need to look at sentencing. I have mentioned the Dale Cregan situation previously, but there are other examples. An off-duty police officer, Neil Doyle, was killed in Liverpool. His attacker also committed a violent offence against two other individuals, but he only got three years and will soon be moved to an open prison.

Rehman Chishti: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one area that really affects police officers and the public is drink-driving and driving while disqualified? Repeat offenders can only be given six months’ custody—it does not matter whether it is a second, third or fifth offence—so we have to review the sentencing on that. My previous private Member’s Bill was designed to increase the maximum sentence to two years. Does he think that that is a good idea and that we should do it?

Andy Burnham: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. We have always been too lenient on motoring offences, particularly death by dangerous driving.

I was talking about police officers, who need greater protection in law and in the sentencing guidelines. The Police Federation said today that the sentences that are handed out are often inadequate and inconsistent, and they simply do not provide the strong message that is...
required. We must resolve across the House to strengthen those sentencing guidelines, and I want to make my support for that absolutely clear.

I will finish on the point of public trust in the police. I believe we are all sent here to challenge injustice wherever we find it. Where we have evidence of it, we have a moral duty to act. Failure to do so corrodes the bond of trust between public and police, and it damages policing by consent. The decision on Orgreave this week was, in my view, wrong, and it makes it harder for the South Yorkshire police to move forward. That decision does not help officers in South Yorkshire who are out there on the frontline, because it leaves a cloud hanging over them.

Let me give the House a quick quote: “Historical inquiries are not archaeological excavations... We must never underestimate how the poison of decades-old misdeeds seeps down through the years and is just as toxic today as it was then. That’s why difficult truths, however unpalatable they may be, must be confronted head on”.

I could not agree more with those words—the words of our Prime Minister to the Police Federation this year. She is right, so what has changed? Why are we now pushing away those things and leaving them unresolved?

The Government have made their decision, but this House should make a different decision. I have today advanced the idea, based on the suggestion made by the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), that a Select Committee should look at Orgreave. In my view, that is the right thing to do. I appeal to Members from all parts of the House to back that suggestion, so that we can build trust in our police and give them proper funding and protection.

5.46 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I am delighted to be able to speak in this important debate, and I am glad that the Opposition have secured it. I spent nine years as a special constable, during which time I was assaulted—once in a police station, of all places, although not by another police officer. I echo many of the comments that have been made by Members from all parts of the House.

I am particularly keen on sentencing. It is fantastic that Members from all parts of the House are saying firmly that they want stronger sentences for people who commit assaults on police officers. I have stood here many times over a decade or more, as a Government Member and an Opposition Member, and argued that prison works, prison is effective, prison keeps people safe and prison acts as a deterrent. Many times, I have been intervened on by Opposition Members—and, sometimes, by Government Members—who have told me otherwise. There seems to be a strong consensus here, however, and I thoroughly support that.

I thoroughly support the use of Tasers. At the moment, all police officers are equipped with pepper spray or CS gas, as was the case when I started, and a long, retractable stick of metal called an ASP, which is basically a long baton. The problem is that the baton has to be used quite close up, and there is a risk of causing a severe injury by striking somebody in any way with a baton. Police officers are trained to use a baton against the legs and arms, but that is difficult to do in the sorts of situations where those batons are pulled out. The advantage of Tasers is that people can stand 10 or 15 feet away and point it. The vast majority of times when a Taser is used, all the police officer has to do is draw it and draw to the potential offender, notice the fact that there is a red dot on their chest. The potential offender will very often desist from whatever they are doing and comply with the instructions they are given, without receiving any injury at all.

When I was a special, there was at one point a debate about the possibility of police officers being armed. I felt that I would never be able to do the job if I was armed with a firearm. I simply could not do that. I have the utmost respect for the highly trained officers who do, but the decision to use it is not something that I would ever want on my conscience. Using a Taser is something else. It is a far less offensive weapon than the retractable iron bar with which all police officers are equipped.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s argument, but he will be aware of a case earlier this year in Telford where the footballer Dalian Atkinson was killed in an incident. We do not know all the circumstances, and generally I support the use of Tasers, but does the hon. Gentleman not think that that case should give us pause for thought before we go for a major roll-out?

David T. C. Davies: It should. We could go into the details of why people sometimes die as a result of Taser use, and it is very rare for that to happen, but that should certainly give us pause for thought. If the alternative is a police officer waving around an iron bar, which could easily strike somebody on the head and similarly injure them very badly or kill them, we have to look at what is the lesser of two evils. For me, the use of Tasers is the lesser of two evils.

I want to go quickly through a couple of other points. I, too, support the use of body cameras. They will enable people to see the problems that police officers face and help to bring more people to justice. I worry, however, that some people may see them as another way of being able to criticise the police. It is very important that people understand two things. First, police officers are under stress when they are threatened by a large group telling them, “We’re going to kill you. We’re going to attack you now.” That has happened to me and, frankly, it creates a certain amount of fear. I could not have admitted that at the time, but it does. Police officers cannot get away from the threat in front of them, and one of the ways they deal with it is to become quite aggressive in their language, and certainly in their gestures and sometimes in their behaviour. People must understand that when they look at camera footage. Secondly, it is a fact that when police officers have finished dealing with such a situation, they sometimes go back into the station and make comments or use language that some people, taking that out of context, may feel is inappropriate. We will have to be grown up and understand that when we look at camera footage.

I worry that the use of cameras by protesters at demonstrations is quite often a means to criticise the police very unfairly. For example, I have seen pictures in national newspapers of police officers looking very fierce and holding up an ASP as though ready to strike somebody. They are doing that because that is what they are trained to do. By the time a police officer has to draw a retractable baton, they are expected to behave in
[David T. C. Davies]

an aggressive fashion. There is no point waving it gently around saying, “Excuse me, sir, would you mind going home now?” By the time that thing is out, people must realise that the police officer means business, and they very often do so. I am worried about the way in which such cameras are used.

I will not be able to sum it up in one minute and 20 seconds, but there is a wider issue, which is the need to consider the whole way in which the police force is structured. It seems to me that we take everyone and train them to be out on the streets, but we can give them only two days training a year in how to use handcuffs, restraints, batons and all the rest of it, which is not enough for those who are going to end up in conflict situations.

I can absolutely say from bitter and true experience—most officers would reflect this—that all the stuff taught during those two days in the gym soon goes out of the window. It all looks very good in training, but once it happens for real, there is just a mass of arms and legs and batons and heavens knows what flying around all over the place, and it does not look good. Yet many police officers frankly do not need to be put in such situations. Those who deal with cybercrime need to be IT experts; they do not need to be able to run 100 metres in 10 seconds. And investigating serious crimes need to have a lawyer’s mind, rather than be able to run 100 metres in 10 seconds. I sometimes think that we could look at the different jobs being done in the police force and consider whether we need police officers to have all the skills that we currently require them to have. I will not have enough time to go into further details, but I want to say one more thing. It behoves us all as Members of Parliament to support the police, not to pander to groups or organisations that are there to criticise them.

5.53 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her fantastic maiden speech? I want to tell her that I thought she did Jo Cox’s memory a fantastic service. The integrity and honesty with which she spoke brought tears to the eyes of many people in the Chamber. The words she said about you, Mr Speaker, and everyone else shows her integrity as an individual and how outstanding an MP she will be for Batley and Spen. I am sure that Jo Cox, if she is looking down on us, and certainly Brendan and all the family will have seen her speech and will treasure it. Her fantastic speech moved all of us.

May I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on obtaining this important debate? I say that as the son of a man who was a Metropolitan police officer for 30 years.

The Minister has some very real questions to answer at the end of this debate. Let us remind ourselves that we are talking about 23,000 assaults on police a year, which is more than 63 a day. Of those assaults, 8,000 involve an injury, which is some 21 a day. In my police force in Nottinghamshire, there were 45 self-reported assaults and 267 assaults without injury. To me, each of those is an assault not just on an individual police officer, as bad as that is, but on the symbol of the rights of us as individuals to live in a democracy under the law.

When the Minister responds, will she say whether she is satisfied that the law on police officer assaults is satisfactory? In particular, the hon. Member for Kensington (Victoria Borwick) mentioned the Notting Hill carnival. Many of those assaults were by young people who are not covered by the sentencing guidelines on assaults on police officers, which refer to people who are 18 or over.

The House deserves a better answer to the questions from the shadow Home Secretary and others about the Government’s policy on body-worn video cameras and how they will be rolled out. It is not good enough for the Government to turn around and say it is an operational matter. Surely the Government have a view on whether it should be accelerated or encouraged.

Andy Burnham: There were 864 assaults on police officers in Greater Manchester last year—a force that is seeing cuts to the frontline. To listen to the Minister this afternoon, one would think everything is rosy, but morale is very low. What does my hon. Friend think the Government need to do to lift morale, because I believe it is dangerously low?

Vernon Coaker: My right hon. Friend makes a really good point. The first thing to do is to listen to what police officers are saying. The Government seem to be living in a parallel universe. They say the funding is fine, there is no problem with police morale and there is no problem with police numbers, yet, like my right hon. Friend, we all see very real problems in our constituencies around morale and policing.

As my right hon. Friend says, we see the backdrop of huge cuts to police numbers, with nearly 20,000 cut since 2010. In my force in Nottinghamshire, the number of officers is down by 122 and the number of PCSOs by 62 since 2012. The only response of Ministers to that seems to be that it has no impact whatsoever on policing on our streets.

I want to draw the Minister’s attention to an excellent article in The Mail on Sunday this week, which revealed the really low numbers of police on duty at night, when many of the most serious crimes are committed. It had a table obtained by a freedom of information request with the number of response officers on duty on the nightshift of 9 April 2016. Members of Parliament will be able to look up the figures for their own forces, but Nottinghamshire had just 75 or one per 11,000 people. That simply is not enough.

It is not good enough for the Minister to say that it is an operational matter. Do the Government not have a view on the number of front-line officers there should be? They should be looking at the operational matter. Do the Government not have a view on the number of front-line officers there should be protecting the public, rather than turning around and saying, “It’s nothing to do with us. It’s an operational matter”? Surely the Government should take a view on that matter and discuss it with chief constables.

It is important to draw attention to the article in The Mail on Sunday that refers to the number of response officers. It is clear that police safety is put at risk by the increase in police officers having to go out on their own. There are not sufficient officers and it is about time the Government took a view on that, rather than washing their hands of it. I look forward to the Minister’s response on that.
Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I welcome this debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on her campaign to protect the protectors.

For the past year I have taken part in the police service parliamentary scheme, which I would wholeheartedly recommend to all Members of Parliament. It has given me a unique window on the world of everyday life in the police force and the tasks that the police have to undertake on our behalf. I have shadowed various departments in Essex police and seen the incredible work that members of our police service do daily, the challenges and dangers they face, and the frankly astonishing levels of commitment to public service they show. I put on the record my thanks to Essex police for helping me take up that opportunity.

Many of the brave men and women in our police recognise that we are in a challenging period for policing. At a time when the Government are asking them to do more for less, they have absolutely risen to the challenge. Front-line officers put their own safety at risk every day in order to keep people like ourselves safe. I have heard first-hand accounts of officers being punched, kicked, spat at and even bitten, not to mention receiving verbal threats.

Spitting has already been discussed. Although it is often not seen as causing physical harm, not only is it truly disgusting but, as has been mentioned, there are real health risks involved. I would like to have a wider debate on spit hoods. If anyone feels squeamish about them I encourage them to put themselves in the position of an officer being spat at.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I recently went out on a ride-along with officers from Essex police. I witnessed a suspect who was being restrained attempting to spit at a police officer. It was a really ugly thing to see. Does my hon. Friend agree that it must be clear that any attack on a police officer will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

I warmly welcome the Minister’s announcement that police forces will be required to record offences against officers properly as part of their crime statistics. Our police forces will be required to record offences against police and support staff work. I know their complete dedication to serving the public and how tough their job is.

Rebecca Harris: Absolutely unquestionably—spitting is a revolting thing to do. Often the last resort for someone being arrested is to try to spit, out of spite.

We have already heard about the around 23,000 assaults on police officers across the country. I was shocked to learn that there were just under 700 assaults in Essex alone. However, many more go unreported, sometimes because officers feel the offence is so commonplace it will not be pursued and, more worryingly, that the sentence will perhaps not reflect the assault’s effect on the officer.

The innovation of body-cams has been very effective in its roll-out in Essex. The cameras have reduced assaults on officers and increased the possibility of prosecutions. But they do not in themselves deal with the inconsistency on reporting, sentencing or prosecution. I spoke to the chair of the Essex branch of the Police Federation about officer experience post assault. What I heard was largely very positive with regard to how the force itself supports its officers. However, the chair stressed again and again that there were incidents where the psychological effect on the victim of an attack was not taken into account in sentencing, whereas it would be for many other crimes.

It is right that the courts, through the independence of the judiciary, have discretion to take into account the circumstances of each case in determining the appropriate sentence, but in cases of assaults on officers, courts really need to consider the implications for the officer’s mental health. When a sentence is very low or non-existent, there is further psychological damage to the officer involved; they feel undervalued, unappreciated and not paid the respect they deserve for putting their lives on the line for us on a daily basis. That is not good enough. We must protect the very people who do so much to keep us safe. It must be clear that any attack on a police officer will be punished to the fullest extent.

I urge everyone to take the contrary view: that such attacks ought to be judged more severely, as police officers deserve our protection and support in return. That point must be repeatedly stressed to the Crown Prosecution Service. Anecdotally, we know that there are concerns about the wide variation around the country in the approach taken by the CPS towards assaults on officers. The message needs to go out to the CPS loud and clear that assaults on police must be charged at the most appropriate gradation, and that that must be consistently applied across the country. Likewise, I would like the message to go to the judiciary that they must understand that we want the police to have the full support of the law behind them.

I warmly welcome the Minister’s announcement that police forces will be required to record offences against officers properly as part of their crime statistics. Our police service is absolutely second to none in the world, which is why they need support from us that is second to none.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I thank those on the Labour Front Bench for choosing this topic for debate today and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for championing this issue. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her brilliant maiden speech, which was very moving. We look forward to many more.

I put on record my thanks to hard-working police officers and support staff, both on the frontline and in the back office. From dealing with Gwent police as the local MP and from my time on the police force parliamentary scheme, I know just how hard police officers and support staff work. I know their complete dedication to serving the public and how tough their job is.

In the firm opinion of the people who contacted me prior to this debate with powerful stories to tell that deserve to be aired, the cuts have depleted numbers on the frontline and certainly impacted on front-line capabilities, as well as increasing the risks to officer
safety. In Gwent, we have 1,127 police officers, whereas in March 2010 there were 1,437 full-time equivalent officers—a 20% cut. I am pleased that this year Gwent is recruiting new officers for the first time in three years, but we have had a loss of hundreds of experienced officers. Cuts of that severity are bound to have an effect. It will take time to bring the new people through.

As has been reiterated in this debate, we lack reliable data on incidents involving officers. We need that data, so we are better able to tackle the problem. Police officers have told me that they agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax when she says that the thin blue line is stretched far too thinly. Single-crewing is common practice and there is a heightened risk of harm because of that. Officers also tell me that numbers on a shift may look fine, but they do not relate to the numbers available to deal with crime. Shift numbers often include those on leave, on sick or on secondment. If we take off those waiting in custody or with injured people, the numbers are significantly lower.

Injuries sustained in the line of duty are far too frequent. They are becoming an acceptable part of the job and that should never be the case. It is not just a hazard of the job: it is clearly unacceptable. Officers report a noticeable reduction in respect for police officers and assaulting a police officer is not taken sufficiently seriously. I support the call in the motion for statutory guidance on sentencing uniformly across the country, which reflects the seriousness of the issue.

Police officers cannot protect us if they cannot protect themselves. I will just finish with this: a woman who is married to a police officer contacted me to describe just how the injuries her husband sustains in the course of his work affect the family. It has got to the point where, to stop their children worrying, the couple lie about how he sustains his injuries. She says:

“According to my children he is the clumsiest dad ever, as we have had to tell them ‘dad fell over a bin chasing someone’, ‘dad walked into a cupboard door in the station,’ ‘dad caught himself on the police car door.’ I am tired of seeing my husband come home injured and having to lie to my children about how he sustained his injuries. I worry every time he is late home and grateful every time he returns home safely.”

It is time that we did more—to say that that is unacceptable for such families and to support our officers who are out there on our behalf.

6.7 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): In 2003, PC Patrick Dunne was a Sutton resident serving in Wandsworth when he arrived in Cato Road in Clapham on his bike to deal with a minor domestic abuse call-out. Hearing gunfire, he rushed out into the street and was hit by a single pistol shot in the chest, which killed him instantly. His murderer, Gary Nelson, laughed with his colleagues and fired a celebratory shot in the air, before instantly. His murderer, Gary Nelson, laughed with his colleagues and fired a celebratory shot in the air, before

In 2009, PC Paul Dalton, a member of the Wrythe safer neighbourhoods team in Sutton next to where I live, was on shift walking close to a local funfair on a Sunday. He was stabbed in the neck with a wine bottle in an unprovoked attack. He bravely managed to chase his assailant and make an arrest. Fortunately, his stab-proof vest prevented a more severe injury, and the person was arrested and jailed for five years. In London terms, Sutton is a low-crime borough, and residents do not expect that sort of violence, but police officers know that, however unlikely, something could happen at any time. As well as policing more dangerous areas than Sutton, Met police officers have to police public events and demonstrations, and face constant terrorist threats.

I have seen demonstrations turn ugly here in Westminster and the pressure that police officers come under when that happens. Six years ago, I watched from Bellamy’s café as protesters outside, right in front of us, picked up rubble from roadworks with the clear purpose of throwing it at police officers. I can only stand in awe of how police officers keep their nerve, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies), along with their patience and their discipline, and I have seen how pumped up they are at the end of their shifts. Parliament Square that day looked like a war zone, with fires all around.

Today, assaults on officers are still too frequent—frankly, just one is too many. Operational changes, as we have heard, as well as changes in sentencing and sentencing advice can help. Police officers face risks from spitting, including hepatitis, and may have to take courses of powerful anti-viral drugs, for up to three months, that can cause severe nausea.

I was very disappointed when the Mayor of London abruptly pressed the pause button at the last minute on the trialling of spit guards. As London’s equivalent of a police and crime commissioner, the Mayor is no longer a lawyer who represents people claiming against the police; he represents the police officers and their welfare, and he represents Londoners, so it is for him to maintain their safety. I hope he will look again at this issue.

As we have also heard, body cameras are a useful innovation for reducing complaints about police officers. I read an interesting report by the University of Cambridge, which suggested that incidents of assaults had increased for those wearing body cameras by 15%. The university acknowledged, however, that far more research needs to be done to explain what lies behind that.

A number of Members lobbied the then Chancellor of the Exchequer to protect the police budget and protect police numbers last time. We want to make sure that our brave police officers are out and about, acting as a visible deterrent, but also keeping us safe.

6.11 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today’s very important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on spearheading this cause and on the powerful case that she made. A very moving maiden speech was also given by my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

In common with other hon. Members, I have the utmost respect for our police officers and for the job they do in keeping our communities and our country
safe. Over the past few months, I have had the privilege of taking part in the police service parliamentary scheme. I have always felt, albeit from a distance, that police officers go over and above the call of duty when carrying out their role. During my time on the parliamentary scheme, as I shadowed police officers in the course of their duties, I was impressed at first hand by just how committed and passionate they are.

It is alarming that, last year, an estimated 23,394 police officers were assaulted while undertaking their duty. This equates to 64 assaults every day. Police numbers have been much reduced since 2010, with the loss of about 19,000 officers. Clearly, this reduction puts added pressure on police officers and has a detrimental impact on morale and officer safety.

Most people do their jobs in safe surroundings, while police officers face dangerous situations and risk their own safety every day. As people who work hard on behalf of society to keep us all safe, police officers deserve to have the full backing of the law in the event that they are assaulted. That assurance will give officers the confidence that they will be fully supported and protected by the criminal justice system.

In my experience, the vast majority of the public do respect the police and the job they do. Luckily, most people do not have direct contact with police officers, but are reassured that the police are there doing their job to keep them and their communities safe. Unfortunately, a few openly attack or assault officers. We must all send a strong message that that is unacceptable, and those who seek to harm officers will indeed face severe consequences and robust sentencing on conviction.

We know that police officers put themselves in harm’s way in the course of their duty, and they do it selflessly. However, the view that being assaulted is “just part of the job” cannot be right. An assault on a police officer doing their lawful duty is, as we heard earlier, an assault against society. Currently, such assaults are covered by section 89 of the Police Act 1996. However, although sentencing allows for a custodial sentence of up to six months, the reality of a conviction for assault on a police officer is rare. It is more common for a caution, a fine or a suspended sentence to be imposed. Latest official figures show that 7,829 criminals were convicted of assaulting police officers last year, but only 1,002 of them were sent to prison.

Most of my constituency is covered by South Wales police, but a third is covered by Gwent police. Both forces have recorded instances of assault, including biting and spitting at officers. As we know, the seriousness of assaults varies, but in many cases officers are off work for some time. Obviously much distress is caused to the individuals involved, but during the periods when they are off work an even greater strain is imposed on police workloads.

I support the motion, and I urge other Members to do so as well.

6.15 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak in the debate, and to have another opportunity to discuss this issue. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who is a strong advocate for police officer safety and who, as we have heard, initiated an Adjournment debate on the subject in which I was happy to participate.

When people become police officers, they understand that they will face risks, and I well remember the risks that I faced during my 32-year career in the Metropolitan police. I received a few pokes myself, but I am glad to say that I survived them. In my view, however, an assault on a police officer constitutes an assault on our values, on our civilised way of life and on our society, and should attract the strongest punishment that the criminal justice system can offer. It is vital for the system to use the strong sentencing guidelines and the full extent of the law to punish those who assault officers. I am sorry, but a caution, a fine or a suspended sentence is not adequate or appropriate. We must send the clear message that any assault on a police officer—on our society—will be met with the full force of the law. Moreover, it is imperative that we take our duty of care with the utmost seriousness, and that means giving officers the proper equipment and protection to enable them to deal with the myriad threats that they now face.

Many of us have areas in our constituencies that are major night-time hotspots, and there are problems in managing such areas. There can be hundreds of pubs and clubs in small areas in a city, with long licensing hours and poor management of drunken and aggressive behaviour. That puts the police in direct confrontation with people who have been allowed to drink to excess, have been thrown out of clubs or have been involved in violent incidents. It must be said that that culture only grew under the Labour Government, with the 24-hour licensing laws and the so-called pavement culture that was fostered under Tony Blair. We need to look again at those laws, at the management of certain premises, and at the way in which pubs and clubs deal with people who are violent if we are to change the environment that causes a large number of assaults on police. It is vital that we do that if we are to have a serious debate about tackling such behaviour.

Long custodial sentences are imperative, not just for the purpose of punishment but, in particular, to protect society from this loutish conduct. However, for the sake of officers throughout the country, we must also try to tackle the behaviour—or the lack thereof—that is at the root of some of the problems. There are, of course, other problems, but I wanted to introduce that issue to the debate in the hope that it will be discussed further.

There is much to agree with in the motion, but we need to be clear about the issue of police numbers. It is, of course, incredibly important for us to have sufficient officers to tackle and prevent crime and antisocial behaviour. However, as one who has managed resources and police officers and who remains in constant contact with former and current officers, I know that it is far too simplistic to concentrate solely on the issue of numbers. This is about giving the police the proper technical resources and equipment, and about the correct management and deployment of those resources. Senior management must use the techniques and resources that are available to 21st-century police forces to manage their forces properly and deploy them in the right way if we are to continue to cut crime and tackle the root causes of criminal and antisocial behaviour.

In the case of police assaults, there is no substitute for strong custodial sentences. If we are to tackle assaults on those who protect and maintain our society—
which, in turn, constitute attacks on that very society—we must ensure that the police are secure in the possession of the very best equipment, and are themselves protected by determined prosecutors who deal with these cases in a way that ensures that serious and severe custodial sentences ensue.

6.19 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The average police officer will be assaulted every five or six years that they serve. It is easy to forget that those officers, despite their exceptional work, are regular people; they go to work to earn a living, to put food on the table and a roof over their family's head. They should not have to put up with the threat of not coming home in one piece. We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to all those who put themselves in danger to protect us, and, as this debate has shown, we are extremely grateful for the work they do. However, it is our responsibility not only to recognise the problem before us, but to deal with it, too.

The Police Federation has claimed that lenient sentences given to those who assault officers are one of the main reasons that so many officers are harmed. Every force in the UK has incidents each week of police officers receiving punches to the face, bites to the arms, and cuts to the head, but the perpetrators are often let off without custodial sentences. On the occasions when a sentence is given, they can be woefully short. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) has done so much work on it. Our police officers have a long history of dealing with difficult and violent individuals, and it is right that they should feel they have the protection of the law when they do so. I am thinking particularly of those who show bravery every day on the streets of south Devon and Torbay and those who have in many cases put their own lives at risk to try and save others, either when dealing with a criminal situation or when coming across someone in distress or need.

The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) talked about Devon and Cornwall being a sleepy area, and he may not have meant it in the way it came across, but although Devon and Cornwall have beautiful areas and villages, Torbay has its share of issues and difficulties, like many other coastal communities, and the level of assaults we have seen on officers is concerning, with 267 in an 11-month period and a—thus far unaudited—further 26 assaults last month. To see people who are serving the public being dealt with in that way gives all of us cause for concern.

I welcome the way in which this debate has been conducted. Most police forces around the world carry firearms for protection, and it is a huge compliment to our own police that they stand firm behind the principle that we police by consent and not at the point of a gun. We see far too many incidents in the United States that would never warrant the use of lethal force or firearms being drawn in this country. It is a real compliment to our officers that the vast majority of them go out there every day without being armed with a lethal weapon. That said, it is right that police forces in places such as Devon and Cornwall are considering the expanded use of Tasers and spit hoods to deal with those who use violence, those who will not co-operate when arrested and, crucially, those who put others at risk.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on what we ask our officers to do. Some contributions to the debate seemed to suggest that they deal only with crime. The nature of crime is changing, and last year’s Public Accounts Committee’s report drilled down into that subject. We considered the situations that we are now asking response police officers to go into. I ask the Minister to tell us when we can look forward to a revised funding formula, particularly in the light of the benefits that that will have for Devon and Cornwall. I also want to highlight the Bills dealing with animal cruelty that will be debated here on Friday 24 February. They might help to deal with some of the issues relating to assaults on police dogs and horses. It is bizarre that at the moment someone can be charged with such an offence and receive a
similar sentence to one that they would receive for damaging property. The Library notes show a worrying decline in the average custodial sentences given to some offenders, and I hope that the new sentencing guidelines will help to deal with that. I welcome this debate, and I welcome this opportunity to pay tribute to the officers who show such bravery each and every day.

6.26 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her excellent maiden speech. I should also like to thank the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for securing this debate and for doing so much work on this matter. I am sure the House will appreciate that assaults on police officers cannot be brushed off as an occupational hazard. Figures obtained from South Wales police show that a total of 631 days were lost due to work-related assaults in one year. North Wales police say that assaults on officers are a daily occurrence.

The first problem that we should address is the lack of accurate recording of assaults against police officers. The Plaid Cymru police and crime commissioner for the North Wales police force, Arfon Jones, has secured sufficient budget allocation to ensure that he can realise his manifesto pledge to supply every police officer with body-worn video equipment while on duty. Body-worn cameras collect evidence that has proved beneficial in securing domestic violence convictions as well as protecting individual officers from malicious complaints and physical assault. There is thus a justice result in having these cameras. It became evident to me, during the time that I was lucky enough to spend with Sergeant Alex Baker and other North Wales police officers on the police parliamentary scheme earlier this year, that body-worn cameras were greatly welcomed for those very reasons. Powerful initiatives such as these should be extended as a matter of good practice. The Government cannot use the police and crime commissioners as an excuse for shrugging off such a fundamental responsibility.

The other point that I want to make is about cuts to front-line policing. It is not a fair response on the part of the Government to say that police spending is now protected. The police are suffering from the previous budget cuts, whose effects are now becoming statistically evident. We have seen a reduction in police officer numbers of 1,300 in Wales since 2010. Last year’s police funding formula would have resulted in a £32 million cut to Welsh forces, which would have caused Welsh police severe difficulties, as I am sure Members can imagine. Last year’s review of police funding sought to place greater emphasis on socioeconomic data and more general crime figures, but such a formula does not properly consider the workload differences of each force.

Figures provided by Dyfed-Powys police indicate that funding for Welsh forces in line with population would result in an additional £25 million for Wales. Of course, if policing were devolved to Wales—a position supported by all four police and crime commissioners in Wales—the overall Barnett formula for funding public services would indeed be based on population. As an aside, I would observe that Welsh forces are facing these significant cuts while control over policing is retained in Westminster. This is particularly important when we consider that policing is devolved to Scotland and Northern Ireland, where the new formula will not apply.

When I have been out with the police, particularly the armed response and dog handler units, I learned about real concerns that the drive to work in alliance with neighbouring forces, arising from the long-term cuts agenda, would result in yet more police officers being put in dangerous situations without sufficient back-up. Of course, there are advantages to co-operation, especially for training, but there is also a tendency to locate officers in areas where the likelihood of certain types of crime is highest. That intrinsically disadvantages officers and the public in rural areas, where they can run the risk of finding themselves unreachable in emergency situations, which is beyond the pale.

In conclusion, I am in favour of the motion, but with one big caveat: that, in line with police and crime commissioners in Wales, policing is devolved and sufficiently funded to ensure that police officers are able to continue their excellent work in Wales.

6.30 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): This issue has always been of personal importance to me. For nearly 30 years, my father was a West Midlands police officer, serving in the mounted branch and the firearms unit. In the 1980s, I remember kissing him goodbye as he went off to police football matches and riots, city centre riots and, yes, Orgreave. Having seen all that makes watching footage of assaults on police officers that bit more real. It is even more devastating when the person going home injured is one’s own father.

West Midlands police officers do a heroic job under consistent pressure to perform. Any assault on any police officer or PCSO is clearly totally deplorable, and those convicted of such assaults must expect a strong and lengthy prison sentence. Ever since the reforms of Robert Peel, we have policed by consent. It is right that the Minister reiterated what he said in the Adjournment debate called by the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) about the public having to “understand that a police officer is to be respected and is there to serve the community.”—[Official Report, 11 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 283.]

Police officers are not there to stand by while they are abused and assaulted. Any use of force must be proportionate, but assessing that cannot be done with the cold rationalism of someone based in an office; it must be viewed from the standpoint of someone who genuinely feels that their personal safety and that of those around them is at risk.

During the summer recess, I did a night shift on patrol with West Midlands police around Dudley borough. The officers explained the difference that body cameras, 1,600 of which have been bought with co-funding from the Home Office, are already making as they get issued to all neighbourhood and response officers. Many Members will have seen the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology’s briefing from last year, which highlighted several benefits from the initial trial that have now been backed up by the experience in the west midlands. In fact, since the camera roll-out there has been a 10% increase in cases proceeding to charge, a 9% increase in early guilty pleas and, staggeringly, a 93% fall in complaints against police officers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Mike Wood: I am afraid that I cannot.

Late last month, I attended the Dudley council for voluntary service awards, at which Chief Superintendent Richard Fisher of the Dudley local policing unit talked of a future in which new technology could not only allow officers to spend more time on policing rather than filling in their pocket notebooks, but enable body cameras to record automatically if an officer draws out their Taser or CS gas. Such technology would improve the safety of both officers and the public.

Our police officers put their safety at risk every time they go out. We owe it to them to do everything we can to keep them safe and to ensure that those who do cause them harm receive the punishment they deserve.

6.34 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Let me start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for her outstanding work in pursuing this issue and to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for her wonderful maiden speech today. She spoke with supreme confidence, sincerity and empathy, and I am sure she will be a great champion for her constituency, just as Jo was.

As we have heard today, the thin blue line keeps getting thinner, which threatens the safety of not only the public, but the men and women working all hours to protect us. Only today, the front page of my local paper, the Ellesmere Port Pioneer, pays tribute to officers who stopped a man setting himself on fire. The truth is that a cut in the number of officers of nearly 20,000 from 2010 to this year has led to the police sometimes being simply unable to attend certain incidents, and to response times at night getting longer and longer. Many constituents tell me that they no longer report incidents because they know the police do not have the resources to respond; this is creating a serious crisis of public confidence in the capacity of the police to respond to incidents.

Ahead of this debate, I asked a number of local officers for their views. One told me:

“Along with every officer that I know; I joined the Police to help people, even those people who hate the Police—we are there for everyone. I’m now surrounded by demoralised colleagues desperately trying to put a brave face on things, but completely overstretched and unable to carry out their jobs to the level that they would like to. This is not an accident; it is a political choice and one which I am concerned will lead to the injury and death of officers and members of the public.”

It should be noted that this officer sent their message during a week of night shifts working alone.

Another officer raised similar concerns about the numbers of officers, but also raised the issue of the impact of cuts to youth justice, diversionary projects, youth workers, social services and mental health services on the workload of the police. He told me that too often officers who should be working to protect the public are left to the most expensive services to pick up the pieces, these cuts can often be a false economy. I hope the Government will reflect on that.

Finally, I want to discuss the estimated 23,000 assaults on our officers in England and Wales each year, each one of which is an attack on all of us. In my area of Cheshire, there were 442 recorded assaults on officers in 2015-16, which equates to one in every four and a half hours of officers being assaulted during the year. If workers in any other profession were asked to face such a risk while going to work, there would be a national outrage, and we should look at our police officers no differently. We need to send the message out to the police and other public servants that we know they do a tough job, which is sometimes dangerous, but we value them and want them to be safe, and we want the full force of the law to be used against those who would use violence against them.

6.37 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for an excellent maiden speech? I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for pushing this important issue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) for saving me from going through a whole lot of statistics in three minutes and 46 seconds, and I praise my hon. Friends the Members for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and for Gower (Byron Davies) for both having served in the police service. I pay tribute to Dorset police, who do the most fantastic job, in a part of the country that many people think is affluent but which is not; we have our share of problems and the police do a wonderful job down there.

I wish to talk briefly about police safety and then move on to police numbers. Before I say anything more, may I pay tribute to our Front-Bench team, who are doing an excellent job, given the financial problems that, as we all know, we face? My comments are therefore in no way aimed at the job they are doing; I make them because I simply must speak up on behalf of my constituents, as that is my job and my duty.

I spoke today to an officer of some 28 years’ service, and his view is that the charging standards have been watered down. His solution, which I am sure the Government would appreciate, is not more police officers, but simply upping the ante in the courts. All too often where police officers or other members of the public services—those in the fire and ambulance services, and prison officers—have been assaulted, they find that the police do a fantastic job getting their case to court, but the courts simply do not have the power to follow up and impose a suitable sentence. Perhaps when she sums up, the Minister could tell the House about using not a caution for assaulting a police officer, which is not acceptable under any circumstances, but the offence of aggravated assault, which of course carries a far more serious sentence, for any assault, including spitting.

Unfortunately, if we do not do that, the yobbish element, or those who attack police officers and other members of our public service, will have no deterrent. They will not be discouraged from behaving in the way that all of us in this House find unacceptable.

On police numbers, there is no doubt that, in Dorset, we need more officers. What I hear from the police
officers on the ground, and from senior officers, is that the nature of crime has changed. There is less crime on the streets, and more crime on the internet. Sadly, we have to deal with more terrorism. More specialist officers are being trained and therefore taken off our streets to meet that threat, and quite rightly so. As a consequence, officers on the street in rural communities such as mine are few and far between. They have no axe to grind politically—they are simply trying to do their job professionally—but the police are finding that, on many occasions, they do not have the officers to do the job. One comment I hear is, "If you don't see an officer, that's good news." I am afraid that I have to say to the House that I disagree, because if we do not see an officer, you can bet your life that the burglar, the thug or the yob will not see an officer either, and that opens up territory for them to exploit to the disadvantage of our constituents. What we need in addition to the specific resources and specialist officers are officers on the beat. That demand and need has not gone. In fact, if anything, as the world changes—often to the detriment of our constituents—we need them more.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): When I was a special constable traipsing the streets of Cheshire, the desk sergeant always said to me that walking the streets was reassuring to the public. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Richard Drax: I do. As a former soldier who, along with other Members in this House, served in Northern Ireland, I can say that all the information and intelligence that we got from the streets came from guardsmen, soldiers and riflemen or whoever was on the ground. No amount of cameras or specialist equipment could feed back what we needed to know—who was in the pub, what they were dressed in and why they were there. Personal checks—or p-checks as we called them—were about going up to someone and asking them what they were doing on the streets at the time. That all provided valuable information and acted as a deterrent to stop terrorists doing things against us and the civilian population. Similarly, more officers on the beat would do this and safeguard our constituents.

I end by paying tribute to the Dorset police force, which does a fantastic job, to all police forces in this country, and to all those who serve us in uniform. They should be protected, and I hope that we hear more from the Minister when she sums up.

6.42 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I join the whole House today in wishing the officer who was stabbed in Lancashire a very speedy recovery. I also add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her moving and poignant maiden speech. She has done the memory of Jo, her constituents and this House proud by her contribution today. She also made me cry.

In this place, we make the laws, but we depend on police officers to go out into our communities and enforce them. This relationship places a special duty on us(nullptr), and indeed in the Government, to ensure that police officers can do their job safely and free from fear of attack. As demonstrated by the horrific stories that we have heard today from my hon. Friends the Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), all too often we are failing in that special duty.

I was particularly affected by the story told by my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) of the clumsy daddy. Nobody should have to experience that level of violence in their job and then have to lie to their children in that way.

A couple of weeks back, as I do every possible year, I attended a memorial service for PC Nina MacKay, who was attacked and stabbed 19 years ago when she went to arrest a wanted man in his home in my constituency. Her wounds were fatal. She was just 25 years old—a young woman with her entire life ahead of her, murdered as she went about her job.

Although police officer deaths are mercifully rare, almost all officers are violently confronted at some point in their careers. I have been looking at the case logs of attacks on police officers in the London borough of Westminster, to see the situation faced by the police working in the borough in which we sit. There have been 80 attacks on police officers in Westminster since May. Of these, 22 were classified as actual bodily harm and five as grievous bodily harm. The vast majority of the attacks were on the streets of Westminster, a few were in residential premises and 14 took place while the perpetrator was in police custody. I know that there were 80 attacks in Westminster since May because the Metropolitan Police Service has kept what are called the Operation Hampshire databases for each borough since April. Every time a police officer is attacked in London, there is now a strict protocol.

The incident is recorded as a crime and registered in the human resources log. A welfare officer—that is important—an investigation officer and someone from the senior leadership is immediately notified of the attack. The attacked officer is kept up to date with the progress of investigations. Most importantly, they are provided with welfare support, someone to ask how they are and provide support if it is wanted or needed. The process is designed to ensure that officers know that an assault on them is taken as seriously as an assault on any member of the public. Experiencing violence should not be accepted or expected as part of their jobs. They should not be considered second-class victims.

I was told by one officer about an attack that he endured when he was a young man and new to the police. It was long before these new protocols were even thought of. He was surrounded by a group of men. They punched him, kicked him and spat at him. He was shaken up. I can imagine that it frightened him, and it certainly dented his confidence. When he got back to the station the very next day, his colleagues congratulated him on a job well done and on the fact that he was in for the night shift, but one boss had the emotional intelligence to come to him, ask why he was there and encourage him to go home and spend the night with his family. He told me, "It was the smallest thing, but it was the most important thing." I hope that officers in London are receiving that small but important thing now that Operation Hampshire is in place. If an officer in London is attacked, the protocol ensures that there is welfare support. They will not have to rely on the judgment and kindness of one decent boss.
Welfare care is important, but so is recording. We are told that there were an estimated 23,000 assaults on police officers in England and Wales last year. As we have heard, this is a number that we can have absolutely no confidence in. I have been told that it is not much better than a back-of-an-envelope job. The Home Office says that it has “worked with police forces to try and improve the data further”, as the Minister reiterated today. However, I heard him say only that he wants to add an additional category of assault with an injury to the recorded crime data. I would like him to go further—he is not a bad man. I want him to ask all police services to adopt the comprehensive and systematic approach taken by the Metropolitan and Hampshire police services. The Hampshire approach includes recording every incident in human resource logs, and integrating data collection with welfare provision. As my story of that young police officer shows, good systems are not just about collecting data, but about offering support.

Proper recording of assaults may give us a better idea of the scale of the problem we are facing, but it will not reduce the number of attacks. For that, Government action is necessary, so I come to sentencing. The Police Federation has raised concerns that a man who punched a police officer in the face and kicked them to the floor would like him to go further—he is not a bad man. I want him to ask all police services to adopt the comprehensive and systematic approach taken by the Metropolitan and Hampshire police services. The Hampshire approach includes recording every incident in human resource logs, and integrating data collection with welfare provision. As my story of that young police officer shows, good systems are not just about collecting data, but about offering support.

Proper recording of assaults may give us a better idea of the scale of the problem we are facing, but it will not reduce the number of attacks. For that, Government action is necessary, so I come to sentencing. The Police Federation has raised concerns that a man who punched a police officer in the face and kicked them to the floor received just a 12-month community order. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax highlighted a case where a man assaulted four police officers, gouged their eyes and inflicted serious injury. He received only a two-month suspended sentence. Will the Minister commit to reiterating to the Sentencing Council, which I obviously respect the independence of, the seriousness with which we in this place treat attacks on police officers?

It would be wrong of me to speak on this matter without acknowledging the substantial cuts the police have had to absorb since the Conservatives came to power. There are 20,000 fewer police officers in the United Kingdom than in 2010—a reduction of 11.7%. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) told us how this is really stretching services in Greater Manchester, as it is elsewhere. That thin blue line has been getting thinner and thinner.

The cuts are leading to under-reporting by the public as their confidence is dented, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). There are concerns that the cuts are also leading to an increase in single crewing, which may well make police officers—particularly at night and when responding to emergency situations—even more vulnerable. But there are no reliable statistics on the amount of single crewing each police force is undertaking. We do not know definitively whether it is becoming more common and in which situations it is used. We do not know whether it has made officers more vulnerable to attack. PCCs and the Home Office need to know the answers to these questions if they are to make informed strategic decisions and, most importantly, keep our officers safe from unnecessary danger.

Today, we have had calls for the Government to improve the recording and reporting of these attacks. The Minister has been asked to work with the Sentencing Council to ensure that appropriate punishments are meted out. He has also been asked to look at the way police cuts are stretching our services. I hope that he will take these requests seriously and act on them urgently. Our police officers deserve to know that their welfare is paramount.

6.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): This has been a lively debate on an important subject of great concern to us all. I have listened with great care to the thoughtful speeches made by Members on both sides of the House. Sadly, there is so little time for me to speak that I will not be able to address all the questions, but I will write to Members with answers.

I am sure that you will agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that there has been one absolutely stand-out speech this afternoon, and that was the maiden speech of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). We will never forget the contribution that Jo made; she was, indeed, a small woman with a big kick. I am sure that the people of Batley and Spen will be extremely well represented by the hon. Lady, as we have seen from her speech today. I join her in paying great respect to West Yorkshire police for how they have dealt with an incredibly difficult time for her community and the broader community of West Yorkshire.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for persuading her colleagues to secure this important debate and for enabling us all to highlight this important issue. Like the hon. Lady and many Members we have heard this afternoon, I have spent time on the beat with officers in my constituency. My sister was a police officer, and my nephew—I am proud of him—is now serving our community as a special. I know at first hand of the dedication of police officers, keeping us safe, day in, day out, all around our country.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) for his long and distinguished service as a special, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) for his more than 30 years of service as a police officer. I congratulate him on his recent election to the Home Affairs Committee, where I am sure that he will do an excellent job.

This afternoon, there have been calls for more and stronger sentencing. We agree that sentences must be tough. Although sentences are a matter for the courts, I want to assure all Members that sentencing guidelines already provide for assault on a police officer to be treated more severely. Assaults on police officers resulting in injuries will often result in a charge of actual bodily harm or an even more serious offence. In these cases, the fact that the victim is a police officer delivering this vital service is taken into account.

An assault can be treated more severely if the court so chooses, and there are offences relating specifically to police officers even where there is no physical harm. Right at the other end of the spectrum, in the most serious cases where an individual is convicted of the murder of a police officer in the course of his duty, a whole-life order will now be the sentencing starting point, thanks to the provisions introduced by the Government in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015.

As the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service stated, the Government will continue to provide the Sentencing Council with data and evidence on assaults
on police officers as it reviews its guidelines. We must make sure that any assault on a police officer is treated with the gravity it deserves. As he said, we will continue to work with ministerial colleagues across the Government, such as the Solicitor General, to ensure that individuals are appropriately prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

**Philip Davies:** It has been agreed right across the House that sentencing for assaults on police officers is not sufficient. Would it not be a good idea for the Minister to send a transcript of this debate to Lord Justice Treacy, the chairman of the Sentencing Council, to ask him, on the back of this debate, to look once again at these guidelines to make sure that they are more appropriate?

**Sarah Newton:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will make sure that members of the Sentencing Council read the record of this debate and fully understand the strong feelings in this House about having really tough sentences for these absolutely appalling and totally unacceptable offences.

I will touch briefly on the issue of equipment to support police officers because that was raised by a number of Members. I want to underline the fact that the Home Office supports chief constables in their operational decisions. This includes the funding of research on and guidance about equipment that might be helpful, including body cameras and spit hoods. I am sure we all agree, however, that the police must maintain their operational independence. It is not for the Home Office to run the police from Marsham Street. Chief constables and police and crime commissioners are accountable to the local communities they serve.

**Andy Burnham:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sarah Newton:** I am afraid that I cannot because of the time.

I want to assure the whole House of the absolute seriousness with which the Government regard assaults on police officers, as demonstrated by the better data that are going to be made available, including the new reporting announced today, through the leadership of the College of Policing. I know that chief constables will continue to do whatever they can to keep their people safe. We will enable them to work confidently to tackle the challenges of modern crime, and we will absolutely continue to support them in doing so.

It is really important to go back to what my right hon. Friend the Minister said right at the beginning of the debate: assaultng a police officer is completely unacceptable. It is indeed an assault on us all and all our society. Police officers should be able to carry out their duties without fear of assault, and anyone found guilty of such an offence can expect to face the full force of the law.

**Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.**

The House divided: Ayes 207, Noes 288.

**Division No. 76**

[6.58 pm]

**AYES**

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blankenosp, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Brandshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Chapman, Jenny
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Davies, Philip
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fiellio, Robert
Fiint, rh Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Glass, Pat
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise

**NOES**

Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Herbert, rh Stephen
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollobaugh, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kendall, Liz
Kinnahan, Danny
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Lynch, Holly
Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marrs, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kenny
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Meaie, Sir Alan
Mearns, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Nandy, Lisa
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillips, Bridget
Pound, Stephen
NOES

Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Mr Greg
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damion
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Crabb, Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Downen, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, Dr Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellison, Jane
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evett, rh David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr Sir Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Field, Mr Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, Mr William
Frazer, Lucy
Freedman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Sir Edward
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greengrass, rh Justine
Grieve, Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
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Harper, rh Mr Mark
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Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
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Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
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Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, Mr Nick
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Sir David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg

Tellers for the Ayes:

Vicky Foxcroft and
Jeff Smith

Field, rh Mark
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
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Jones, rh Sir David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaijalsh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and
Christopher Pincher

Business without Debate

PETITIONS
Symmetry Park Logistics

7.12 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition organised by Mrs Gillyan Bailey and supported by two local councillors in Isham, Councillor Clive Hallam and Councillor Mrs Bone. Mrs Bailey has done an enormous amount of work. She has got virtually every resident in the village to sign the petition, which has hundreds of names on it. It concerns a completely unsatisfactory planning proposal, in the neighbouring constituency, which would create a logistics park twice the size of the village of Isham.

The petition reads:

The Humble Petition of residents of Isham, Northamptonshire and the surrounding area, Sheweth.

That the Petitioners believe that the proposed planning application for the logistics development site known as Symmetry Park, outside, but adjacent to the village of Isham—planning application KET/2016/0606—is unacceptable, because it is twice the size of Isham, will very significantly increase the volume of traffic going through the village, increase noise, air and light pollution to unacceptable levels and is opposed by the vast majority of local residents.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Communities and Local Government to encourage the Borough Council of Kettering to reject the current planning application.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of residents of the Peterborough constituency, who are very concerned regarding the eviction of residents of St Michael’s Gate in Parnwell, Peterborough, by their landlords. This issue has received a lot of public attention. A similar petition on the Change.org website has gained more than 1,400 supporters, and a second further petition to Peterborough City Council has hundreds of signatures. I can make a copy of it available to Ministers. I thank all those who have signed this petition and similar ones.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Peterborough, Declares that residents of St Michael’s Gate are being threatened by eviction from their landlords Stef and Philips acting on behalf of Paul Simon Magic Homes; further that the private landlord who has recently acquired St Michael’s Gate has entered into agreement with Peterborough City Council to house homeless people at the properties; further that as a result of this agreement, all current longstanding tenants will be evicted, and some former tenants, including families, have had to declare themselves homeless; and further that Peterborough City Council should be doing more to support residents against their eviction by the private landlords.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to put pressure on Peterborough City Council to ensure that residents of St Michael’s Gate in Parnwell, Peterborough, are protected from eviction by their landlords.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
EU Customs Union

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

7.16 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to have a short debate on the UK’s membership of the customs union.

My constituents voted to leave the European Union, largely because of what they see as uncontrolled immigration, but also because of the slightly bossy tendency of some of the EU institutions, which I think can be taken as a rejection of the European Court of Justice. However, they did not foresee all the consequences of the vote, partly because a number of false promises were made—most notably that there would be £350 million extra every week for the NHS, and also that no jobs would be at risk.

In the circumstances, it is reasonable of the Prime Minister to work on the assumption that part of her mandate is to end the free movement of citizens from the EU to the UK. That, in itself, does not amount to a negotiating strategy. The problem is that we are hearing wildly different things from different members of the Government. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has just reassured Nissan and it is going ahead with significant inward investment. I welcome that. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary still seems to believe that it will be easy and straightforward to do free trade deals “very rapidly indeed”.

The Government continue to say that they will not provide a running commentary on the negotiations. I know they claim that that is because they want to maintain confidentiality, but it appears from the outside as if it is because they are finding it difficult to agree among themselves on what should be done.

What I find alarming is the Government’s refusal to answer parliamentary questions. I asked the Minister a written parliamentary question about the Government’s policy on the customs union. He gave a rather opaque answer. I can live with that, but I have also put down a large number of written questions that ask factual things, such as how much we export, what the value of it is and what would be covered by the rules of origin were we to leave the customs union. On those questions, I also received the answer, “We will not give a running commentary.” That is why I felt it necessary to have a debate and explore these issues in more detail. I am alarmed by this situation, because the risk is that decisions will be taken on the basis of rhetoric not facts and on the basis of ideology not analysis.

An intelligent negotiating strategy needs to meet the public’s expectations, to be based on a hard-headed assessment of the national interest and to be deliverable. With that in mind, the Treasury Committee visited Berlin and Rome in September to find out what some of our counterparts might think. I am sorry to say that Brexit is not at the top of the in-tray for the other EU member states. They all see it in the context of their domestic political worries. Angela Merkel is looking over her shoulder at Alternative für Deutschland; Hollande is worried about Le Pen; Matteo Renzi is worried about Movimento 5 Stelle. Probably only the Irish take Brexit as seriously as we do. Over and over again we heard the same word: precedent. There should be no reward for exiting the EU, and no precedents must be set.

I conclude from that that if controlling immigration is going to be part of the British position and we are to move to a more skills-based approach for managing migration, our EU partners are going to say that we cannot remain members of the single market. However, there has not been so much attention paid to our membership of the customs union, which I am beginning to think may be more important, especially if we want manufacturing industry to thrive in this country.

It is worth recalling the history. The customs unions was established in 1968. It is what we joined in 1973, and what the public affirmed with the referendum in 1975. It is what most people call the Common Market. Unlike high levels of immigration or the ECJ, it is rather popular with the British public.

The shadow Chancellor has rather pejoratively described the Government’s approach as a “bankers’ Brexit”. I know why he has done that. We must base what we are doing on some facts. I remind the House that we export more goods—some £285 billion-worth—than we do services, the figure for which is £226 billion. That is a ratio of 56:44. This is important. At the moment, we have a common external tariff, goods move freely within the EU and the Commission has competence for external trade negotiations. The customs union is not the same thing as the single market. Norway is in the single market but outside the customs union, whereas Turkey is in the customs union and outside the single market.

It is also worth recalling that the export of goods into the European Union comprises 48% of our exports. The EU is our biggest partner. Exports to Europe bring 3.3 million jobs. The next most significant partner is America, with 17% of our exports, and way down the numbers is China, our third biggest trading partner, with just 4%, or one 10th of the significance of our European exports. So what would happen if we were to leave the customs union?

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for calling this debate. She is precisely correct that this is what most of the debate in the House will be about. She said a little earlier that we joined the customs union when, effectively, we joined the European Union, as was reaffirmed in the referendum of 1975. Is that correct? If so, that sets the basis for what the Government have to argue, namely that in the referendum that we held this year we voted to leave the European Union and the directive is therefore to leave the customs union; we have to argue back from there. Will she clarify that point?

Helen Goodman: We joined the Common Market, which is the customs union, in 1973. Now we have voted to leave the European Union. People want to leave the EU, because of their concern about migration and perhaps about the ECJ. In my opinion, the move is not driven by concerns about the customs union, which in fact is very popular. That is what I am arguing.

Richard Fuller: We come from different points of view. I suspect, about the referendum—I supported our leaving the European Union—but there are very positive reasons for both sides regarding the customs union. We
have to understand where we are coming from after the referendum result. The presumption from that result is that we will leave the customs union. It is therefore beholden on people who may want us to stay in the customs union to argue what strong reasons there are for staying in—and there are strong reasons.

Helen Goodman: Let me come on to give some of those strong reasons. If we were to leave, we would face tariffs ranging generally between 5% and 10% on our exports. Even more significantly, our exporters would have to comply with the rules of origin. I think this is the biggest problem. I have the last television manufacturer in Britain, Cello Electronics, in my constituency. It imports a lot of components from China, puts the televisions together and sells them into the European market. The OECD estimates that the cost of filling in all the forms and complying with the rules of origin would add 24% to the export costs of selling into the European market. That would wipe out firms such as Cello, which, as I say, is in my constituency.

In Norway, which is outside the customs union, we know that some exporters find the bureaucracy of the rules of origin so burdensome that they prefer to pay the tariffs. This is really what the Nissan problem was. Belonging to the customs union was the first thing the Japanese Government listed in their hopes for what our deal would be, but the Government cannot take a factory-by-factory approach. Let us look at some of the big industries that would be affected: the automotive industry employs 450,000 people; aerospace 110,000 people; pharmaceuticals, such as Glaxo in my constituency, 93,000 people. All those industries have the same complex integrated international supply chains and would be badly hit were we to leave the customs union.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate and making some very strong and powerful points. Does she agree with me that if we are outside the single market there will be a load of non-tariff barriers that would definitely hit those sectors, and so membership of the single market is just as important as the customs union?

Helen Goodman: We need to explore that and think about it in a little more detail.

A leaked document from the Treasury found that were we to leave the customs union, our GDP would fall by some 4.5%. Of course, I am not asking the Minister to comment on a leaked document, but it would be very nice if he could say how many jobs a fall of 4.5% of our GDP would translate into us losing. I think it would be hundreds of thousands.

It is true that staying in the customs union limits our capacity to do new trade deals on the goods it covers with third countries such as India and Australia. Some of the hard Brexiteers, such as the Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), seem to think that this is a good thing. He made a speech in Manchester in which he hailed the “post-geography trading world”. Well I have heard of the end of history, but I have never before heard of the end of geography. I think he is being wildly over-optimistic. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer pointed out to the Treasury Committee, world growth and growth in trade are both slowing. This is not a good background in which to initiate these deals. The Government’s export target of £1 billion is bumping along at half that level and there would be a time lag. We cannot start the negotiations at least until our relationship with Europe is clear. That is obviously going to take three or four years, so we need to have transitional arrangements.

Finally, there must be a big question mark over whether we can get deals with third countries that are so much better that they more than compensate for what we would lose if we left the customs union. The UK is one tenth of the EU market of 550 million people. The Americans have already told us we would be at the back of the queue. The Swiss have found, in negotiations with the Chinese, that the Chinese get access to the Swiss market seven years before it gets access to the Chinese market. Ministers are at sixes and sevens on this, with the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy apparently on one side, and the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on the other. Robert Peston has pointed out that the mere fact that the Department for International Trade exists makes it a fiduciary obligation for multinational manufacturers based in Britain to start thinking about moving investment and jobs to the rest of the European Union. I will not talk about the Irish dimension, because I have already taken interventions on it, but it does present a significant political problem.

What I am mainly saying to the Minister this evening is that millions of jobs depend on our staying in the customs union. I am sure that the Secretary of State for International Trade is delighted that his career is flourishing and that he is travelling around the world, meeting all sorts of interesting people and trying to do lots of deals, but those million manufacturing jobs matter more than his grandiloquent ideas. What we want from the Minister is some concrete evidence that decisions will be taken on a proper basis. My message is simple: a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) on securing this debate. My constituents, like hers, voted to leave the European Union, so I welcome her comments about listening to that vote. It is also important that we all work together to make this process a success, so I welcome her analysis.

Last week, she posed a question along similar lines to the Prime Minister about the EU customs union and Nissan. I am delighted that since that question was posed, Nissan has announced that it will produce the Qashqai and a new model at its plant in Sunderland. The hon. Lady welcomed that, and so will I. I want to join the chorus of approval that we heard in this place for that decision. It is a vote of confidence, which shows that Britain is open for business and that we remain an outward-looking, world-leading nation. The plant in Sunderland will be expanded through new investment to be a super-plant, manufacturing more than 600,000 cars a year. Some 80% of the plant’s output is exported to more than 130 international markets. The decision is
a massive win for the 7,000 direct employees and 35,000 total British employees in the plant and the supply chain.

Turning to the core subject of this debate, the issue of the customs union is an important one. As with all facets of our exit negotiations, we recognise the need for a careful—what the hon. Lady called a “hard-headed”—analysis for a smooth transition that will minimise disruption to our trading relationships and seize the opportunities presented. This is an area in which there is excellent cross-Government co-operation, and I am pleased to be joined on the Treasury Bench this evening by the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison). That shows how the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Treasury are working hand in hand on these issues.

I would like to be clear from the outset that—as, I think, we are all aware—no final decision has been taken on our broader future economic relationship with the EU, which includes our approach to the customs union. As with our decision not to trigger article 50 immediately, it is right that we take the time, as the hon. Lady said, to analyse our options carefully and seek to secure the best deal for the whole of the UK.

Richard Fuller: Can the Minister help me with the question I posed to the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)? The ballot paper said that we are either leaving the European Union or remaining in it, and we voted to leave. We joined the customs union in 1973. Is not the presumption and the starting position for the Government the fact that we will leave the customs union, so arguments have to be made why we should not do that rather than accepting that that should be regarded as the opening position?

Mr Walker: I think it important to engage with arguments on both sides of this debate. The key thing is to secure the UK national interest, so before we take a decision, we will want to listen very carefully to the arguments for leaving the customs union and the arguments for staying in it.

I think we can all agree that the issue has numerous aspects. The hon. Lady speaks with considerable experience of complex economic issues, having been a Treasury fast-streamer serving on the Public Accounts Committee and the Treasury Committee, and a former Minister. She will appreciate that, as the Prime Minister said in her reply the other day, making a full assessment of the Government the fact that we will leave the customs union, so arguments have to be made why we should not do that rather than accepting that that should be regarded as the opening position?

First, it is important to understand exactly what a customs union is and is not. It is an arrangement that relates to trade in goods; it does not cover trade in services or free movement of capital or people. To facilitate trade, a customs union removes tariffs and customs controls on goods moving between its members. While services are not directly included—they are not subject to either tariffs or customs controls—they have become increasingly embedded in goods production, so a customs union could indirectly affect trade in services industries. For example, in parallel to exporting an aircraft engine, an engineering firm might also provide maintenance services; or in parallel to exporting cars, an automotive firm might provide financial services.

To function properly, a customs union must have a common external tariff, applied equally by all members of the union. That supports the free circulation of goods within the customs union, preventing trade diversion by ensuring that no one trading with the members of the union can be given preferential access to any individual members relative to the others. In the case of the European Union, in practice, we have chosen to make a reality of the common external tariff through the common commercial policy under which the European Commission negotiates on trade on the United Kingdom’s behalf, and in that way sets the common external tariff. In the case of members of the EU and the EU’s customs union, 80% of the tariffs that are collected by member states on imports from non-EU countries are paid into the EU budget, with member states retaining just the remaining 20% to cover collection costs. The UK collected £3.1 billion in tariffs on non-EU imports in the financial year 2015-16.

However, a customs union is only one of the many ways in which countries have sought to minimise the impact of customs procedures and support the free flow of goods. There are numerous examples around the world in which co-operation between customs authorities has helped to reduce the costs of customs processes at the border, short of a customs union. Even in the case of the European Union, the customs union is only part of an approach that also focuses on strengthening systems and processes on the ground. For example, the vast majority of customs declarations in the UK are submitted electronically and cleared rapidly, with only a small proportion experiencing delays—for example, when risk assessment indicates that compliance or enforcement checks are required at the border.

Norway has been involved in customs co-operation with Sweden and Finland, both of which are EU member states and are therefore in the EU customs union, as they have been since the 1960s. Norway has an agreement with the EU to mutually recognise each other’s schemes to impose less onerous checks on exporting firms with secure supply chains. It sits, as an observer, on some of the EU’s committees that discuss customs issues. Notwithstanding the issues raised by the hon. Lady, and although our Prime Minister has made it clear that we are seeking not an off-the-shelf solution but a UK solution, it is important to note the collaborative agreements that exist in other countries. Switzerland and the EU have an agreement that recognises the equivalence of security checks at their external borders, and waives the need to make pre-departure and pre-arrival declarations. If we look more widely, we see that the United States and Canada also co-operate closely on customs issues, including schemes to expedite customs procedures for firms with secure supply chains and collaborative arrangements for operations at the border.

Helen Goodman: I am listening with interest to what the Minister is saying, but according to my constituents, who do a great deal of exporting, exporting to Switzerland is a nightmare by comparison with exporting to the EU, because of all the bureaucracy. Does the Minister not agree that the UK is in a different position from Norway?
Its major export is oil, and exporting oil is incredibly simple, but, as I said earlier, most of the goods that we export are manufactured goods, which have complex supply chains.

Mr Walker: That is a fair point. I shall say something about our engagement with some of those industries and the importance of supply chains later in my speech. It is worth noting, however, that many countries also have authorised economic operator schemes, which means that exporters with supply chains that are demonstrably secure are subject to fewer and less stringent checks. The EU has such arrangements with China, Japan, Norway, Switzerland and the United States, through which both sides recognise each other’s authorised economic operators for customs purposes.

Turkey, which the hon. Lady mentioned, is one country outside the EU that has a customs union arrangement with it. That arrangement covers most but not all goods. Raw agricultural produce, for instance, is excluded. The EU and Turkey have been preparing to update the terms of their current customs union arrangements, which were always meant to be transitional, given that Turkey has applied to be a full member of the EU. I could go on, as there is a multiplicity of examples, but the point is that any decision about membership or otherwise is complex, and must take account of the full spectrum of options.

During last week’s debate, the Prime Minister also said that the way in which one dealt with the customs union did not involve a binary choice. There are different aspects to a customs union, which is precisely why it is important to look at the detail, to carry out the hard analysis that the hon. Lady called for, and to get the answer right. We have made it clear that we will pursue what works for the unique circumstances of the United Kingdom, and we continue to analyse thoroughly what it might look like in order to ensure that we make the best choice for the UK. That includes the broad-based analysis of more than 50 sectors that my Department is undertaking in relation to the impact of the UK’s leaving the EU.

As with the broader UK-EU negotiations, we recognise the need for a smooth transition that minimises disruption to our trading relationships and seizes the opportunities that are presented. The issue of a customs union has also been part of the Government’s programme of stakeholder engagement. We have been discussing this matter with numerous companies, organisations and trade bodies, including the chemicals sector, car manufacturers, and the agriculture and food and drink sector. We want to ensure that their views are reflected in our approach. The Prime Minister has been very clear that the intention of the Government is to ensure a competitive market so that people are able to prosper here in the United Kingdom and add to our economic growth.

We are also aware of the specific circumstances faced by businesses in Northern Ireland, which I know the hon. Lady could have touched on if she had not taken the interventions. We had a common travel area between the UK and the Republic of Ireland many years before either country was a member of the European Union. Nobody wants to return to the borders of the past. I underline the will and commitment of ourselves, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to support the common travel area and to ensure that there are no hard borders. We must now work closely together to ensure that as the UK leaves the EU we find shared solutions to the challenges and maximise the opportunities for both the UK and the Republic of Ireland, which I expect will continue to be a close friend of the UK in years to come.

Helen Goodman: I am slightly nervous that the Minister might sit down before I ask him another question. He said his Department is looking at 50 sectors. My basic request tonight is that we should have more information and facts from the Department, so will he make a start by telling us which 50 sectors and how large they are, how much they export and how many people are employed in them?

Mr Walker: In the six minutes I have left, it would be a challenge to run through each of those 50 sectors, but we will certainly disclose that information in due course. It is important to emphasise this is a whole-Government effort. Our Department is engaging with those sectors and conducting the analysis and drawing it all together, but we are also working closely with colleagues at the Treasury, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and all the other relevant Departments to each sector of the economy, because it is important we get this right and there is a role for every part of Government in informing that process.

Jonathan Edwards: I am slightly confused about one point. I welcome the announcement about the common travel area between the Republic of Ireland and the UK, but will that not mean there is an open border between the EU and the British state?

Mr Walker: I think both the Republic of Ireland in its communications with the EU and we in ours are very clear about the value we place on that common travel area, which existed long before the membership of the two countries to the EU. We have been clear in saying this is not necessarily a completely easy issue; it is an issue that will require some work, but we are determined to do that work and make sure we can make this work. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman’s question.

We must also consider carefully the position of the Crown dependencies and the UK’s overseas territories. Just today, I have met in a joint ministerial council with the overseas territories and the chief Ministers of the Crown dependencies to hear their views. There are some interesting examples. Gibraltar, for instance, has benefited from the UK’s membership of the EU but has not been part of the customs union to date.

I welcome this debate as part of the scrutiny of the Government’s position by this House. That is an important process and the information the hon. Lady and others have brought forward can certainly be taken into account as part of our analysis. I also look forward to Monday’s debate on exiting the EU and workers’ rights. That is an important aspect of our policy, and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has been very clear about our determination to protect workers’ rights.
[Mr Robin Walker]

That debate will be another opportunity for the House to discuss the important issues in relation to our exit from the European Union.

In summary, the Government fully recognise the importance of the question of a customs union with the EU in the context of our future relationship. It is a complex, multi-faceted issue, and we are analysing carefully all the options available to us with the aim of securing the best outcome for the UK as a whole.

Question put and agreed to.

7.44 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Nuisance Calls

1. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to tackle nuisance calls.

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for the work of the all-party group on nuisance calls. A number of its recommendations have been taken forward, including the new requirement for all direct marketing callers to provide caller-line identification, and I have just mentioned our intention to hold company directors to account. More needs to be done and I stand ready to make sure we do what we need to do to stamp out the dreadful nuisance that is nuisance calls.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware of the Fair Telecoms Campaign? It argues that, given the untargeted nature of the telephone, it is completely inappropriate for payment protection insurance and accident claims calls. It suggests that the Secretary of State should press colleagues at the Ministry of Justice to prohibit this entirely. Will she meet the campaign and my constituent David Hickson to sort this out?

Karen Bradley: I will look carefully at what the hon. Lady said, but I assure her that this is a cross-Government piece of work; we need to work together to tackle this and I fully recognise that nuisance calls can have a devastating effect on people.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Nuisance telephone calls are a modern menace, especially for the elderly. I am pleased to hear that the Government are taking more action. What will my right hon. Friend be doing to monitor whether the new action is actually being successful?

Karen Bradley: I will look carefully at whether the action we have taken so far has the desired effect, and if it does not I do not rule out taking further steps.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted that the UK Government have announced they will accept the provisions of my ten-minute rule Bill in their entirety and hold named directors to account for nuisance calls with effect from spring 2017. Does the right hon. Lady agree that we must not rest on our laurels and that we must continue to strive against nuisance calls to protect the vulnerable, all consumers and legitimate and ethical businesses, and will she keep the House updated on action going forward?

Karen Bradley: I pay tribute to the hon. Member for her Bill, which helped raise awareness of the issue, and I am pleased the Government are following her recommendations. We need to make sure this works; we need to work together to make sure that it does, and I will be very happy to continue updating the House on this matter.

Fixed Odds Betting Terminals

2. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the effectiveness of regulation of fixed odds betting terminals.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Mr Speaker, you will recall that before I went on maternity leave I announced that the triannual review into stakes and prizes would happen this year, and I am pleased to say this promise will include a close look at fixed odds betting terminals.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for that reply. Will she look carefully at the merits of reducing the maximum bet per spin for FOBTs from £100 to £2, and at the important contribution that could make to significantly reducing problem gambling and the problems families suffer as a result?
Tracey Crouch: I am sure the House would not want me to prejudge the outcome of the review, but clearly the call for evidence will look at the stakes and prizes of all gaming machines, and I have no doubt that the Department will receive many representations on those of FOBTs.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The whole House is concerned about FOBTs, which are the crack cocaine of gambling. It is possible to spend £100 every 20 seconds, or £300 every minute, on them. They are affecting our constituents, and people have a real concern about them. I welcome the fact that we are going to have a review, but when will the Government also deal with the Gambling Commission, which seems to have sat behind this and allowed it to happen, alongside the inaction of the previous Government?

Tracey Crouch: The review is looking at all stakes and prizes relating to gaming machines. The issue with FOBTs has clearly grown since the liberalisation of gambling, which was of course brought in by the Labour party when it was in government. The issue blights individuals and communities and I am very passionate about it. I look forward to the review concluding.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Perhaps it would be topical to point out that the term “crack cocaine of gambling” was first coined by Donald Trump in the 1980s. He was talking about video keno games affecting his casinos. Perhaps the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) will start chanting “Lock her up” if we keep quoting Donald Trump. Can the Minister tell us what the point is of reducing the stakes on fixed-odds betting terminals in betting shops when people can go straight on to the internet and play exactly the same games with unlimited stakes and unlimited prizes?

Tracey Crouch: I welcome my hon. Friend’s comments on these issues. He will of course be entitled to reply to the call for evidence on gaming machines. Online gambling is obviously an area of increasing concern that we keep under regular review.

Tracy Crouch: The official statistic is that 1% of the adult population have a problem with gambling, but that still equates to 600,000 people, and in my view that is 600,000 too many.

Tourism

3. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What assessment has she made of trends in the level of tourism to the UK over the next five years. [907004]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Together with VisitBritain, we actively monitor inbound tourism trends to the UK. The latest figures predict a 27% growth in tourism visits between 2015 and 2020. International tourism has had a very strong summer, with August setting a new inbound record for that month with 3.8 million visits—up 2% on the same month last year—and July having the highest ever figure for that month.

Jessica Morden: Wales has seen the biggest rise in overseas visitors to the UK in 2016, and it is the only part of the UK to feature in the “Lonely Planet” guide’s list of the best places to visit in 2017. Hopefully, there will be many more. Does the Minister appreciate that there is great uncertainty in the sector over what Brexit will mean in practice? This means that we need Ministers to listen hard, have a plan and work closely with the Welsh Government to ensure that Welsh tourism goes from strength to strength.

Tracey Crouch: The hon. Lady is right: the number of international visitors to Wales is up 15% and the figure for domestic visitors is 4%. That is a tribute to the hard work of VisitWales and VisitBritain. With the “Lonely Planet” guide placing north Wales in its top places to visit and with the Champions League final being played in Cardiff in June, things can only get better next year. I can reassure the hon. Lady that I meet Ministers from all the devolved Administrations regularly, and that we want to work closely to ensure that more people come to Britain, and that means all parts of Britain, and Wales.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): For the first time for 12 years, Visit Isle of Wight will be at the World Travel Market, which takes place next week. Will the Minister pay a visit to the stand to show her support for tourism beyond London and, in particular, on my island?

Hon. Members: Your island?

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the Secretary of State will be visiting the World Travel Market next week, and I am sure that if she has time she will pop by and visit the Isle of Wight’s stand.

Mr Speaker: What a fortunate and apparently prosperous fellow the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) is! We are always pleased to get a bit of additional information.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The “Lonely Planet” guide must be in a galaxy far, far away if it does not mention Yorkshire. We in Yorkshire demand a greater share of all the people who come here. Too many tourists come to London but do not go beyond it. When are we going to get the balance right?

Tracey Crouch: Visits to Yorkshire are in good health. One of the Government’s ambitions under the tourism action plan is to ensure that people get out of London and visit the rest of the country, and we are supporting that with the £40 million Discover England fund. I encourage the Yorkshire tourism industry to see whether it can apply for additional funds.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Like most of the sector, the Cornish tourist industry enjoyed a bumper summer, but there is still a degree of uncertainty about the impact on the industry of leaving the EU.
What conversations has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to ensure that the voice of the tourist industry is heard in the negotiations?

**Mr Mark Williams** (Ceredigion) (LD): The figures alluded to by the Minister, not least those for Wales, are welcome, but what assessment has she made of the further impact on the industry of the reduction in VAT on tourism and visitor attractions?

**Tracey Crouch**: The Department and I are sympathetic towards cutting VAT on attractions and accommodation. However, the industry needs to make that argument to the Treasury, not to us.

**Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): Sadly, I do not own an island, but I do live in the glorious Ribble Valley. The falling pound should mean that far more foreign tourists look favourably at the United Kingdom. The Crown jewels may be in the Tower of London, but the real crown jewels are in the UK’s regions, whether Yorkshire, Wales or the Isle of Wight. What more can be done to attract tourism away from London and into the regions?

**Tracey Crouch**: As I said earlier, we are working hard to ensure that we get visitors out of London and into the regions. I encourage my hon. Friend and his local community sector and have a massive impact, yet media attention usually focuses on the big players. Small local charities make up 97% of the voluntary and community sector and have a massive impact, yet media attention usually focuses on the big players. Small local charities deserve much more recognition than they currently receive, and I encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to get involved on 16 December.

**Seema Kennedy**: Will the Minister tell the House how the Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill will help charities such as the Leyland Project, which works with young people in my constituency?

**Mr Wilson**: I pay tribute to the Leyland Project, which does such great work in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and possibly elsewhere in Lancashire. The Bill represents yet another commitment that we are making to small local charities that will help to ensure that the gift aid small donations scheme is more accessible to small and new charities. It is expected to be worth an additional £15 million a year for the sector. That means £41 million a year from the small donation scheme, which, when added to gift aid of £1.3 billion a year, should help an awful lot of small charities.

**Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Lab): Is the Minister aware that the latest findings from the national trustee survey reveal that almost a quarter of charity trustees have considered quitting due to mounting pressure and that it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit trustees? Given how important trustees are to the sector, what plans do the Government have for further support so that trustees can fulfil their roles?

**Mr Wilson**: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to mention the role of trustees, who do a fantastic job up and down the country supporting charities in their amazing work. The Government’s job is to help charities big and small to become more independent, resilient and sustainable. That is exactly what we intend to do.

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**Local Charities Day**

4. **Seema Kennedy** (South Ribble) (Con): What support her Department is providing for Local Charities Day.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport** (Mr Rob Wilson): Local Charities Day is an opportunity for all to celebrate small local charities across the country and for the Government to recognise the huge contribution that they make to local communities. Small charities make up 97% of the voluntary and community sector and have a massive impact, yet media attention usually focuses on the big players. Small local charities deserve much more recognition than they currently receive, and I encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to get involved on 16 December.

**Seema Kennedy**: Will the House how the Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill will help charities such as the Leyland Project, which works with young people in my constituency?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport** (Tracey Crouch): It is too early to draw conclusions about the impact of changes in the currency exchange rate on tourism. Many trips to the UK are booked far in advance. Thanks to our world-class attractions, heritage and great marketing campaign, July and August set new records for inbound visits and spending.

**Imran Hussain**: Since the EU referendum result, the pound has devalued dramatically, and last month the Conservatives were celebrating the rising number of tourists coming to the UK. Is it now the Government’s policy to encourage a weak pound in order to increase the number of visitors to UK tourist sites?

**Tracey Crouch**: I appreciate that this is a Labour party attack on the Government following Brexit, but the British tourism industry is going from strength to strength. The softening of the pound is a welcome boost for that, but it is a concerted action by Government and industry that has been driving record-breaking numbers of visitors to our shores. The hon. Gentleman should welcome that, because the number of visitors to west Yorkshire is up.

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**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The latest VisitBritain report showed that every £1 spent on international marketing brought in £23 in incremental tourism spend. Is that a good way to spend money, given the weakness of the pound?
Tracey Crouch: We want to ensure that we have the best marketing campaigns to encourage international visitors to these shores, and I hope people will continue to get behind the GREAT campaign, because it is working incredibly well.

Creative Industries

6. Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the contribution of the creative industries to the economy. [907007]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): The UK's creative industries are an economic success story, worth more than £87 billion to the UK economy and growing twice as fast as the economy as a whole. They account for almost 2 million jobs and export more than £19 billion-worth of services to the rest of the world.

Judith Cummins: This Government's northern powerhouse is not just about improving transport. In the words of the former Chancellor, it is also, importantly, about "creative, cultural, beautiful places". This Government have committed to providing £78 million towards Manchester's new theatre and exhibition space. That is welcome, but what are the Government doing to drive the creative industries in Yorkshire and the city of Bradford? Will the Minister agree to meet, Bradford Council and business leaders to discuss what more could be done to support a new theatre and exhibition space in Yorkshire and the city of Bradford?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady will know that this Government are committed to promoting creative industries across the whole of the north of England, which is why Hull is the city of culture next year, we have the "Great Exhibition of the North" in Newcastle and Gateshead in 2018 and we have a legacy fund of £15 million, on top of the money for that exhibition, to promote the creative industries across the whole of the north of England. Bradford has many great creative industries, particularly in tech and gaming, and I want to make sure we do all we can to foster the economic climate in which they can thrive.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): In the post-Brexit economy, the creative industries will be more important than ever. Those 2 million jobs the Secretary of State mentioned, in music, TV production, film, video games, art, design, publishing, dance, drama and literature, are one of our strongest hands as we find a new trading place in the world. When I checked the Government website this morning, I noticed that the Secretary of State attends a Brexit Cabinet Sub-Committee but not the main Brexit Committee, which means the creative industries have no voice at the top table. May I help the Secretary of State in some way? Would she like me to write to the Prime Minister about this, because the creative industries need a voice at that table?

Karen Bradley: It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to offer to help, but I think he would agree that there is no higher table than the Cabinet, and I can assure him that the creative industries are fully represented at that top table. It is also worth pointing out that I have held round-table meetings with the creative industries, and the Creative Industries Council last week had a specific session looking at the work it has done to examine not only the threats there are from Brexit, but its many, many opportunities. This is a global industry in which the UK is a world leader, and he should take comfort from the fact that the Prime Minister mentioned the creative industries specifically in her conference speech as one of those strengths that we want to build on, here in the UK and in the rest of the world.

Homophobia in Sport

7. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What steps she is taking to reduce the incidence of homophobia in sport. [907008]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): There is absolutely no place for homophobia in sport or anywhere in society. In the sports strategy, we asked Sport England to "place equal emphasis on the support for LGBT people in sport as it does for other characteristics" that are protected. Some research has been commissioned, and Sport England is currently considering its findings.

Hannah Bardell: When the chairman of the English Football Association said that it was not the time for gay footballers to come out in the male Premier League he shamed himself and he shamed football. Does the Minister agree that those comments are wholly unacceptable, and that the FA and Premier League clubs in England should follow the example of Scotland, which, with the Equality Network, has developed an LGBT sports charter? Will she work with me and others to take that forward?

Tracey Crouch: The reported comments are indeed unhelpful and we should encourage and support people in all sports who wish to come out. We need to ensure that we use existing legislation to stop homophobic chanting and language during sporting events. I know that the Football Association is working hard trying to support people in the game and that progress has been made in tackling homophobia, but we need to consider other means of doing that as well. Supporting players is absolutely essential.

Mr Speaker: Very briefly, Gavin Newlands.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for her comments. I found the comment in the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) that the FA was unable to offer protection in the event of a player coming out to be the most damning. Does the Minister agree that we require real leadership on this issue and that the Government, the Football Association, the Premier League and the Football League must now come together to create a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex-focused Kick it Out campaign, as the quicker that we can rid society of these appalling views the better off we will all be?

Tracey Crouch: Advances have been made in fighting discrimination in football over recent years, and the FA is putting its support behind the European Football v. Homophobia campaign, and it is trying to ensure that
everybody understands homophobia and transphobia. Stonewall's recently relaunched Rainbow Laces campaign helps. With regard to the Kick it Out campaign, it is a fantastic app that enables people to report any kind of abuse as it happens, and we should do more to encourage people to do that when it is related to homophobia.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Since Justin Fashanu took his own life, no professional football has come out in England. The FA chair has recently admitted that the FA is still not doing enough to tackle homophobic abuse. Homophobia is rife, and has been for far too long. How are the Minister and the Government working with the FA to tackle homophobia at every level, from Sunday league to Premier League?

Tracey Crouch: First, may I welcome the hon. Lady to the Despatch Box? I look forward to sparring with her over the course—[ Interruption. ] It's okay. I can hold my own, don't you worry. There has been progress in the Football Association, but there is always more to be done. It is important that the FA remembers that it is there as the national governing body to support footballers. Our own strategy sets out a cross-Government vision for sport and will encourage more tolerance at every single level of all sports, including grassroots and Premier League football.

Topical Questions

T1. [07007] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Since the last oral questions, we have launched a call for evidence on gaming machines and a consultation on press regulation. We have also seen our Paralympians win 147 medals, 64 of which are gold. I am sure that the whole House will join me in celebrating their achievements.

Mr Jayawardena: Mr Speaker, as you will remember from my maiden speech, King John rode from his castle at Odiham to sign the Magna Carta. Eight hundred years later, the national lottery provided a three-day festival for our community to learn more about our heritage. Will the Secretary of State commend the Odiham Society for its work and celebrate the fact that the national lottery is awarding its 500,000th grant?

Mr Speaker: Of course I think of little else.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right. We stand right behind the FA and the Scottish FA in their decision to wear poppies. I will be at the match next week and I will make sure that I pass on those comments. It is absolutely right that home nations should, if they choose, wear poppies to commemorate those who sacrificed their lives, and I hope that FIFA will see sense and withdraw any threat of sanctions for those who do so.

T2. [07008] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Many grassroots music venues are struggling, with 40% closing in London alone over the past decade. There are many pressures on venues, but will the Minister look specifically at the call from the Music Venue Trust for PRS for Music to scrap its minimum tariff, which is hitting grassroots venues very hard, and to introduce the 3% fee across the board?

Karen Bradley: I know that the hon. Lady is campaigning hard on this issue and I will look at all that she has said.

T3. [07009] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): On a recent visit to Lambourn I saw at first hand the significance of the horse-racing industry to our rural economy, so will the Minister confirm that the proposed replacement of the horse-racing betting levy is on track for April 2017?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Yes.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Yesterday, Facebook made the welcome announcement that it would not be allowing Admiral to use its data to determine insurance premiums. While the Government have been dragging their feet and refusing to update data protection legislation, private companies have been harvesting our personal data, against our knowledge, without our consent and to our detriment. When will the Government act?

Karen Bradley: I know that the hon. Lady, who is on the Digital Economy Bill Committee, is doing considerable work in this area. I look forward to working with her to ensure that we achieve all that we want to. May I make the point that the Investigatory Powers Bill, which is an incredibly important part of our law enforcement around data protection, is currently being hijacked and prevented from making progress and receiving Royal Assent because of press regulation? It is important that we get that matter of national security on the statute book to protect us all.

T5. [07021] Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend support any of the home nations who choose to display a poppy next week to remember all those from every part of the world who sacrificed so much? Will she also pass on to FIFA the anger that there is in this House and among our constituents?

Karen Bradley: My friend is right. We stand right behind the FA and the Scottish FA in their decision to wear poppies. I will be at the match next week and I will make sure that I pass on those comments. It is absolutely right that home nations should, if they choose, wear poppies to commemorate those who sacrificed their lives, and I hope that FIFA will see sense and withdraw any threat of sanctions for those who do so.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): Yes.
Karen Bradley: May I take the points that the hon. Lady has made and consider them? Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Minister of State could meet her to discuss the matter.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am not sure whether you are a football fan, Mr Speaker—[Interruption.] Oh yes, you are. Perhaps you could change your allegiance, because Taunton Town football club has reached the first round proper of the FA cup for the first time in 35 years. Will the Minister join me in praising all those who have worked so hard for years and years as volunteers at the club to help it to get to this far, as well as the paid people? Will the Minister also join me in wishing the club the very best of luck for the big match on Sunday?

Tracey Crouch: I am well aware, Mr Speaker, that you are a football fan, albeit for the wrong north London team. I am delighted to join my hon. Friend. Friend in praising Taunton Town football club for its progress in the FA cup and I wish it all the best.

Mr Speaker: I hope I enjoy Sunday lunchtime more than the hon. Lady does. I say to the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) that I am, of course, a fanatical Arsenal fan.

T6. [907022] Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Sheffield has a proud and fabulous football history—perhaps I can volunteer him for a visit to Waverley Vale. The South Yorkshire fanatical Arsenal fan.

Karen Bradley: I am determined to make sure that there is access to the arts for everyone across the country. We have to make this a country that works for everyone, and that means access to the arts. From a sporting perspective, I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome the first Parklife activities that took place in Sheffield last week, which the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), attended.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Are Ministers aware that Dr Peter Aitken, the chair of the faculty of liaison psychiatry at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, told the Health Committee on Tuesday that gambling addiction is becoming a major cause of suicide? Will Ministers be emboldened to take the issue further?

Tracey Crouch: I have seen the transcript of Dr Peter Aitken’s comments, in which he said that we should not overlook gambling as one of the significant addictions of our day. As somebody who spent a lot of time working on addiction issues in this House before I was made a Minister, I could not agree more. I discussed the matter only last week with GambleAware, formerly the Responsible Gambling Trust.

Mr Speaker: Natalie McGarry—not here.

Karen Bradley: I am very aware of the devastating fire in Exeter—I was actually in the west country over the weekend and saw the local news coverage. Having visited Exeter on a number of occasions, I know how important that building is in the cathedral precinct. Historic England sent a team of experts to the site on Monday to assess the situation, but I will take up the points that the right hon. Gentleman has raised.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah, yes. Marathon man—Mr Graham Evans.

Graham Evans (Waverley Vale) (Con): When the Minister for Digital and Culture has finished hobnobbing with Her Majesty, will he agree to meet me and my residents who have worked so hard for years and years as volunteers to see if we can get Waverley Vale connected with 21st-century broadband speeds?

Karen Bradley: As my right hon. Friend is not here, perhaps I can volunteer him for a visit to Waverley Vale.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The favourable exchange rates mean that many people from the United States are visiting the Republic of Ireland for their holidays. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland to ensure that they also come north to Northern Ireland and across to the mainland?

Tracey Crouch: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As I said earlier, I meet people from all the devolved Administrations, and I will be doing so again later this month. We have seen increasing numbers of tourists visiting Northern Ireland, specifically to see the Titanic exhibition. We will continue to market Northern Ireland as a great place to visit.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Trading Relationships: Israel

1. Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): What plans he has to strengthen the UK’s trade relationship with Israel as a result of the decision to leave the EU. [907063]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): The UK and Israel have a strong and important trading relationship, with nearly £6 billion in bilateral trade last year. The UK is the No. 1 destination for Israeli foreign direct investment.
in Europe, and there are now more than 300 Israeli companies established in the UK. I recently visited Israel to discuss investment and trade, and we will continue discussions on strengthening our important trade relationship.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. UK-Israel trade is at a record high, with strong ties in science and technology, cyber-security and medical science, but the terms are currently determined by the EU-Israel association agreement. Does he agree that our vote to leave the EU presents a great opportunity to strengthen co-operation between our countries, and will he update the House on progress on planning and securing a new post-Brexit deal with Israel?

Mark Garnier: We are taking advantage of all the opportunities presented to us to ensure that Britain becomes a truly global leader in free trade once we leave the EU, and that of course includes Israel, building on our strong relationship in areas such as research and development and cyber-security. For example, we have established the UK-Israel tech hub, which creates partnerships between British companies and world-class Israeli innovators.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): A survey this year found that 89% of Israeli tech companies and 86% of Israeli investors are interested in business and tech co-operation with the UK. What steps will the Minister be taking to take advantage of that good will and ensure that Britain continues to be a leading destination for Israeli tech companies?

Mark Garnier: The right hon. Lady is quite right to mention our growing relationship. In cyber-security, in particular, we saw a 24% growth in exports last year. I was recently in Tel Aviv and had the opportunity to visit a tech accelerator hub that is sponsored by Barclays. It is very encouraging to see that private sector relationship, which is something we will continue to encourage.

11. [907076] John Howell (Henley) (Con): One area in which the UK can strengthen its relationship with Israel is cyber, where Israel has 20% of the global market. Will the Minister welcome the UK-Israel cyber-physical initiative and say what is coming next?

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise the interest in cyber. In February we led a successful cyber-security collaboration mission of businesses and academics, and we will continue to promote further such delegations.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As part of these trade discussions, did the Minister raise the thorny issue of illegal settlements in Palestine and the demolitions that are ongoing? Demolitions of some buildings have actually been part-funded by the UK.

Mark Garnier: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government do frown on the illegal settlements in the Palestinian territories. These are not helping with the peace process—they are standing as an obstacle—and the Government continue to promote the two-state solution to ensure that Palestine becomes a viable and sovereign nation.

Bilateral Trade Deals

2. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the development of bilateral trade deals between the UK and other countries.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): While we remain members of the European Union, discussions we have are limited by our considerations of the common commercial policy and our duties of sincere co-operation. We cannot negotiate and conclude trade agreements while we are a member of the European Union, but we can have discussions on our future trading relationships. The UK will continue to be a champion for free trade, and back the EU’s current and ongoing negotiations.

Dr Fox: Yes, we are keen to seize all the opportunities that leaving the EU presents, and so, too, are many of our international partners, who recognise the attractiveness of doing business with the UK. I will be accompanying the Prime Minister on a trip next week to India to take forward some of those opportunities.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State see any irony or contradiction in his development of these new free trade and investment agreements, which involve the harmonisation of rules and standards with other countries—even obedience to supranational commercial courts—and the referendum instruction from the British people that we should leave membership of the largest free-trade agreement in the world so that we can set our own rules and take back our sovereignty?

Dr Fox: It is not a question of punishment; it is a question of what we have signed up to and our duty to fulfil the obligations we have entered freely into.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): As we are leaving the EU, and everybody knows it, why do we not just get on and start negotiating trade deals? After all, the EU can hardly punish us in the future.

Dr Fox: It is not a question of punishment; it is a question of what we have signed up to and our duty to fulfill the obligations we have entered freely into.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Has the UK managed to get the World Trade Organisation’s 160-plus members to agree that we will be a continuing member, rather than a new member, of the WTO? If the UK is not able to have negotiations just now, how will it get that agreement?
Dr Fox: We are a founding and full member of the WTO—there is no dispute about that. I think what the hon. Lady is referring to are the trading schedules under which we operate under the WTO, and, obviously, we will be in full discussions on those.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has already said, to do a bilateral trade deal we need to be out of the European Union. Does he therefore deplore, as I do, the High Court’s decision this morning to rule against the Government and say that the will of the people in the EU referendum on 23 June is still subject to parliamentary approval?

Dr Fox: The Government are disappointed by the Court’s judgment. The country voted to leave the European Union in a referendum approved by Act of Parliament. The Government are determined to respect the result of the referendum. This judgment raises important and complex matters of law, and it is right that we consider it carefully before deciding how to proceed.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Will the Government respect the ruling of the Court in this matter, and also respect Parliament? If they want to get on with these trade deals, should they not accept that Parliament should have its say, as the Court has ruled?

Dr Fox: I have nothing to add, other than to reiterate that it is right that the Government will consider carefully before deciding how to proceed following the judgment.

Trade Negotiations: Parliamentary Vote

3. Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Leader of the House on Parliament debating and voting on the outcome of trade negotiations before they are signed. [907065]

The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): As the hon. Lady will know, I am a great advocate of parliamentary scrutiny. The Department for International Trade is currently working to shape a more independent UK trade policy. Once we begin to negotiate trade agreements, Parliament will, of course, play its crucial role in ensuring that we deliver on our commitment to secure the best possible negotiation outcome for the whole of the UK.

Thangam Debbonaire: Trade agreements need at least 50 negotiators per bilateral. The former Brexit Minister, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), said in July that the UK has “no trade negotiators”. The Minister of State himself said last month that the number has “doubled since June”. Zero doubled is still zero. Will the Minister come clean? Exactly how many trade negotiators do we have?

Greg Hands: I think the hon. Lady is conflating and confusing two different statistics relating to those working on trade policy and those working on trade negotiations. The answer that I gave in the written answer is correct: the number of people working on trade policy in the Department has doubled since the Department’s creation in July.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The truth is that this Parliament is, always has been and always will be sovereign, so Parliament could overcome any trade deal it wanted. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether Parliament should resist the will of the people.

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am not going to add anything to what the Secretary of State said earlier about the Court judgment, which has just been released.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), I am moved to congratulate him on his achievement in winning the yellow jersey for his performance yesterday on the British Legion stationary bicycle. It was a remarkable athletic feat on his part.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is nice to come first at something when you are a Liberal Democrat.

More seriously, on the subject of debating and voting on essential trade matters, is it not essential that the Government give way to the courts and allow Parliament to be sovereign and to debate and vote on the issue of article 50?

Greg Hands: I first join you, Mr Speaker, in congratulating the right hon. Gentleman on achieving the yellow jersey. I thought for a moment that it was an internal Liberal Democrat award, in which case winning out of eight was perhaps not the greatest of achievements, but I commend him on what he has done.

I have nothing to add to what the Secretary of State said earlier, but I will say that, in general, we are very committed to consulting Parliament on the future of trade agreements, which is the subject of the question on the Order Paper.

Mr Speaker: Certainly, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington beat me, as he is signalling from a sedentary position. I did my best, but he was far superior and I pay him due tribute.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Minister confirm that, notwithstanding this morning’s Court judgment, Brexit means Brexit—[ Interruption. ]—and the will of the British people in the referendum will be respected?

Greg Hands: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I campaigned for the remain side on 23 June, but nevertheless I fundamentally and totally agree that Brexit means Brexit. This Government are getting on with delivering and making sure that it works for the whole of the United Kingdom.

EU Customs Union

4. Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What assessment he has made of the international trade opportunities available to the UK in the event of the UK leaving the EU customs union. [907068]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): The people of Britain voted to leave the European Union and that is what we will do. It is the job of this Department to maximise the UK’s trade opportunities,
whatever the relationship with the EU that the Government ultimately adopt. The Prime Minister has made it clear that the UK’s agreement with the EU will get the best deal for Britain at home and abroad.

Jonathan Edwards: Via our membership of the customs union the UK has access to more than 50 international trade deals, which according to a parliamentary answer I received accounts for 15% of UK exports. In the event of Brexit outside the customs union, what estimate has the Secretary of State made of the length of time it will require to renegotiate those deals, bearing in mind that he will not be able to begin his negotiations until after exit in March 2019?

Dr Fox: There are a number of errors in what the hon. Gentleman has said. The EU currently has 36 free trade agreements covering more than 50 countries. It is entirely possible for us to be able to transition those into UK agreements and we are free to discuss them with countries while we are still a member of the European Union. Our aim will be to have minimum disruption of trade and no gap in market access for British companies.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): Although I welcome the Canadian-EU trade agreement, does my right hon. Friend share my concerns at the elements of protectionism that have emerged in this agreement? Do they not indicate that there are advantages to the United Kingdom outside the customs union in negotiating its own deals more rapidly, in defence of free trade?

Dr Fox: In recent history, most of the trade deals done in the world have been bilateral, because it is clearly easier to get country-to-country agreement. One of the reasons why the European Union does not have an agreement with the United States, China, Japan, India or the Gulf is that it is rather difficult to negotiate with 28 different partners, especially if they retain a veto.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The creative industries are some of Britain’s most competitive and successful industries, and they depend on worldwide access and negotiation with many multinational organisations. How, post-Brexit, will the UK maintain relationships with multinational organisations such as the EU and worldwide broadcasting organisations?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The creative industries are incredibly important, and one of the jobs of the Department for International Trade is to promote them. When we take trade delegations abroad and when we make representations to other Governments, we will fully take those industries into account. Where we have got areas of excellence in our economy, we need to promote them—sometimes more than we have done in the past.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Secretary of State knows about the growing opportunities for trade and investment, in both directions, with the countries of south-east Asia. Does he agree that next year’s 50th anniversary of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations offers a great chance for the UK to demonstrate what a superb international platform we can be for all those countries’ exports and investment in both directions? Will he commit to DIT offering some finance to help this great session to go well?

Dr Fox: I will certainly offer a great deal of help and goodwill. Mindful of the forthcoming autumn statement, I am not going to offer any sort of finance in advance of the Chancellor’s permission being granted.

May I say what a great job my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) does as one of our trade envoys? Our trade envoys have contributed hugely to our recent export gains. He makes the important point that trade has to operate in both directions, both in exports and imports and in outward and inward investment. It is very important that we maintain a balance if we are to have a chance of reducing our current account deficit.

Trading Opportunities Abroad

5. Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help businesses take advantage of future trading opportunities abroad.

7. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help businesses take advantage of future trading opportunities abroad.

9. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help businesses take advantage of future trading opportunities abroad.

The Minister for Trade and Investment (Greg Hands): We want more British businesses to take advantage of trade opportunities. Currently, only 11% of British businesses export. Our overseas teams continue to help British businesses to win opportunities in 108 different markets, with 190 high-value priority campaigns.

Mr Mak: British businesses benefit from the expertise of our embassies and consulates when seeking trading opportunities abroad. I saw that for myself at first hand while I was in Hong Kong over the summer. Will the Minister continue to back British businesses to gain market access by supporting our missions overseas?

Greg Hands: I certainly will. My hon. Friend and I had a productive conversation just last week following his successful visit to Hong Kong. The Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) was also in Hong Kong last month, and we are absolutely committed to using our networks and our professionals overseas to boost both trade and investment.

David Rutley: Given the strong contribution made by the life sciences sector to UK exports—AstraZeneca’s site in Macclesfield made a huge contribution to the company’s £5 billion-worth of exports in 2015—will my right hon. Friend tell the House what steps he is taking to work with the sector to ensure that medicines that are researched, developed and manufactured in the UK continue to have ease of access to European markets and global growth markets once the UK leaves the EU?
**Oral Answers**

**3 NOVEMBER 2016**

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Will he make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [907025] **Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): As a country, we need to export more. There are a lot of barriers to overcome to get businesses to start exporting or even to consider exporting, but we have a real opportunity to get existing exporters to export to more markets. Will my right hon. Friend outline the measures that the Government are taking to encourage and support small and medium-sized businesses to expand the number of markets to which they export?

**Dr Fox:** I apologise for taking longer than usual to get to the Dispatch Box, Mr Speaker—the last time I take my own advice about going to the gym to get fit. It is important to get more small and medium-sized enterprises.
Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Government Front-Bench team has tried to suggest that the High Court decision that Parliament should have a vote before triggering article 50 is in some way antidemocratic or thwarts the referendum result. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that the vast majority of Members in this House are now committed to honouring the decision to leave the EU, but that democracy demands that the terms of our leaving be subject to the proper advance scrutiny and consent of this democratically elected House, and not negotiated in secret and smuggled through without the support of this sovereign Parliament?

Dr Fox: There will be numerous opportunities for the House to examine and discuss what the Government are negotiating. When we are clear about the position we will adopt, article 50 will be triggered, but given the nature of the judgment this morning we will now have to await the Government’s appeal to the Supreme Court.

Dr Fox: As I said earlier, the EU has some 36 free trade agreements, which cover more than 50 countries. A very large number of those have already made representations to the United Kingdom to say that they would like those agreements to continue. We will explore and discuss that, because, as I have said, our aim is to have no break in access to markets and to achieve the transition as smoothly as possible, with minimal disruption to the international trading environment.

Dr Fox: I take an intense personal interest in this area, from long experience. I am delighted to see David Frost in his new position—he was so pleased with our policy he joined the company. It is very important that we get reductions in tariffs. One issue I will be raising in India next week is the very high level of tariff against scotch whisky there, to see whether we can make major reductions.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Business in my constituency has praised the work of UK Export Finance but expressed some concerns about the bureaucracy and the length of documentation required to seal those deals. Will the Secretary of State please look into that?

Dr Fox: May I first praise the work of UKEF? As a Government export credit agency it is the world leader and its practices are second to none. However, we are always trying to streamline and improve, and in fact have appointed a new chairman for UKEF, who will be announced shortly. When they are in place they will certainly be shaking up the organisation.

Mark Garnier: My hon. Friend is right to raise that. We have strong economic links with Gibraltar and 20% of the UK car insurance market is underwritten within
Gibraltar. I stress that we have an interest not just in Gibraltar but in all the overseas territories. I met many of the leaders yesterday. They will very much be involved in the process of the negotiations of our deal with the EU as we progress through article 50.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Leaving the single market would mean that our agricultural exports would be subject to World Trade Organisation tariffs, which will have a hugely detrimental effect on a vital industry for Scotland. Does the Secretary of State plan to get farmers a special deal to ensure that they are not affected by sudden rises in tariffs to protect that vital industry?

Mark Garnier: The hon. Lady is right to raise that. It is incredibly important that we secure good tariff deals with other countries, and agricultural products suffer some of the highest tariff levies, but it is a two-way operation. On the one hand, exporters from Scotland to other markets may face big tariffs, but on the other hand, if we end up with a very low tariff barrier, we will have to impose it, which could mean that her farmers in Scotland are flooded by imports. It is a difficult and nuanced area to try to get right.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I refer to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on today’s article 50 ruling, which says that the trigger should be exercised within Parliament. I think my right hon. Friend said that the Government will appeal, but I ask him, on behalf of the Government, please to look at the learned judges’ ruling and understand that it is not about a re-run of the arguments of the EU referendum. It is all about Parliament’s sovereignty. In that event, will the Government look at it carefully to decide whether or not the learned judges are right, and that this place should and indeed will trigger article 50?

Mr Speaker: Not least we will bear in mind the importance of referring to international trade in responding to the right hon. Lady.

Dr Fox: As this is now an ongoing court case, I have nothing further to add to the comments I made earlier.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to disappoint remaining colleagues—demand invariably outstrips supply—but we will return to these important matters ere long.
Air Quality

10.38 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Department will take to improve air quality after her defeat in the High Court on 2 November.

Hon. Members: Where is she?

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): She's in her diesel car.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is chuntering about diesel cars and who might be occupying them, but we have a Minister at the Dispatch Box, and she is a doctor as well. We are going to hear from her.

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend raises a wide range of issues. Let me try to pick up on them. In a parliamentary question, he rightly revealed the number of councils where there are issues. I take this seriously. In my constituency, there are two air quality management areas. That is why I want to work with local councils to do what we can to tackle action locally. Of course the Government will work on issues to tackle air quality nationally, but we need local action. Powers are already available, under the Transport Act 2000, for councils to take appropriate measures, and I will encourage them to do that. Again, that is why we are encouraging councils to apply for help from the air quality fund.

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister very much for that response. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is very much in the dock, but the whole Government need to take action. This is the second time the Government have lost in the courts on the issue of air quality in 18 months: they need to take this matter very seriously. The problem causes up to 50,000 deaths a year—more than 20 times the number killed in road accidents. It is a silent killer.

The Government's current air quality plan has only five compulsory clean air zones, but more than 40% of councils breach air pollution limits. The Government need to take rapid action or they will be back in the dock again. In April, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report on air quality called for all councils to have the power and the funding to implement clean air zones. Will the Government make that commitment?

The Government have to look at getting the worst diesel vehicles off our roads quickly. Will the Department consider financial incentives, such as a scrappage scheme and changes to the vehicle tax system? Those changes would have to be made via the Treasury, because successive Governments have been encouraging diesels. That has to be reversed.

Some 70% of air pollution comes from road transport. Will the Department act now, with the Department for Transport, to promote electric cars and encourage taxi conversions from diesel to liquefied petroleum gas, which can reduce nitrogen dioxide levels by 80%? The court case revealed that the Treasury has been blocking stronger measures on air quality. I have sympathy with the Minister, but will her Department now commit to working with the Department for Transport and the Treasury to tackle this matter once and for all? Clean air should be a right, not a privilege. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Dr Coffey: The Transport Act 2000 gave powers to councils to introduce measures to help to tackle air pollution. The national air quality plan for NO₂, published in December, set out an approach to improve air quality and achieve compliance. We are mandating five cities to introduce clean air zones, and targeting the oldest and most polluting vehicles. The consultation on this framework was launched last month to ensure a consistent approach.

Our plan was based on the best available evidence at the time. We have been pressing for updates to COPERT—computer programme to calculate emissions from road transport—emission factors and got them in September. We said that when we got the new factors we would update our modelling and that is exactly what we are doing.

I am writing to councils to ask them what they are doing to tackle air pollution. Our local authority grant fund was launched in early October and we are encouraging all local authorities to apply. We will shortly launch a consultation on policy options for limiting emissions from diesel generators. In addition, funding was announced last month to boost the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles. We accept the judgment of the court and will now carefully consider it, and our next steps, in detail. However, legal proceedings are still ongoing, so I may not be able to answer every hon. Member's question in detail.

I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that this is a top priority for me. It is a top priority for the Secretary of State. As the Prime Minister said yesterday:

“We have taken action, but there is more to do and we will do it.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 887.]
is the biggest spreadsheet I have ever seen in my life. As I used to be a chartered accountant, I can assure the House that I have probably seen more than most.

It is a complex situation, and we are working through it. We are coming up with what we can think of to try to tackle this issue, but I genuinely believe that we need targeted interventions rather than use a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The Labour Government introduced fiscal incentives that encouraged people to move to diesel. I am not going to complain about that. We are where we are, and the Government and local government must all pull together because we care about the people we represent. My hon. Friend is absolutely right: air must all pull together because we care about the people where we are, and the Government and local government fiscal incentives that encouraged people to move to diesel. I am not going to complain about that.

I used to be a chartered accountant, I can assure the House that I have probably seen more than most. The biggest spreadsheet I have ever seen in my life. As I used to be a chartered accountant, I can assure the House that I have probably seen more than most.

I therefore ask: will the Government guarantee that, instead of creating just five clean air zones, they will now put in place a network of zones across all 37 out of the 43 areas with high emission levels? Why have they wasted time and resources fighting court cases, instead of fighting air pollution? The High Court judge condemned the Government’s delay in reducing ambient nitrogen dioxide levels. How soon will the Government have in place a comprehensive plan on air quality? How will fuel emission measurements now proceed? Will the Government guarantee that, in leaving the EU, they will not water down air quality standards, and how will this be policed? Will the Government introduce a clean air Act, which Labour has done in the past and will do in the future? Will the Government now clean up their act and clean up our air?

Dr Coffey: As I am trying show in the tone of my response to this urgent question, this really is a top priority. It is not straightforward. We produced a national air-quality plan based on the best available evidence at the time. We now have new factors, and we are updating the model. We are responding to the needs that we have. I have pointed out that a framework is already out for consultation and councils can do this now if they wish. We are mandating. We need to look carefully at the evidence and what the model says about where we mandate further.

Leaving the EU has absolutely nothing to do with our determination to improve air quality in this country. There is no need for new legislation; we already have powers in place, and we are consulting on new powers.

We have already reduced nitrogen dioxide by 41% in the last 10 years. We are still taking action to do that. Let us not get into the blame game; otherwise, we could go into the history of Labour and what the Labour Government did on diesel in the first place. That is not worth while. What matters is that we pull together and address this issue.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): In the light of this judgment and of the fact that car journeys to Heathrow are increasing at a rate of 2 million over two years, how can the Government support more pollution that would come from a third runway at Heathrow?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport referred to that issue when he came to the House to discuss the Heathrow decision. The Government believe that the Heathrow north-west runway scheme can be delivered without it having an impact on the UK’s compliance with air quality limit values, and with a suitable package of policy mitigation measures. Policies at national, London and local level will help to ensure that the scheme can be delivered in line with our legal obligations in respect of air quality.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Minister rightly says that this is not straightforward, but documents revealed to the court showed that the Treasury is blocking measures proposed by her Department and the Department for Transport that would actually tackle air pollution. The Environmental Audit Committee published a report on sustainability in the Department for Transport, in which we concluded that we had no confidence that the Department would meet either its 2020 or its 2030 target on low-emission vehicles. Given that the autumn statement is imminent, will the Minister now go back and work with the Department for Transport, and, critically, the Treasury, to unblock the pipeline and ensure that we stop dirty diesel?

Dr Coffey: The Environmental Audit Committee does important work in monitoring those ongoing issues. The Department for Transport and DEFRA have been working together, and we established the joint air quality unit earlier this year. I am also meeting public health and DCLG Ministers. As I have said, I am absolutely committed to trying to make a difference in this area.

The hon. Lady will be aware of the scheme that we launched last month to fund more charging points for low emission vehicles, focusing on taxis as well as cars. Those measures are well under way. I assure her that the Department for Transport takes this issue very seriously and that we will be making further progress, and I am sure that the Treasury has also heard her pleas. Moreover, the Prime Minister gave an undertaking in the House yesterday that we would do more in relation to air quality.
Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I am encouraged to hear that the Minister is making air quality her first priority. I hope that it will continue to be so until the problem is solved, because this is a deplorable state of affairs. I know that the Minister is part of a new ministerial team, but I agree with everything that was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish). My own constituents have had enough of the current appalling state of air quality. I know that I am in the middle of a big city, but the same applies to many other parts of the country. We need to ensure that the perverse incentives for diesel are stopped in their tracks, and I hope that the Minister will make representations to that effect at the highest level.

Dr Coffey: As my right hon. Friend suggests, the Government intend to continue to encourage people to opt for low-emission vehicles. As for what is being done in London, the Mayor said that he would plant 2 million trees in the run-up to the campaign—[HON. MEMBERS: “Where are they?”]—and I hope that he keeps to his pledge over the next four years, because that will help to improve air quality. I know that the Transport Committee has asked him to appear before it. As I have said, it is important for central and local government to work together to help the people whom we all represent.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May I gently suggest to the Minister that talking about sledgehammers and nuts is not really appropriate in this context? Air pollution is the biggest avoidable killer apart from smoking. The Minister needs a sledgehammer, and she needs to take the sledgehammer to the Treasury.

Given that this is the second humiliating defeat that the Government have suffered in the courts, surely there was a plan to announce some action here, today, in response to that defeat. Where is it? Where are the new measures?

Dr Coffey: As the right hon. Gentleman will know from his time in government, measures take some time to work up. He may shake his head, but I am not going to become involved in the blame game and talk about what happened under Labour, when the number of diesel vehicles on the road increased. What I will say is that I am working closely with officials to come up with comprehensive plans at a national level, including scrappage and other diesel vehicles. Will the Minister now set up a settlement from which it can decide to prioritise certain actions? I do commend the Mayor, who is bringing forward measures more quickly, particularly on buses. We need targeted interventions rather than, perhaps not a sledgehammer, but comprehensive schemes which may not be the best use of taxpayers’ money in tackling this critical issue.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Air quality in Malton and Norton is often at dangerous levels. Will the Minister join me in urging North Yorkshire County Council to develop and implement a clear strategy to deal with this problem?

Dr Coffey: I agree with my hon. Friend. Local councils know their communities best and can come up with good schemes where they work with local home and business owners. Of course, the national Government have their part to play; we have published our air quality plan and are updating our modelling, but local action with the help of a proactive local MP is good news for constituents.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister talked about nuts and sledgehammers and there being no need for a comprehensive plan, but does she not agree that she needs a proper fiscal strategy to incentivise consumers and producers so that we have a sustainable future, with an infrastructure of hydrogen and electric and a commitment to EU air quality standards, yet she has given us none of those things?

Dr Coffey: I said earlier that leaving the EU has nothing to do with improving air quality, and I stand by that.

May I clarify something that I said earlier? We have done the analysis on the scrappage schemes. Having just one particular kind of scheme where any diesel car can be replaced would not be the best use of taxpayers’ money because it is not a targeted intervention. I want to be smart about this and use taxpayers’ money effectively so that we can tackle this issue, not just have a comprehensive scrappage scheme which will not help as much.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): What role can the Government play in pushing the EU to improve the driving emissions test further?

Dr Coffey: I am not going to pretend I am the Department for Transport expert on this matter, but I know that we have been pushing for the last five years to get the real driving conditions actions updated. More is coming out next year, in 2017. We should be seeing Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The Mayor of London is making huge strides in cleaning up London’s bus fleet, in stark contrast to his predecessor, and he deserves to be recognised for taking this issue seriously while the Government are failing. However, urgent action is needed to tackle HGVs, private cars and other diesel vehicles. Will the Minister now set up a comprehensive plan at a national level, including scrappage schemes, fiscal incentives and urgent investment in research and development to help the Mayor and others to remove the highest polluting vehicles from our roads?
action right across the EU, and I am looking forward to that. We will start to see whether those measures have really made a difference in 2019, because it will take a bit of time to bed in, but I can assure my hon. Friend that although we will be leaving the EU, we will continue to make sure that our air quality improves.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): A Sunday Times investigation last year revealed that 3,000 schools were in areas affected by toxic air pollution, and we know that childhood asthma is massively on the increase. What are the Government doing specifically to ensure that schoolchildren are protected from air pollution?

Dr Coffey: Schools are in local council areas.

[Interruption.] I am not blaming local councils; I am trying to say that local councils know how best to work with their local communities in order to make a difference. The hon. Lady will know of various schemes—I am sure they happen in Bristol—such as walking to school. There are powers that councils have today that we encourage them to use; we are encouraging them to apply for the air quality grant fund. That is the kind of proactive action our local councils can take now to make a difference for children.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently remind colleagues that the business statement will follow these exchanges and after that there are two further ministerial statements before we reach the first of the two debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. Therefore there is a premium upon time, necessitating brevity from Back and Front Benches alike, now to be brief; we are briefly exemplified, I am certain, by Mr Jason McCartney.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Labour-run Kirklees Council keeps forcing through huge housing developments on greenfield sites in my constituency, especially around Lindley, with scant regard for the impact on air quality. Can we please put air quality at the forefront of planning reforms, and can we have a clean air zone in Huddersfield?

Mr Speaker: By the way, there will also be up to 20 minutes on the Select Committee statement, which merely serves to underscore the force of what I have just said.

Dr Coffey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In answer to my hon. Friend, I will need to check this—and I might need time to bed in, but I can assure my hon. Friend that although we will be leaving the EU, we will continue to make sure that our air quality improves.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The M1 motorway runs right next to the Tinsley area of my constituency, and NOX levels there are so dangerously high that Sheffield Council has acted to move two local schools away from the motorway and rebuild a school elsewhere. In the end, however, the council can only do so much, and it cannot prevent pollution from the M1. That needs a national plan from the Government to reduce NOX emissions from diesel vehicles. When are we going to get one?

Dr Coffey: One of the actions that the joint air quality unit is taking is to work up plans for the strategic road network, and that work is still under way. As I have said, our modelling was based on the best available evidence. A consequence of updating the modelling might be that more areas will come into it, but the strategic road network, including the M1, is on our agenda.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): According to the World Health Organisation, Plymouth has been named as one of the worst cities in the UK for air quality, along with Sulush in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray). There is an 11-year difference in life expectancy between the north-east of my constituency and the south-west. Would my hon. Friend be willing to meet members of my council to discuss how we can make significant improvements?

Dr Coffey: I am sure that it is a little rich to place this responsibility on local authorities when they are already so cash-starved and struggling to provide education and social care services. Is it not time for the Treasury to stand up and tackle this issue by providing the funds that are so desperately needed?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I feel some sympathy for the Minister, who is having to deal with this issue today, because the problem lies with the Treasury rather than with her Department. I have to say, however, that it is a little rich to place this responsibility on local authorities when they are already so cash-starved and struggling to provide education and social care services. Is it not time for the Treasury to stand up and tackle this issue by providing the funds that are so desperately needed?

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May I urge the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to liaise very carefully with the Department for Transport and the Treasury in the 20 days before the autumn statement to ensure that we get some good news on 23 November? Will the Minister also remember that the reason many people drive older diesel vehicles is that they are on lower incomes and those vehicles are their means of getting to work? We need to bear that in mind when we take action.

Dr Coffey: I recognise what my hon. Friend is saying. The miles-per-gallon rate is much better in diesel cars, and that is a reason to drive them in rural areas where petrol and diesel prices tend to be higher than in cities. We want to ensure that our interventions are targeted to
have the best impact. I can assure my hon. Friend that I am not shy about discussing these matters, either with the Department for Transport or with the Treasury.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): In my constituency, there are four primary schools within 100 yards of the M32 motorway, and another that is bang in the middle of the city. It is not enough for the Government to blame local councils. Will the Minister meet me, the other Bristol MPs and the Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, to discuss exactly what funding she will be providing to tackle this problem?

**Dr Coffey:** I am not blaming anyone. I have already set out that it is good for local councils to work with local communities on some of these solutions. The Government also need to do their bit, and I referred to the work on the strategic road network. There is a fund out there. Councils already know about it and I encourage them to use it. I would be happy for the hon. Lady to come and meet me to discuss the matter.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): While I applaud the Government’s commitment to introduce clean air zones in five of our big cities, may I urge Ministers to consider introducing them more quickly, because the deadline is 2020, and in more cities and towns? Will the zones be tailor-made and specific to individual needs, such as the A358 in my constituency? Can we also have lots of trees to help as well?

**Dr Coffey:** The Government are committed to this and are on track to plant 11 million trees over the lifetime of this Parliament. I hope that the Mayor of London keeps to his commitment to plant 2 million trees in London. Some powers already exist, and the consultation on the clean air zone framework is out there. The difference is that we are now mandating five cities to implement clear air zones. I recently visited Derby to sit down with the council leader and go through what is being considered. I assure the House that I will keep encouraging local councils to take action.

**Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): There are two possible routes for the M4 relief road in south Wales. One, the blue route, would concentrate and increase pollution in the heavily populated heart of Newport, where air pollution accounts for 70 deaths a year. The other scheme would disperse pollution over a wider, less-inhabited area. Will the Minister assure me that she will give her wholehearted support to the black route in order to reduce pollution?

**Dr Coffey:** I must be careful when dealing with such issues in Wales as they are the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government, but I am sure that officials will have heard what the hon. Gentleman had to say.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way to improve air quality is through innovation and new technology, not through regulation and more taxes?

**Dr Coffey:** My hon. Friend is right that we must pull on a number of levers. We should be proud of the innovations that we have undertaken, particularly in the development of low emission vehicles. However, we must be serious when addressing this issue. We are working up targeted interventions that I genuinely hope will mean that in a few years’ time we can be celebrating the fact that air quality is improving for everyone whom we represent.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have opposed a third runway at Heathrow for 20 years, but the Government are ploughing ahead. What action will the Minister take now to improve the appalling air quality around Heathrow? Will she ensure that the third runway will not be built unless air pollution can be contained within the legal limits?

**Dr Coffey:** In answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias), I set out that the Government believe that the runway at Heathrow can be delivered without impacting on the UK’s compliance on air quality. The Secretary of State for Transport was at the Dispatch Box on 25 October and talked about the Department for Transport, DEFRA and the Treasury embarking on a joint project “to identify further ways in which we can tackle the issue.” He continued: “By the time a new runway opens in the next decade, we intend to have made substantial progress on tackling such air quality challenges” not only around Heathrow, but “across our nation as a whole.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 164.]

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): In a few hours’ time, I will be returning to my seat of Brecon and Radnorshire, where the air is clear and fresh. I recommend a visit to every hon. Member to replenish their lungs. However, I come to this great city for four days a week. What difference does the Minister think that hydrogen and electric vehicles will have on emissions in cities such as this and across Great Britain?

**Dr Coffey:** I think they would have a huge impact.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have great sympathy for the Minister this morning because we are all responsible for the mess we are in, and I say that as chairman of my party’s Back-Bench DEFRA committee. Does the Minister realise that the public are far ahead of us on this issue? No one in their right mind would now buy a diesel car. The fact of the matter is that we need a scrappage scheme to get these filthy, belching diesel buses and cars out of our towns and cities. We are choking and poisoning children. That is why we need action now.

**Dr Coffey:** We are taking action to target our interventions. I have heard what the hon. Gentleman says about scrappage schemes. May I ask whether there are any more MPs left to speak?

**Mr Speaker** indicated assent.

**Dr Coffey:** I ask that because I am really pleased that so many Members in the House today are concerned about this issue, and I hope that we can all become champions on it with our local councils. I am happy to be held to account on this, but we must work together to make sure that we make the difference.
Mr Speaker: It is a very good headline: “Minister wants more questions”. The hon. Lady is setting a splendid precedent.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am very happy to oblige the Minister on that. Does she agree that supporting British industries wherever possible, rather than importing cheap, poorly produced products from elsewhere, is good not only for jobs, but for air quality in this country?

Dr Coffey: As I have just been reminded, Nissan will continue to manufacture cars in this country; we have Toyota in Derbyshire, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler); and we are already leading the way on ultra-low emission vehicles. Long may that continue.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): My constituency and the borough of Enfield are bound by the M25, the A10 and the north circular A406, so we have much more than our fair share of dirty diesels powering down our roads. Some of our roads, such as Bullsmoor Lane, are practically an extension of the M25. I do not think my constituents are going to feel reassured by what they have heard today; there has been no specific plan and no money identified from the Treasury. We have had nothing to stop the fact that we have kiddies in pushchairs sucking in this poisonous NOx.

Dr Coffey: I have outlined the fact that the Treasury has already provided incentives to make some changes and that we are looking at the strategic road network. We have to do this on the basis of the best available evidence. We are updating our modelling, and I hope that we will be able to help Enfield Council in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister accept not only that steps need to be taken, but that a knee-jerk reaction is not needed? We need action that does not adversely affect industry and our economy, but that encourages a reduction in pollution.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, but we do have to have a sense of urgency on this issue, and I am absolutely committed to prioritising it. It is a top priority for me and the Secretary of State. I will echo what the Prime Minister said:

“We have taken action, but there is more to do and we will do it.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 887.]

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 7 November—A general debate on exiting the EU and workers’ rights.

Tuesday 8 November—A debate on a motion on the role of grammar and faith schools, followed by a general debate on raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and service personnel. The subjects for both these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

The provisional business for the week commencing 14 November will include:

Monday 14 November—Second Reading of the Technical and Further Education Bill.

Tuesday 15 November—Consideration of a Lords message relating to the Investigatory Powers Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill.

Wednesday 16 November—Opposition day (12th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 17 November—A debate on a motion on reductions to employment and support allowance and universal credit, followed by a general debate on International Men’s Day. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 18 November—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 14 and 17 November will be:

Monday 14 November—Debate on an e-petition relating to the status of police dogs and horses.

Thursday 17 November—General debate on the future of the Post Office.

It may be for the convenience of the House if I make a few comments following this morning’s High Court judgment. It is a lengthy and complex judgment, which my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General is currently studying. I can confirm to the House that it is the Government’s intention to appeal against today’s High Court judgment. As the House is aware, we are now in a situation in which we have this judgment today and, from a little while ago, a judgment from the High Court of Northern Ireland, which came to a completely different decision on the same subject. We now have the High Courts in two different parts of the United Kingdom coming to opposite conclusions about the same constitutional legal question. This will now need to go to a higher court. In the light of the two judgments, the Government intend to offer an oral statement next Monday so that, subject to the usual requirements on sub judice, Ministers can be questioned by Members from all parts of the House.

Valerie Vaz: May I just say that it was the Master of the Rolls and the Lord Chief Justice who handed down that judgment?
Business questions are proving to be very successful in many areas. Not only was Marmite returned to the shelves on the same day that it was raised here, but now Bob Dylan has contacted the Nobel Committee.

We still do not have a negotiating position on exiting the European Union. We had a glimpse of it—not in Parliament, but on the “The Andrew Marr Show”—the day before a statement to the House. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy admitted that he had given assurances to a company that there will be continued access to markets in Europe, and vice versa. So, not a complete hard exit then, which reflects the Prime Minister’s comments to City bankers that she is worried about the effect of Brexit on the British economy.

A recent report by Professor Menon of King’s College said that cuts to personnel over the past few years have left the civil service depleted and with little expertise. Where do we get the expertise from? It is Europe, which is why we need a debate on the Government’s negotiating position. If the Government are going to provide letters of comfort, as the Secretary of State said, sector by sector, the British people would also like a letter of comfort. Sadly for us and for you, Mr Speaker, if the British people want to know what is going on and what the Government are thinking, they have to watch “The Andrew Marr Show”.

Mr Speaker, you will recall the words: “You turn if you want to. The lady’s not for turning”, but this Government seem to be turning again. In a written statement, the Education Secretary said last week that there will be no changes to education legislation in this parliamentary Session, which will run until next summer. Will the Leader of the House confirm that that is correct? Does that mean no forced academies, no education Bill and parents back on governing bodies? Will he please be explicit? If that is not enough, the legacy of the beleaguered Education Secretary at the Department for International Development has been traced by her successor, who says that there will be a greater focus on trade and that she will “call out” foreign aid organisations using British money. The Government are in disarray and speak with forked tongues.

I recall the former International Development Secretary telling the House that she had undertaken an audit of all aid donations, and that the Department’s website is in disarray and speak with forked tongues.

That is why we remember them. The Royal British Legion wants us to rethink Remembrance to include today’s generation who have died serving their country. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has secured a debate next week to draw attention to that call. May I ask the Leader of the House to ensure that, across the parliamentary Estate, we take up the call to rethink Remembrance?

Those who served fought for future generations, and future generations will be here next week when we welcome the Youth Parliament on 11 November. Its sitting will involve more than 300 young people between the ages of 12 and 18 from throughout our United Kingdom. We can learn from them how to focus on debates.

Will the Leader of the House join me in sending a message to Bob: “If you don’t want the Nobel peace prize money, could you donate it to the White Helmets of Syria”? That charity did not win the Nobel peace prize and was the beloved charity of our beloved colleague Jo Cox, who would have been delighted by the maiden speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) yesterday.

Finally, we look forward to the result of the United States presidential election. Faced with a scary clown and the possibility of the first woman President of the United States, I think I know who I would vote for. I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing President Obama and his family all the best for the future.

Mr Lidington: I straightaway join the shadow Leader of the House in expressing best wishes to President Obama, who has shown himself to be a firm friend of the United Kingdom, and of efforts to bring about peace and stability in conflict-torn parts of the world. We wish him and his family well.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on her maiden speech and welcome her from the Dispatch Box. We look forward to her playing an active part in our proceedings in the months and years to come.

Like the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), I am looking forward very much to the Youth Parliament coming here on 11 November. As you and I discussed earlier this week, Mr Speaker, we are both going to play a small role in the opening of those proceedings. It is really good to see young men and women who are enthusiastic about and committed to the democratic parliamentary process. I hope they will go away from their experience on 11 November wanting to be ambassadors for the strengths of parliamentary debate and parliamentary democracy in their communities around the country.

I am certainly aware of the wish of the Royal British Legion and other armed forces charities to ensure that, while we rightly continue to honour the sacrifice of those who served in the world wars, without whom we would not have the freedoms that we can so easily take for granted today, we should also have in mind those who have served in more recent conflicts, and the work that the charities do to provide help and support to servicemen and women who suffer mental and physical injury as a consequence of that service, and their families. All of us should be working with local branches of the Royal British Legion, other service charities and the services themselves to ensure that this message, as well
as the sacrifice and the continuing service of our armed forces, is understood by the wider community and across the generations. We should be as proud of those who have served more recently in Northern Ireland, the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan as we are of those who served in previous generations.

On the more political elements of the hon. Lady’s remarks, I was surprised by what she said about aid and international development. The Government could not have been clearer about our commitment to the 0.7% development spending, as we have demonstrated, not least by writing it into law. The very work to help to build democracy and good governance that she talked about, through organisations such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, is part of that 0.7%, and the criteria for our aid spending are laid down by the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015. There are clear guidelines and rules that govern how aid money should be spent, so I think that the hon. Lady is trying to set up some kind of Aunt Sally. There ought to be agreement across the House about our wanting an ambitious development programme, but also one in which we are rigorous in measuring the value for money of our aid and look carefully at the outcomes to make sure that that money—taxpayers’ money, don’t forget—is going to people who are in desperate need and is making a difference for good to their lives.

On education policy, I do not know whether the hon. Lady was on holiday when my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), but there is no reason why that is. It is full of general debates and Backbench Business of the House. We should be as proud of those who have served more recently in Northern Ireland, the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan as we are of those who served in previous generations.

Mr Liddington: I am somewhat surprised that my right hon. and learned Friend appears to have an appetite for the kind of all-night sittings that he and I went through on the Maastricht Bill some 25 years ago. I do not think that that would be the right way to have a mature debate and to reflect public interest in these various European issues. I am sure that the House will have plenty of opportunities—not just in Government time, but in many others ways—to debate all aspects of our forthcoming negotiation, but the fundamental principle is that this House voted overwhelmingly to give the British people the final say when it voted through the referendum Bill earlier this year, and we need to accept and respect the consequences of that decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House will decide its sitting hours—that is a matter for colleagues—pursuant to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), but there is no reason why that is. It is full of general debates and Backbench Business of the House. We should be as proud of those who have served more recently in Northern Ireland, the Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan as we are of those who served in previous generations.

Looking at the business, what meagre business we have. It is full of general debates and Backbench Business debates. I am glad that we have some time for the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), but there is no legislation, save one piece programmed for a week on Monday. It took the last Parliament four years to acquire
the moniker of the zombie Parliament; it looks like this Leader of the House is trying to achieve that in less than two years.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman is trying to work himself up into a sense of rage that, I am afraid, I find wholly synthetic. The judgment today is some 30 or 40 pages in length. The idea that I would come to the House within an hour of that judgment being read out in court and be able to provide the sort of detailed analysis and responses to questions that the hon. Gentleman seeks is, quite frankly, wrong-headed. That is why the Government are offering the oral statement that my right hon. and learned Friends had the opportunity to look at the judgment in detail so that we can respond as best we can, given the sub judice rule, to the questions from hon. Members on both sides of the House.

When it comes to the business before the House, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is not correct. I did say that we have legislation on both Monday 14 and Tuesday 15 November. I am asked all the time in these sessions for debates on European matters. The Government are now offering, in Government time, a debate on European matters—on workers’ rights, which is something the Scottish National Party professes to care about a great deal. Now the hon. Gentleman. The Government are offering the oral statement when my right hon. and learned Friends had the opportunity to get a Minister responsible before us, but I seek is, quite frankly, wrong-headed. That is why the analysis and responses to questions that the hon. Gentleman needs to make up his mind where his priorities really lie.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I was going, yet again, to raise the question of BBC monitoring in Caversham, and the determination of the Defence Committee to get a Minister responsible before us, but I will let the Leader of the House off this week on that topic. Will he instead make a statement about the holding by Russia of 31 Ukrainian prisoners, half of whom are having their Ukrainian nationality denied by the Russians because they come from that part of the Ukraine that is now occupied by Russia? I believe he met Nadiya Savchenko; the courageous army pilot whom the Russians took prisoner and sentenced to 22 years in jail until a campaign successfully got her released. A statement from the Government on the way in which Russia could perhaps do something to improve relations between east and west by releasing those prisoners would, indeed, be welcome.

Mr Lidington: I have a great deal of sympathy for what my right hon. Friend said. I did, indeed, meet Nadiya Savchenko yesterday, and I said to her that it was really good to see her a free woman, but also to be able to meet her in a free and democratic Parliament. I just wish that those conditions pertained in Russia as well. The approach that the Russian authorities have been taking in detaining Ukrainian citizens and holding them as political prisoners is but one manifestation of the increasingly ruthless and authoritarian approach taken by the Kremlin. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has been very plain in his condemnation of the Russian Government’s approach, and the British Government will continue to urge Russia through all diplomatic channels to change its approach, and will continue to support international sanctions, including European sanctions, against Russia so long as it continues to occupy Crimea and to interfere in the Donbass.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The Leader of the House has announced Back-Bench business for up to and including 17 November, including two debates next Tuesday. We are grateful to get debates on a Tuesday, even though it is the last day before the recess. We have two important Back-Bench debates this afternoon, but you have granted an urgent question, Mr Speaker, and two Government statements will also eat into our time. Will the Leader of the House consider finding protected time on days other than Thursdays, so that Back-Bench business is not eaten into by Government statements?

Last Saturday, I was privileged to attend the official opening of the north-east of England garden of remembrance in Saltwell Park, which is in the heart of my constituency of Gateshead. May I pay tribute to the Royal British Legion, the volunteers and the staff and members of Gateshead Council, who provide a wonderful, serene space in the town centre municipal park, for a magnificent display of commemoration for the fallen?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to join the hon. Gentleman in his salute both to the Royal British Legion in Gateshead and to the work done by Gateshead Council.

We will always do our best to ensure that there is no unnecessary intrusion of statements on Back-Bench business time, but there are always constraints on the use of time for limited parliamentary hours. Just as Government business sometimes gets curtailed because of the need for time for statements or urgent questions, that applies to Back-Bench business as well. We will try to be as helpful as we can to the hon. Gentleman and his Committee.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Government have rightly decided to appeal to the Supreme Court. Does my right hon. Friend appreciate that the vote to leave the European Union was fundamentally based on a sovereign Act of Parliament that expressly transferred the decision from Parliament to the voters of the United Kingdom as a whole?

Mr Lidington: As I recall, during the debates on the European Union Referendum Bill, hon. Members on both sides of the House agreed and said in their speeches that that was the political consequence of enacting it. The Court has come to its judgment and we will make a further statement on Monday, after the Attorney General has had the chance to look at it in detail.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab): May we have a debate on the increase in the use of food banks? During my recent campaign, I met the manager of Batley food bank, who is increasingly concerned about the upcoming winter months, as hard-working people and families left behind by this Government are forced to make the really difficult decision between heating their homes and putting food on the table.

Mr Lidington: One of the differences between this Government and the Labour Government who preceded them is that this Government have made a conscious decision to signpost people who might be in need to food banks as a possible source of support; whereas under Labour, staff working for the Department for Work and Pensions were expressly discouraged and forbidden from doing so. Despite that, there was a tenfold increase in the use of food banks under the last Labour Government. I would have hoped that the hon. Lady would have welcomed the fact that a record number of people are in work in this country, and that all the indicators of inequality, including those that the Labour
party has historically supported and championed, show that inequality has fallen compared with its level under the Labour Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Given the pressure on time, to which I referred earlier, I should now appreciate single, short supplementary questions.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I welcome the announcement by the Leader of the House that there is to be a debate on the European Union and workers’ rights next week. Could he also provide an opportunity for the House to debate the rights of this House, because without our supporting our own rights, there are no rights for workers? The Court this morning reinforced the importance of parliamentary sovereignty. Will my right hon. Friend make it abundantly clear that this House believes in its own powers and privileges; that they should be sustained; and that we should not enter into the farce that we entered into last Monday, when Parliament made a mistake in relation to Select Committees? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: It is being chuntered from a sedentary position that the right hon. and learned Gentleman is a lawyer. He is indeed a very distinguished lawyer, but I fear that we will have to wait for the next question to get a brief one.

Sir Edward Garnier: I am also a Member of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is also a Member of Parliament, and we have heard him with great courtesy and, indeed, a degree of charity.

Mr Lidington: As recently as last week, we had a debate on a report from the Privileges Committee during which Members from all parts of the House spoke up for the rights, powers and authority of this House of Commons. The particular issues arising from this morning’s High Court judgment are precisely the ones about which Members will have an opportunity to ask questions on Monday.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Bonfire night is almost upon us, and I really worry about the fire and rescue service in Cleveland—one of the highest fire-risk areas in Europe—where we have lost more than a quarter of our front-line staff since 2010. Firefighters are at breaking point and worried that their ability to save lives is compromised. May we have a debate on the funding of fire and rescue services, and will the Leader of the House encourage the Fire Minister to visit Cleveland at my invitation to understand what is happening there?

Mr Lidington: I will certainly alert my right hon. Friend the Fire Minister to the invitation and to the welcome that he will undoubtedly receive in Cleveland from the hon. Gentleman. The issue of fire safety as we approach fireworks night is always about trying to get the right balance between families’ individual freedom to buy fireworks, to have bonfires and to celebrate; and our need to provide for their safety. That freedom-versus-security debate is so relevant here, as it is in other aspects of public policy.

The good news is that the trend in admissions to hospital A&E departments because of accidents on fireworks night is downwards. That suggests to me that individuals and local authorities are much more aware of the safety advice that the Government and local councils have promulgated, and that they are taking appropriate action.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): President Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo is due to step down on 19 December. He will not do so, and he has not even arranged for the elections to replace him. May we have an urgent debate on the matter? There is great risk of substantial violence occurring on and after 19 December at a time when everybody will be off for Christmas and the United States will have an interregnum.

Mr Lidington: It is important that those elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo take place as soon as possible. That is in the interests of the stability of that country and the wellbeing of its people, so many of whom have to live lives of the most dreadful poverty and still fall prey to endemic violence within the DRC. The Government are using all diplomatic means available to try to ensure that those elections take place. The Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Minister with responsibility for Africa, issued a statement to that effect very recently.

Mr Speaker: I aim to move on to the next business at midday.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House make a statement explaining why the Government can give a £4.6 billion loan guarantee to Thames Water but will not provide loan guarantees to the oil and gas industry?

Mr Lidington: As the Prime Minister said yesterday, the Government provide a range of measures through the tax system that help to support oil and gas businesses in the United Kingdom. There is also the economic reality that the global price for hydrocarbons has fallen very sharply in recent years, and it is never possible to insulate any industry completely from that kind of movement.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) on the need for an open-ended debate on Europe? As normal on Europe, Ken and I are as one. For brevity’s sake, would it help the Leader of the House if he just said yes?

Mr Lidington: Learning of this historic pact, my heart skips. Although the Government have pledged that there will be a series of debates on different aspects of the forthcoming EU negotiation, I fear we shall never be able to grant enough of them to satisfy my hon. Friend.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House arrange a debate on the re-routing of HS2 in south Yorkshire? The new route will decimate communities throughout the region and provide none of the advantages first associated with the Meadowhall station, which was going to be a catalyst for growth in the south Yorkshire economy.
Mr Lidington: I will certainly report to my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed on behalf of his constituents. As he will know, that phase of the HS2 route has not yet been published in the form of a Bill. I am sure he will continue to make very strong representations to HS2 Ltd and the Department for Transport asking them to look again at the plans in the light of his constituents’ concerns.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): As one who campaigned against leaving the European Union, I give my right hon. Friend the assurance that I would vote for triggering article 50 if given the chance. I welcome the fact that there will be a statement on Monday, but does he accept that the Government’s tone need not be one of disappointment? It should be one of welcoming the operation of the British rule of law, which I thought the referendum was partly about. It is not a decision to be afraid of, even if the Government wish to appeal.

Mr Lidington: We certainly pride ourselves, rightly, on being a country that lives by the rule of law. The case in question involves some very important constitutional matters concerning the respective powers of the Executive, Parliament and, indeed, the courts themselves, so it is right and inevitable that this will end up in front of the Supreme Court. My right hon. Friend, like other hon. Members, will have an opportunity to make such points again on Monday.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The High Court has ruled that the “government does not have power” to trigger article 50. May we therefore have a debate to celebrate taking back control and parliamentary democracy, and to argue that Parliament should determine when article 50 is triggered on the basis of full consideration of the implications of the advisory referendum?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman has aired his view. I cannot recollect at the moment whether he voted for or against the European Union Referendum Bill when it came before Parliament. I suspect that he did not vote against it at the time, which might make his call for a celebration now seem slightly odd. As I have said, this is a matter about which hon. Members can question Ministers on Monday, and we shall then have to await the appeal hearing.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Thanks to the hard work of volunteers and Rugby Borough Council’s parks department, under the leadership of Chris Worman, my constituency won a prestigious gold award at the recent Rugby Borough Council’s parks department under the leadership of Chris Worman, my constituency won a prestigious gold award at the recent Best Park awards. We are hoping for further success when Caldecott Park is nominated for the UK’s Best Park awards. May we have a debate about the importance of our green open spaces?

Mr Lidington: I am delighted to congratulate Mr Worman and his team on the achievement that my hon. Friend the Transport Secretary the concerns that the right hon. Gentleman has expressed on behalf of his constituents. As he will know, that phase of the HS2 route has not yet been published in the form of a Bill. I am sure he will continue to make very strong representations to HS2 Ltd and the Department for Transport asking them to look again at the plans in the light of his constituents’ concerns.

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Mr Lidington: I am delighted to congratulate Mr Worman and his team on the achievement that my hon. Friend mentioned. I hope that my hon. Friend will have the opportunity, perhaps through an Adjournment debate, to draw the House’s attention further to this matter, as well as to point out how the Government’s policy on neighbourhood planning will give local people a greater say in the future of their precious parks.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My constituency is wonderfully diverse, so I was saddened this morning to read a very misrepresentative newspaper article about an area in my constituency, in which the journalist appears to do nothing but stir up racial hatred. Such articles serve no purpose. May we have a debate to discuss the role the media appear to be playing in creating racial tension?

Mr Lidington: I am obviously not aware of the details of the particular case that the hon. Lady has described. In my experience, to promote good community relations requires commitment and steady hard work by members of different communities at local level in towns and in cities, right down to the level of individual estates and neighbourhoods. In my years in this place, I have seen members of all political parties getting stuck into that kind of work. As a result, if we look at opinion poll findings, we see that although there are problems—I am not going to pretend otherwise—for the most part this is a country where people feel at ease with their neighbours, whatever colour skin, whatever religion or whatever background those neighbours may have or have come from.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) have a point. Irrespective of the court case, is a general debate on triggering article 50 good enough? Why should we fear a debate on a substantive motion? It would be a brave Member of Parliament who voted against the will of the people. When it comes to Brexit, the only thing to fear is fear itself—let’s get on with it.

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, some important constitutional questions were raised by the case in the High Court, and by the court case in Northern Ireland last week. The Government are going to appeal against today’s High Court judgment. We shall see what the appeal brings.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): The 2013 Tomlinson report identified malpractice at the Royal Bank of Scotland, and a constituent of mine, Mr Alun Richards, believes he has been the victim of similar actions by the former Lloyds TSB group and its surveyors, Alder King. May we please have a debate on the conduct of the banking industry in the years that followed the financial crash?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Gentleman’s constituent has been the victim of criminal malpractice on the part of a company or its employees, there are routes available with independent investigatory and prosecutorial authorities, and he should present his evidence to those. If the hon. Gentleman would care to write to me with the details of that constituency case, I shall pass them on to the Minister responsible.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we please have a debate on the time taken to obtain Disclosure and Barring Service checks? A constituent has been waiting six weeks for a check, despite having had a previous check only in January of this year. These delays are stopping people working.
Mr Lidington: Delays of the kind that my hon. Friend mentions are deeply to be regretted. Not only are they inconvenient—to put it mildly—for the individuals concerned but they often mean that a school, hospital or social services department has to carry a vacancy or employ temporary staff for longer than necessary. The information I have is that over the past 12 months DBS checks that have taken longer than 60 days amount to less than 6% of the total number dispatched, but if he would like to let me have some details about the problems in his constituency I shall ensure that the relevant Minister at the Home Office is made aware of them.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The stabbing of a 14-year-old in Ealing made the front page of the Standard this week. It was the 68th one with a victim under 25 in our borough in 12 months, and there have been nearly 1,800 London-wide. May we have a Government statement on what is being done to get a grip on knife crime, to stop this becoming the new norm in the suburbs?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friends the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor are both very well aware of this challenge. Strong laws are in place against the carrying of knives in public places, but the real problem here is the gang culture that has grown up in parts of our cities. I know that the police and other criminal justice agencies make strenuous efforts to curb that gang culture. I do not think there is a single neat, easy answer to these questions. I hope that the hon. Lady will have the opportunity for further debate on the matter and also to put questions on it to the relevant Ministers.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Since a majority of Members of this House would vote to trigger article 50 but want further reassurance about the terms of Brexit, may I suggest to my right hon. Friend that whatever the legal position it would be wise of the Government to allow a discussion and vote on the plan, before they find that, one way or the other, they are required to offer that?

Mr Lidington: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Foreign Office Ministers have made frequent representations to the Ethiopian authorities about Mr Tsege. I shall draw the right hon. Gentleman’s continuing concern to the attention of the Foreign Secretary at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Lidington: All hon. Members will be aware from our constituency work of some pretty dreadful cases in which parents of children who have various autistic spectrum disorders run into difficulties in accessing one or more of the statutory services. It is important that we have the best possible practice and the best awareness of autistic spectrum disorders in the education service and all other parts of the public service. Ministers are doing their utmost to encourage such understanding. My hon. Friend will have the opportunity to pursue that further in Education questions on Monday 14 November.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What should be supreme: the single snapshot of public opinion taken on a single day in June, heavily influenced by racial scaremongering and the downright lie of extra billions for the health service; or the mature opinion of Parliament when the full titanic consequences of Brexit are known? The Government asserted on 30 September 2010 that all referendums are advisory. Will the Leader of the House stand up for the supremacy of Parliament, knowing that second thoughts are always better than first thoughts?

Mr Lidington: The Government, the former Prime Minister and the current Prime Minister have always been completely consistent. We have said that the referendum, while legally and constitutionally advisory, was something that we would regard as politically binding. That was also the view taken by the Opposition, and certainly Opposition Front Benchers, when the Bill was going through. I campaigned hard for the remain side, but I have to say that it takes us into very difficult and potentially dangerous territory if we lightly say that we set aside the results of an exercise in mass democracy that attracted a turnout on general election scale, and that had an outcome that, while close, was nevertheless decisive.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My private Member’s Bill on sugar is published today. It requires the number of spoonfuls of sugar in processed foods from autism, which affects thousands of people up and down the country. Will he arrange for a statement outlining whether the Government are prepared to reconsider the current situation?
and drinks to be put on the label. Given that a man like him is supposed to have only nine spoonfuls a day, the equivalent of one Coca-Cola, and a woman only six spoonfuls, the equivalent of one Müller Light, will the Leader of the House find time to debate obesity, sugar labelling and the impact on the NHS?

Mr Lidington: Obesity is certainly a real challenge for the NHS, because of its link to chronic conditions such as diabetes. That is precisely why the Government have launched the most ambitious childhood anti-obesity strategy that any Government in the United Kingdom have set in motion. The Government will take a view on the hon. Gentleman’s Bill if and when it is debated in the Chamber.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As my right hon. Friend may know, I have been campaigning to save the hedgehog. Bonfire night will be on Saturday. Does my right hon. Friend agree that people should check their bonfires before they are lit to make sure there are no hedgehogs lurking inside them?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend will merit some kind of Tiggywinkles award for his devotion to hedgehogs. He is right. If our constituents want further advice, they can consult the website of the British Hedgehog Preservation Society, where further tips are available.

Mr Speaker: Truly, the hon. Gentleman has established himself as a hedgehog fetishist.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): My constituent David Greenway is currently struck in Iraq. His employer is an American company called Hannaford, which has not paid him or his accommodation costs for some time, with the result that his passport has been seized by his hotel, which will not release it until all arrears are paid. The embassy has intervened without success and I have written to the relevant Minister. May we have a debate on what more can be done to help British citizens left in this situation?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this case. He will understand that it is sometimes the right course of action to raise an individual case in public, and that with particular Governments it is better to try to go in slightly under the radar and make representations. I will make sure that Foreign Office Ministers are very alive to the case he describes. If he would like to let me have further details, that will help to speed things up.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Following the Welsh Assembly Government’s decision to cut the local government settlement for Powys County Council for the 10th year in a row, may we have a debate on whether the Welsh Government are taking their responsibility to serve the whole of Wales seriously, or whether they are interested only in looking after their Labour heartlands?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. It is very important that he and others who represent rural communities in Wales impress on the Welsh Assembly Government the need to try to have a Welsh Government that works for all. The evidence, sadly, is that there is not much of that commitment on the part of the Labour party in Cardiff.

Mr Speaker: I trust the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) will now impress us with a single sentence inquiry.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): At this time of year, when we remember those who died and their families, it is a national disgrace that there is a group of women who still do not receive any support from the state because after grief they again found love. May we have a debate on this injustice and an announcement from the Government that this will finally change?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman may have the chance to obtain an Adjournment debate on this subject, but I will make sure that the relevant Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions writes to him.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House and colleagues.
Prison Safety and Reform

12.3 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Elizabeth Truss): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government’s proposals for prison reform.

The prison system in England and Wales is under serious and sustained pressure. Rates of violence and self-harm have increased significantly over the past five years. In the 12 months to June 2016, there were nearly 6,000 assaults on staff and 105 self-inflicted deaths. Prison staff are responding to constantly evolving security threats, such as psychoactive drugs, mobile devices and drones. Too many prisoners are missing out on the chance to reform and too many are going on to reoffend when they leave prison. We owe it to our hard-working prison staff to reverse these trends. We owe it to prisoners and their families, and we owe it to our communities and victims of crime. The cost of reoffending by former prisoners to society is estimated to be £15 billion a year: £1.7 million every single hour of every single day, blighting thousands of lives.

In May, Her Majesty set out in the Gracious Speech that her Government would legislate to reform prisons, including increasing freedoms for governors, improving education opportunities for offenders and closing old and inefficient buildings. Today, I am publishing the Government’s plans for doing so. They represent a major overhaul of the system—the biggest for a generation.

Prisons punish by depriving people of their liberty. They must also reduce reoffending. My starting point is to refocus the system so that everyone is clear that safety and rehabilitation is the purpose of the prison system, setting this out for the first time ever in statute. Governors and staff cannot lead and manage change in an environment where they fear violence. Likewise, offenders cannot be expected to turn their lives around while they are dependent on drugs or in fear of being assaulted.

I will invest in 2,500 more prison officers across the prison estate. This includes the recruitment of 400 additional prison officers, which is already under way, in 10 of our most challenging prisons. Increasing the number of front-line staff will give prison officers more time to turn the lives around of offenders. Starting with 10 of the most challenging prisons, each and every offender will have a dedicated prison officer offering regular, one-to-one support. This one-to-one support model will be rolled out to every prison in England and Wales.

We will combine this new support for prisoners with a zero-tolerance approach to criminality in prison. I will send the clearest possible message that if anyone attacks our prison staff, we will treat it as a serious crime. We are rolling out body-worn cameras across the prison estate to give staff extra confidence, and we will work closely with other organisations, including the National Crime Agency and the police, to improve our intelligence-gathering function to tackle organised crime within the prison estate.

We will also take robust action to address emerging threats to prison security. We have rolled out new tests for psychoactive substances across the estate, and have trained staff to detect these new substances. We will work with industry to rid our prisons of the mobile phones that are driving up crime within the prison walls, as well as of the drones used to smuggle goods in.

Alongside investing in our staff, we will give governors the tools they need to drive forward improvements. We will push decision-making authority and budgets for the things that make a difference to offenders down to governors—whether it be education, family services or how prisons run their regime.

We are already seeing what greater authority can achieve in our six reform prisons. Launched in the summer, these trailblazers have allowed governors to reap the rewards of greater authority and empowerment in their prisons. Now we want the whole of the prison estate to benefit from greater devolution of powers to local level. In return for greater authority, we will hold governors to account for improvements. For the first time, we will publish national league tables every year, so the public can quickly see an illustration of how each prison is performing. This will include assessing the progress that offenders have made to improve their maths and English skills as well as getting into work.

The various inspection and scrutiny regimes—Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons, the prisons and probation ombudsman, and the independent monitoring boards—need to be strengthened. Their recommendations need to be taken seriously and responded to quickly. When failures happen, people want to see action taken. We will strengthen the role of Her Majesty’s inspectorate, adding to its remit so that in addition to its broad focus on the treatment of prisoners, it takes account of the extent to which prisons are achieving the statutory purpose. There will be a formal process for the inspectorate’s findings to act as a trigger for the Secretary of State to intervene in the worst cases.

Finally, reform simply cannot happen in decrepit jails. Some prisons are overcrowded and no longer fit for purpose. That is why I am investing £1.3 billion in a modern, fit-for-purpose estate. In addition to HMP Berwyn in Wales, which will open from February 2017, we will build new prisons for men and women and close those prisons that do not have a long-term future on the estate. This year, we will begin the process of submitting planning applications for new sites, starting with Wellingborough and Glen Parva. As the new accommodation is opened, we will start to close old accommodation. As part of this programme, we will not reopen Dover and Haslar as prisons. Over the next five years there will be a programme of closures, and I shall make a more detailed announcement about that shortly.

Over the course of this Parliament and beyond we will see tangible improvements in the condition of our prisons, and we will begin to see better results in what prisons are asked to achieve. I believe that over the coming years we can create a better system with pronounced and sustained improvements in results for offenders—improvements in their education, employment and health—so that those stubborn reoffending rates can come down, and fewer people will have to go through the terrifying ordeal of being a victim of crime. That will be the marker for whether these reforms have been a success.

This Government’s mission is to reform the way our public services work for the benefit of everyone in society. As Justice Secretary, I have made urgent reform of our prisons my No.1 priority in order to bring crime down in our communities and reduce harm for both prison staff and prisoners. That priority will, I am sure, be shared by all Members, and I commend my statement to the House.
Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): This morning the Secretary of State said that it was in July that she had realised that there was a problem in our prisons. The rest of the country was aware of that reality well before then. There is a crisis in our prisons, although the Secretary of State refuses to admit it openly. The story of our prison system since 2010 is a story of spiralling violence and drug use. The root cause of the prison crisis is the political decision to cut our prison service back to the bone, and today’s announcement feels a lot like “too little, too late”. The Secretary of State wants the headline to be “2,500 extra prison staff”, but 400 of those jobs have already been announced, and, in fact, it is 2,500 “extra” after a reduction of more than 6,000 on the front line.

It is deeply concerning that it was only after a threat of unofficial action that the Secretary of State was prepared to meet representatives of the Prison Officers Association to discuss the safety crisis in our prisons. However, she has finally met the leaders of the officers of whom she has asked so much, and they have made the scale of the crisis clear to her. Will she now admit that there is a Conservative cuts-created crisis in safety in our prisons? In his annual report, published in July, the chief inspector of prisons, Peter Clarke, described our prisons as “unacceptably violent and dangerous places”.

Only if it is recognised that there is a crisis in our prisons can a prison crisis be solved.

The Secretary of State clearly now feels that she needs to be seen to be doing something, but the provision of 2,500 extra prison officers is not a cause for celebration, given that more than 6,000 front-line prison officer jobs have been cut since 2010. We have a prison capacity of 76,000 and a prison population of 85,000, which has remained at about the same level since 2010. We had 24,000 prison officers to deal with 85,000 prisoners; now we have 18,000 to deal with the same number. Our hard-working prison staff are overstretched and overwhelmed, and what has that meant? It has meant a record number of prison deaths, including a record number of suicides. The rate is nearing one death every day. There have been 324 deaths this year, including 107 suicides. Overall, we have seen 1,416 deaths since 2010, including 473 suicides. There are now more than 65 assaults each day, and this year there have been nearly 24,000: there has been a huge surge in both prisoner-on-prisoner assaults and assaults on our hard-working prison staff. The statistics show that there have been more than 100,000 assaults in prisons since 2010.

Why is that? It is because the austerity experiment in our prison service has failed. The presence of fewer officers, overstretched and overwhelmed, means a stricter and increasingly unsafe prison regime, and it means that prisons cannot effectively reform and rehabilitate in the way that prisoners and wider society need. Working in prisons has become less appealing and more dangerous. The Government have said that they have recruited more than 3,100 prison officers since January 2015, but there has been a net increase of only 300 in that time. It is clear that they are failing on staff retention. Prison officers are now expected to work until they are 68, in conditions that the Prison Officers Association has described as “dangerous for everyone, staff and prisoners alike.”

I am afraid that this Conservative Government have not valued hard-working prison staff; in fact, they have driven experienced staff out of our prisons.

Former Conservative Home Secretary and party leader Michael Howard famously said “Prison works.” Under this Conservative Government, prison isn’t working. Prison isn’t working for prisoners, prison isn’t working for our prison staff, and prison isn’t working for wider society. Reoffending rates are far too high, and the Government have failed on rehabilitation. Because prison isn’t working under this Government, it is not protecting our society properly.

The Justice Secretary has undoubtedly grabbed headlines by promising an increase in the number of prison officers, but she needs to tell us how she will attract new staff. She also needs to understand that building new prisons is not a panacea in itself. There are problems over how league tables would work in practice, and there is a tension between more autonomy for prison governors and new powers for the Secretary of State.

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the hon. Gentleman very much indeed. I gave him an extra half minute, which I think was fair.

Elizabeth Truss: I have to say that I am disappointed by what the hon. Gentleman has said. I thought that, following our exchange on Tuesday, he would welcome the fact that the Government are committing 2,500 extra staff to the front line. We have also produced a White Paper detailing some of the most significant reforms of prisons for a generation to address the violence and the reoffending rates. We are launching apprenticeship schemes to encourage more people to become prison officers, as well as a new graduate entry scheme and a scheme that is intended to increase the number of former armed forces personnel in the Prison Service.

The hon. Gentleman asked about staffing. Our staffing numbers are based on evidence. Our new programme will allocate to every prisoner a dedicated prison officer who will be responsible for supporting and challenging that prisoner. Each prison officer will be responsible for six offenders. We know that that approach works, because we have trialled it: it is based on evidence. For the first time, we are enshrining in statute the Secretary of State’s responsibility to ensure that offenders are not just housed but reformed. Of course they need to be punished and deprived of their liberty, but they also need to be reformed while they are in prison. That is a major change, and I should have thought the hon. Gentleman welcomed it.

Of course it is right for us to give governors authority and accountability, but I have visited numerous prisons where I have met our hard-working prison officers, and they are the people who can turn lives around. They are the people who can motivate someone to get off drugs, to get an education and to get a job. It is right for us to give them the autonomy and authority that enables them to do that, while also holding them to account.

I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman has seen nothing to commend in the White Paper, which I think addresses many of the long-standing issues in our prison service.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend. I warmly welcome her prompt response to the crisis of violence in prisons, and her
attractive proposals for strengthening the management of those prisons and the public accountability of the management for their results. Does she agree, however, that her overriding aim of protecting the public by reducing reoffending and preventing prisoners from committing crimes in future is almost impossible to achieve so long as prisons are overcrowded slums? Will she make the courageous decision to start addressing some of the sentencing policies of the 1990s and the 2000s, which accidentally doubled the prison population in those overcrowded slums? Will she ensure that our prisons are reserved for serious criminals who need to be punished, and find better ways of dealing with problems of mental health and drug abuse and with irritating, trivial offenders?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not in favour of an arbitrary reduction in the number of prisoners in our prisons. What I am in favour of is reducing reoffending rates so that we stop people revolving through the system and going in and out of prisons. We need to make sure our prisons work and reform people, and we also need more early intervention so that we prevent people from committing the crimes that lead to their serving a custodial sentence. The fact is we are seeing fewer first-time offenders, so more of our crime problem is now about those who persistently reoffend, and that is the important issue I am seeking to address.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): What concerns me is that the Secretary of State appears to think it is a brilliant new idea to establish no-fly zones for drones near prisons—apparently with a taskforce of eagles to be called in at the time, although I suspect the drone will have got in and out by the time the eagle is untethered. Does she not know that drone manufacturers have for some time had the technology to establish these zones? Why have they not been given the GPS co-ordinates of prisons by now, and why is she not meeting them until December?

Elizabeth Truss: The prisons Minister is working closely with drone manufacturers and leading a Government taskforce to address precisely this issue.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Secretary of State’s statement should on any objective view be welcomed as bold and courageous. Will she make the courageous decision to start addressing immediately issues in our prison system, and increasing face immediate issues in our prison system, and increasing the truth that we have 3,500 fewer prison officers in our prisons than in 2010? At the same time deaths and suicides in prisons are dramatically up, and assaults on prison officers are up as well. Will the right hon. Lady just come to that Dispatch Box and say, “I admit it: too little, too late”?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been clear that staffing is an issue. That is why we are investing in 2,500 more prison officers, but it is not the only issue. We also have an issue with drugs, drones and phones, which we are dealing with, and we have just rolled out testing for new psychoactive substances such as Spice and Black Mamba, which the prisons and probation ombudsman has said have been a game-changer in the system. We are also changing the way we deploy staff, so that there is a dedicated officer for each prisoner, helping keep them safe, but also making sure they are on the path to reform—getting off drugs, getting into work and getting the skills they need to succeed outside.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Unsurprisingly, I wholly associate myself with the question of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), Does the Secretary of State understand that the prisons are in this state now because of the Faustian pact between the Prison Officers Association and the National Offender Management Service and her predecessor-but-one, in order to deliver the savings demanded by the Treasury: to agree to stripping the public sector establishments down to the bone if he stopped the competition programme? That is what happened. Will the Secretary of State now ensure that the private sector builds the new prisons, and is given a proper opportunity, in competition with the public sector, to run both the new prisons and the existing prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: Today’s White Paper is about the standards we expect of prisons, in both the private and public sector. I have been to some very good public sector prisons and I have been to some very good private sector prisons, and what I care about is getting the best possible outcomes so that we reduce reoffending and crime.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There is a lot to welcome in this statement, but the Secretary of State would do well to listen to the sage counsel of her right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). The root cause of prison violence is overcrowding, and the root cause of overcrowding is that we still send too many people to prison for short sentences, which will not achieve the purpose the Secretary of State now says she is going to enshrine in statute. Will she not consider a presumption against short sentences?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming elements of the White Paper, in contrast to some of the other comments from the Opposition. We face immediate issues in our prison system, and increasing staffing is part of the solution to that, as is having a much clearer purpose to the prison system. As the number of first-time offenders goes down, we need to address the ramp of reoffending in order to address the problems of crime in society. That is why I am focusing
on that. We have enough staff in our plans to be able to deliver safe prisons that reform offenders, and we also have a building programme creating 10,000 new spaces so we are able to house those offenders.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I warmly welcome the statement. Unless there is the necessary discipline and a reduction in overcrowding and reliance on drugs in our prisons there simply will not be the rehabilitation the Secretary of State wants. May I urge her to continue down this path to ensure we help to reduce reoffending as well?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right: being on drugs is one of the major causal links to reoffending. That is why we will test prisoners for drugs on both entry and exit, to see how effective the regime in prisons is at getting offenders off drugs.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is almost 10 years since Baroness Corston’s report recommended women should be held in small custodial units, if in custody at all, and as close as possible to home. The Secretary of State has just spoken of substantial investment in the women’s estate, which is very welcome. Will she be able finally to take this important turning point as an opportunity to implement that Corston recommendation?

Elizabeth Truss: I can confirm we are developing the idea of women’s community prisons, which will be smaller-scale prisons specifically designed to address the needs of women. We will outline more about that in due course, and look at overall reform in respect of women offenders in the new year.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): A little while ago a former prisoner said to me that when he left prison he could mop a floor very well but that was not going to pay the bills. In the recent Dame Glenys Stacey in-depth look at 86 prisoners, not one left the shop with anything.

Elizabeth Truss: I commend my hon. Friend for the work he did as prisons Minister in promoting employment. I have seen some excellent schemes in prison. For example, Costa Coffee is offering jobs and training people as baristas, and I have mentioned Land Securities looking for scaffolding and dry-lining workers and training them in prison. I completely agree with my hon. Friend that rather than doing work in prisons and then seeing what jobs are available on the outside, we need to look at the opposite way round; we need to see what is available on the outside and make sure those are the skills we are training up in prisons, preferably with the employers who are then going to take those offenders on.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady have a word with the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) in order to reduce her naive optimism and to recall that no party in the last 45 years has reduced recidivism? On this Government’s watch, a recent report said the number of prisoners who first took drugs in, for example, Bedford jail had risen from 4% to 14%, meaning people were going in as shoplifters and coming out as heroin addicts. What is she going to do about that?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely reject the hon. Gentleman’s counsel of despair. This is the first time we will ever be putting it in statute that reform is the purpose of prisons. At the moment the Secretary of State is merely responsible for housing prisoners, not making sure we improve outcomes. We have not had that systematic approach and I am determined we achieve it.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I welcome the White Paper, which rightly recognises the need to educate prisoners and help them into work. It also identifies existing good practice in the relationships between prisons and businesses. The Lord Chancellor mentioned the scaffolding work; another example would be the restaurant at HMP Cardiff. How will she build on the current schemes and incentivise employers to work more closely with prisons?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that engaging with employers is vital. We have seen some fantastic examples, such as Timpson and Virgin, which are already working closely with us. My hon. Friend the prisons Minister will be doing further work on this subject and making further announcements on it shortly.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I think I heard the Secretary of State admit that cutting 25% of prison officers had been a mistake, but restoring just over a third of that number might not be enough. Will she keep this under review, and can she tell me whether particularly troubled prisons such as Wormwood Scrubs, which have had a temporary uplift in staff numbers, will be able to keep those staff? Will the numbers there go up rather than down?

Elizabeth Truss: The number of staff we are putting in is based on the evidence of our new offender management model. The idea is that each prison officer will be responsible for supervising and mentoring six prisoners and challenging them to reform. There is an important evidential base for that programme, but we will of course continue to look at it as we develop it. We have measures in place in London prisons to help staff recruitment and retention.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I have been banging on about Wellingborough prison almost as much as I have been banging on about Europe, so I should like to tell the Secretary of State how much I welcome today’s announcement that it will reopen. I particularly want to thank Lynn Holcombe and the other local residents who have done such a good job in keeping the campaign going for such a long time. I must apologise to my hon. Friends the Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), and to the Attorney General. Over the years, I have badgered, bought them cups of tea and been a real pest. This will be a wonderful prison and it will be welcomed by the people of Wellingborough.
Elizabeth Truss: I am absolutely delighted to be able to announce the first phase in our programme, and delighted that we are able to make my hon. Friend's wishes come true in Wellingborough. I look forward to being able to make more announcements about new prisons in due course.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I hope that the Secretary of State will be able to give a similarly warm and positive answer to my question. Many charities work with reformed ex-offenders, and they are transforming people's lives. Those charities have a problem, however, in that some of the ex-offenders are unable to become trustees of a charity. I accept the importance of having safeguarding arrangements in place, but will she look into this?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with the hon. Lady that we have some brilliant charities and brilliant people who are really transforming lives. I want to make that happen on a wider scale and I will certainly look into the point that she has raised.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement and the continuation of a progressive agenda to ensure that prisons are places that not only keep offenders secure but rehabilitate them. Does she agree that it will be important to ensure that staff are empowered and held accountable for that objective of reducing reoffending, as well as for that of keeping people safe?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to ensure that prisons are not only places of safety but places of reform. We are wasting a huge amount of talent at the moment, and we are also presiding over problems in society, with a £15 billion bill for the crimes that ex-offenders go on to commit. We have a progressive agenda, and it is also important to prevent there being more victims of crime.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): A year ago, the dear son of my friend and Stafford councillor Ann Edgeller was murdered in Dartmoor prison. Will the Secretary of State or the prisons Minister meet me to discuss the way in which these welcome reforms could ensure that this kind of tragedy does not happen again?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very sorry to hear about the case that my hon. Friend has mentioned, and I extend my greatest sympathy to the family. I would be delighted to meet him and his constituent.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement of more prison officers, but what my constituents really want is to see more burglars and robbers behind bars. When all the old prisons have closed and all the new ones have opened, will there be an increase or a decrease in the number of prison places?

Elizabeth Truss: We are going to ensure that there are enough prison places for those whom the courts are sentencing. That is our duty as a Government, but I also want to ensure that those prisons have safe, decent conditions and that they are places of discipline, hard work and self-improvement so that we can reduce the chances of those burglars burgling again.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Corby and east Northamptonshire residents will wholeheartedly welcome the reinstatement of Wellingborough prison on the existing site. As a former local councillor, I can tell the Secretary of State that this is very good news for local people. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for his persistent efforts. Will the Secretary of State make my constituents even happier by promising to keep the use of British steel at the forefront of her mind when having discussions about these projects?

Elizabeth Truss: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his championing of British steel, and I shall look closely at his suggestion.
Counter-Daesh Campaign: Iraq and Syria

Mr Speaker: I call the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs. It is good that he has beent into the Chamber just in time. We are greatly obliged to him.

12.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. With your permission, I shall make a statement updating the House on the campaign against Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

Two years ago, a global coalition that now embraces 67 members came together with the overriding aim of destroying Daesh. The words of one Iraqi recently liberated from Daesh demonstrate in vivid terms why that goal is so necessary. He said of living under Daesh:

“Life was a disaster. We felt like captives and we were afraid all the time.”

Our campaign has now reached a crucial moment. Iraqi forces have fought their way to the eastern fringe of Mosul, two weeks after the onset of an offensive designed to break Daesh’s grip on the largest city within its domain. I want to update the House today on every aspect of the effort to vanquish Daesh and on Britain’s role in this endeavour.

I turn first to the situation around Mosul. Iraqi security forces and Kurdish peshmerga are advancing on the city from the east and the south. The town of Bazwaia, just 2 miles east of Mosul, is among several dozen settlements that have been liberated. Iraqi spearhead units have advanced still further, striking as far as the outskirts of Mosul itself. Overall, the campaign is making good progress. In some areas, Daesh has mounted fierce resistance, dispatching scores of suicide bombers against the liberating forces. It has mounted diversionary attacks in the city of Kirkuk and as far away as the town of Rutba, almost 400 miles south-west of Mosul. The House can be sure that Daesh will be driven from Mosul, but this is the toughest task that Iraq’s security forces have yet encountered, and success will take time.

We have worked tirelessly with the Government of Iraq, the Kurdish regional government, the United Nations and our coalition partners to prepare for this campaign. The aim is to defeat Daesh in a way that protects civilians, minimises human suffering and promotes a political settlement. I pay tribute to Prime Minister Abadi for his statesmanship and his acute awareness that genuine Iraqi national reconciliation must follow Daesh’s defeat. The terrorists have threatened to inflict a scorched earth campaign once the loss of Mosul becomes inevitable. Already, they have set oil wells ablaze and destroyed a sulphur plant south of the city, releasing clouds of noxious gas. Daesh’s vindictiveness in defeat may cause many of Mosul’s people to flee. The Iraqi Government are leading the humanitarian response, helped by aid agencies and the UN. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development has announced a further £40 million of UK humanitarian aid, focused on Mosul. I commend her leadership, which has placed Britain at the forefront of the international response, bringing the total amount of British aid pledged for Iraq to almost £170 million.

Even before the advance on Mosul, the coalition and local forces had broken Daesh’s grip on about half of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and a quarter in Syria. Our armed forces have been crucial to this effort. The House will wish to join me in paying tribute to British servicemen and women who are working tirelessly to vanquish Daesh and keep our country safe. On the ground, we have 500 British soldiers in Iraq, where they are helping to train that country’s forces. Across the middle east, nearly 1,350 British military personnel are supporting operations against Daesh. Our troops have helped to train more than 29,000 members of the Iraqi security forces, including some units now approaching Mosul. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence announced last week, the UK will resume training of vetted members of Syrian opposition groups to fight Daesh. In the air, the RAF has delivered 1,105 air strikes against Daesh—1,038 in Iraq and 67 in Syria.

With the exception of the United States, no country’s air force has carried out more strikes.

However, as the Chilcot report reminded us, the gains of any military operation will be preserved only if they are followed by the painstaking task of stabilisation and rebuilding lives. As more areas are liberated from Daesh, protecting the population and helping them to return to their homes is a central priority of the Government of Iraq, working alongside the coalition and the UN. Britain is providing over £15 million for UN stabilisation efforts. Wherever Daesh is driven back, we are helping to fund the UN to clear the lethal explosives the terrorists leave behind, repair water supplies, restore power networks and reopen schools. So far, over 775,000 people have been helped to return home to liberated areas of Iraq, including the Sunni heartlands of the Euphrates valley.

Daesh’s defeats on the battlefield are helping to counter its ideological narrative. The UK leads the coalition’s efforts in this area. We host the coalition’s global communications cell in London, where experts from 10 countries are working together to blunt the edge of terrorist propaganda. Daesh’s propaganda output has fallen by around 70% in the last year. As one defeat succeeds another, they are increasingly seen for what they are: a failing and disintegrating movement. On 19 September at the UN in New York, I launched a global campaign, alongside my Iraqi and Belgian counterparts, to bring Daesh to justice. Our aim is simply justice for all those affected by Daesh, regardless of their religious beliefs and including those who suffered in terrorist attacks around the world. I intend the campaign to be led by the UN and to begin by gathering and preserving evidence of Daesh crimes in Iraq. However long it may take, those who committed unspeakable acts must be brought to justice.

I turn now to the situation in Syria. As the House debated in September, the brutality of Assad, and the misguided interventions of Russia and Iran, are prolonging the civil war and postponing the final defeat of Daesh. Assad and his allies have hurled their strength against opposition-held western Aleppo, where 275,000 people have been unable to deliver aid for the last four months.
The House should be in no doubt that the attack on eastern Aleppo has little to do with defeating terrorism and everything to do with preserving Assad’s blood-soaked regime. Wherever Daesh has lost ground in Syria, this has frequently owed nothing to Assad or his backers. In August, it was the Syrian Democratic Forces that threw Daesh out of the town of Manbij. In September, moderate armed opposition groups, helped by Turkish forces, expelled Daesh from Dabiq, a town in northern Syria of great symbolic significance. The same combination drove Daesh from the towns of Jarablus and al-Rai. The lesson is clear. While Assad, Russia and Iran inflict untold suffering on eastern Aleppo, it is Turkey and the moderate Syrian opposition who are pressing on with the task of defeating Daesh.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation across Syria is appalling. More than five years of civil war have killed or displaced about half of the entire population. Last Wednesday, Stephen O’Brien, formerly a member of this House and now the UN’s Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, gave a briefing to the Security Council and I would recommend that every Member read it. He described the “apocalyptic horror” being visited upon eastern Aleppo. Only six partially functioning hospitals survive in this besieged wasteland where fewer than 30 doctors struggle to bind the wounds of a population under relentless assault. Last Friday, a rebel alliance that includes Syria’s branch of al-Qaeda attacked regime-held western Aleppo. They shelled the area and killed at least 40 civilians, including children. I condemn attacks on civilians whoever carries them out—I am sure the whole House will agree.

Britain has pledged £2.3 billion to the Syria relief effort—our largest ever response to a single crisis, making us the second biggest humanitarian donor behind the US—but in the end a political transition away from Assad is the only way to end the civil war and defeat Daesh. That is why I convened a meeting on 16 October in London of our key partners, including Secretary Kerry of the United States. We discussed our options for responding to the situation in Syria, particularly the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo. The EU Foreign Affairs Council has agreed to increase the pressure on Assad, including by imposing sanctions on more members of his regime. Last week, another 10 individuals were added to the EU sanctions list, including military commanders responsible for ordering chemical attacks and planning assaults on Aleppo.

At the same time, a UN investigation confirmed yet again what this Government have long known, namely that Assad’s forces have repeatedly used poison gas. The UN’s Joint Investigative Mechanism has concluded that regime forces employed chemical weapons three times and Daesh once. We are pressing for a UN resolution to hold accountable those who used such horrific weapons in defiance of the rules of war. If Russia chooses, once again, to protect Assad by casting its veto, it will be shielding someone whose forces have been found guilty over and over again—by a UN investigation that the Kremlin itself supported—of killing their own people with poison gas. I say that vetoing such a resolution would be unconscionable. But I wish to make one point abundantly clear: Russia could win the acclaim of the world by permanently halting the bombing of civilians and persuading Assad to return to negotiations. As well as being profoundly right in itself, that would be the single greatest contribution that Russia could make to the struggle against Daesh.

Daesh is also coming under pressure in Libya. Forces aligned to the Government of National Accord, supported by US airstrikes, have weakened Daesh’s hold on the city of Sirte. The international community must support the full implementation of the Libyan political agreement, and that was why Secretary Kerry and I co-hosted a meeting on Monday with key international partners and the Libyan Prime Minister, Mr al-Sarraj. Hon. Members should have no false hopes. Despite our efforts and our progress, Daesh remains determined and fanatical. Its defeat will require the liberation of Raqqa, its stronghold in Syria.

Even as Daesh is being routed on the battlefield, our country still faces a grave threat from terrorism, so I pay tribute to the dedication of those in our security and intelligence services, who have foiled 12 plots to attack the UK since September 2013. The flow of British citizens to join Daesh or other terrorist groups in Syria has fallen steadily since the beginning of 2015. Approximately 850 people of national security concern have travelled to Syria since the war began. We estimate that just under half have returned, and 15% have been killed.

In conclusion, the campaign to liberate Mosul opens a vital chapter in the struggle against Daesh. It will not be the final one, but Daesh is now in retreat on every battlefront in Iraq and Syria. After so much bloodshed, its downfall is not a matter of if but when. I commend this statement to the House.

12.52 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in recognising the extraordinary commitment and bravery of the men and women of our armed forces. As we approach Remembrance Day, our thoughts are with not only those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the past, but those who put their lives at risk every day to keep us safe.

I also welcome the Secretary of State’s update on the progress made in fighting Daesh in both Syria and Iraq. Even in the past week, we have seen further evidence of the medieval horror and barbarism that has become Daesh’s trademark: a free Syrian Army prisoner blown to pieces with an artillery gun; children being forced to carry out executions; and Daesh’s own fighters in Mosul being forcibly drowned for attempting to surrender. Equally disturbing was yesterday’s audio message, attributed to Daesh leader Mr al-Baghdadi, calling on jihadists inside Mosul to fight to the death and urging their counterparts around the world to strike at western targets, and doing so in terms that were nakedly sectarian in their demonisation of Shi’a Muslims. What assessment have the intelligence agencies made of the authenticity of that audio message? If it is authentic, what is its significance?

There is no doubt that those words and actions, despicable as they are, are those of a movement that is embattled, weakened and in retreat. Nowhere is that more true than in the ongoing battle for Mosul. I join the Secretary of State in saluting the bravery of the Iraqi armed forces, the peshmerga fighters, the Shi’a militia and the Sunni tribesmen who are leading this courageous
and vital fight. I also pay tribute to the skill and expertise of the personnel from Britain and other countries who are advising them.

As the battle moves deeper into the city, it is more important than ever for this operation to proceed with discipline and professionalism. We know that Daesh will be fully prepared to use Mosul’s population as human shields, to execute those who try to surrender and to use terrorist tactics against the Iraqi forces. Unfortunately, high numbers of civilian casualties therefore seem inevitable. Can the Secretary of State tell us how the Iraqi forces plan to keep those casualties to a minimum when conducting their own operations? I am sure that he will have been as shocked as I was by reports from Amnesty International of Sunni tribesmen taking part in the anti-Daesh coalition engaging in reprisals in the villages that they have liberated around Mosul against civilians who were alleged to have supported Daesh. How can we best ensure that such behaviour is not repeated inside Mosul itself? How can we best ensure that stability is restored? How can we avoid sectarian violence? How can we avoid a dangerous power vacuum once Daesh’s forces in Mosul have been destroyed?

The Secretary of State has rightly referred to Chilcot and the lessons that need to be learned from it. Over the years, we have learned one clear lesson from Iraq: winning the battle is never enough; we must also plan effectively for the peace. I therefore hope that the Secretary of State can tell us how those plans are progressing.

Finally on Mosul, I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to provide lasting support to the tens of thousands of civilians who have been displaced from their homes and will face destitution in the aftermath of the battle. Have there been similar commitments of humanitarian aid from our coalition partners in Iraq? If there have not, will he press them to match the UK’s contribution?

I also thank the Secretary of State for his update on progress against Daesh in Syria. Although much of our attention has been focused on the dreadful assault on eastern Aleppo—I fully agree with his remarks about Russia and the Assad regime—we must not lose sight of the fight in Syria against Daesh. Last week, the US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, said that an attack on Raqqa would begin “in the next few weeks”

This level of urgency was reportedly triggered because of fears that an imminent attack on targets overseas was being planned within Raqqa. However, the question remains as to whether Kurdish fighters can be part of any operation on Raqqa if Turkey is also involved. If they cannot, without those Kurdish fighters, are there sufficient numbers of trained moderate Sunni rebels to take Raqqa on their own? What is the Secretary of State’s assessment of the likely timetable to move on Raqqa, of the composition of the ground forces who will wage that battle, and of the role that UK personnel and resources will play?

We welcome the progress that has been made in the fight against Daesh in recent weeks in Mosul and elsewhere. That vital fight is one on which we support the Government and that we are clearly winning. We also welcome signs that this progress will be maintained in Raqqa, meaning that Daesh will lose its strongholds in both Iraq and Syria. I thank the Secretary of State again for his update, but hope he can address the few outstanding issues I raised.

**Boris Johnson:** I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her general support for the progress that has been made by the coalition forces, involving 67 nations, in defeating Daesh in Iraq and Syria. British servicemen and women in that theatre will welcome her words and the support from the House of Commons.

Let me deal with some of the points that the hon. Lady raises. She asked about Mr al-Baghdadi’s propaganda video inciting people to fight, which many Members will have seen. It is a cruel irony that, as she may know, some of the intelligence we have suggests that the gentleman in question has vacated the scene, but he is none the less using internet media to encourage people to take part in violence.

The hon. Lady asked the most important question, which is really about the management of Mosul after it is recaptured. I am talking about the management of a city of 1.5 million people who are mostly Sunnis. How will it be managed? It is vital that that should be done with a force that is plural in its composition—President Abadi and the Iraqi forces have done their level best to ensure that it is so—and that there is a government structure that commands the confidence of the people of Mosul, that delivers services for the people of Mosul, and that gets that town running again in a way that, frankly, it has not done under the tyranny of Daesh.

I can give the hon. Lady every possible reassurance that a huge amount of preparation has been made over many, many months by the United Nations Development Programme and others, with the active participation of this and other Governments around the world who wish to see a secure future for that city. Everybody understands the paramount importance of bridging the sectarian divide. Prime Minister Abadi has talked the right language about wanting to reconcile his country and the communities therein.

The hon. Lady asks about the timetable for the recapture of Raqqa and the American plans for that. It would be premature to give such a timetable now. What Ashton Carter was referring to was the plan to isolate Raqqa rather than specifically to recapture it. I do not think that we should get into detailed speculation about the timetable now.

None the less, looking at the situation in the round, I think that the House will accept that considerable progress is being made by the coalition in defeating Daesh, which not only has sustained a series of military defeats but, since 2014 when this campaign began, has lost Tikrit, Baiji, Sinjar, Ramadi, Hit, Ruqba and Fallujah in Iraq. In the Kurdish areas of Syria, it has lost al-Shaddadi, Manbij, Dabiq, Jarabulus and al-Rai. Very substantial progress has been made territorially, which is having a profound moral impact on the credibility of that evil body and exposing it for what it is: a disintegrating and failing terrorist organisation.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. This is an extremely important and sensitive matter, but may I just point out to the House that there are several Members on both sides of the House who entered the Chamber after the Foreign
Secretary began his statement, but who apparently, in defiance of all convention, expect to be called, which they should not? Although this is incredibly important, we have important further business to which to proceed, so I appeal to Members to please ask brief, single-sentence supplementary questions without preamble no matter how elevated their status in the House. I call Mr Crispin Blunt.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Is the Foreign Secretary satisfied that he has resources in the stabilisation unit in the United Kingdom and the stabilisation forces in the United Nations that are adequate to the task in Mosul? Will he give us his assessment of what is going on between Turkey and Iraq—the war of words between those leaders and the massing of Turkish armour on the borders of, and indeed in, Iraq?

Boris Johnson: It is vital that where Turkey can be useful—it certainly can be useful, and is more than useful in the struggle against Daesh—we maximise and optimise its contribution. Clearly there are sensitivities and difficulties that need to be managed, particularly in its handling of the Kurdish areas, where there is a risk of disagreement about the nature of some of the Kurdish groups and the threat that they pose to Turkey, and the utility that they have for the world in defeating Daesh. I am confident that we will be able to work towards the stabilisation of Mosul. As my hon. Friend knows, the UK has made considerable financial contributions towards that effort already. In September, we announced £40 million in humanitarian assistance for Mosul, bringing our total contribution to £169 million. We are also providing £300 million in loan guarantees to Iraq through the World Bank. Clearly this process must primarily be done by the Government of Iraq. This is a massive moral and political challenge for them, and obviously we are doing everything we can to support them.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheik (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Foreign Secretary and I welcome his update, particularly on the current situation in Mosul. I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to our servicewomen and men who put their lives at risk for our safety.

The lives of 1.2 million civilians trapped in Mosul are indeed in grave danger. Their wellbeing is paramount, and no effort must be spared in ensuring that they are indeed in grave danger. Their wellbeing is paramount, for our safety.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): This statement is about Daesh, but the Foreign Secretary has quite rightly not held back his words condemning Assad’s
brutality to his own people. In line with the campaign by the Daily Mirror to save Aleppo, which I am sure the right hon. Gentleman supports, will he come back to this House as soon as possible with a comprehensive British-led strategy to protect civilians in Syria?

Boris Johnson: I pay tribute to the long-standing commitment that the hon. Lady has shown to this cause. I will give the undertaking that she asks for, in the sense that we are working on that the whole time. The House will have heard me explain before that some options commend themselves to people in a slightly glib way—we talk about no-fly zones or no-bomb zones—and they sound easier than they are, but as I am sure the hon. Lady will know, there are other things that we could and should be doing. We can do them only in a coalition of international partners, and, as the Prime Minister rightly said at the October European Council, no option is off the table.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): What is my right hon. Friend’s strategy going to be if events in the United States next week are followed by the complete victory of Russia and Assad in Syria and the elimination of Daesh by those means?

Boris Johnson: With his characteristic brilliance, my right hon. Friend asks a very difficult but hypothetical question which, given that it is hypothetical, I am entitled to decline to answer. What I can say is that I believe that under any circumstances, whatever happens in the United States on Tuesday of next week, the relationship between the UK and the US is the single most important political relationship in the world and will continue to be robust.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Nevertheless, that relationship would be a lot better if President Clinton wins, as I am sure most people in this House agree. Does the Foreign Secretary see any prospect in that of then not giving up on his desire to see a more robust response to the Russians and to Assad in Aleppo?

Boris Johnson: I cannot, as I say, comment on the elections in another very friendly country. We have to wait and see what happens there, but I do not think that anybody here wants the United Kingdom under any circumstances to abandon its driving role in that question.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that we have been absolutely right in this country to provide general financial support for refugee centres throughout the middle east, and that this must continue for humanitarian reasons?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is completely right. We have a proud record in this country of contributing to humanitarian relief and to the care of refugees—the single biggest contributor after the United States. As the House will know, £2.3 billion is the total envelope of our commitment to humanitarian relief for the area.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary referred to Russia’s vetoes, or potential vetoes, in the Security Council. There have been five in five years, most recently on 8 October on war crimes. Given the Russian vetoes in the UN, does he believe that the Security Council is failing? Is it not time to consider using the other possible mechanism within the United Nations—the General Assembly’s Uniting for Peace process? Would the British Government support that?

Boris Johnson: We are looking at that. It will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to know that the advice I have had so far is that that would almost certainly not work, but I have asked our officials to go back and see what they can do. I have studied the proposal with interest and with care. The hon. Gentleman should not get his hopes too high, but we should rule nothing out.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How likely is reform in Iraq, which is so vital to this enterprise?

Boris Johnson: My right hon. Friend asks the fundamental question. Everybody who has talked to Prime Minister Abadi or Foreign Minister al-Jaafari, as I have, will feel that they understand what they need to do. They get the scale of the problem and the credibility that they need to build with their own people. Whether they will achieve that is a matter for them. It is vital that they do not shirk their responsibility, and we will give them every possible support.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the appalling persecution suffered by Christians and other religious minorities at the hands of Daesh, and the role that those religious communities can play in helping with the relief effort and the reconstruction of Mosul and other cities after the conflict. Can the right hon. Gentleman say what he is doing to support the idea in the Iraqi Government in particular of the positive role that Christians and other minorities can play during and after the conflict?

Boris Johnson: It is vital that freedom of religious belief should be guaranteed under the Iraqi constitution and under the future Syrian constitution. That is why I made the point to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Shelkhi) about the pluralism of the High Negotiations Committee. That is something that we have stressed time and again to Prime Minister Abadi and it is very much part of his manifesto and his plans for the country.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): In relation to bringing people to justice, may I commend the work of the International Commission on Missing Persons which, by its work in identifying bodies, was responsible for a number of war criminals from Bosnia being brought to justice at The Hague? The ICMP, of which I am the UK’s international commissioner, is seeking support from sponsoring Governments to continue its work in Iraq and Syria. May I assure my friends in the commission and its excellent director, Kathryn Bomberger, that the United Kingdom will remain first among equals among Governments supporting its work?

Boris Johnson: I thank my right hon. Friend for his excellent work in tracking down missing persons. I can assure him that both he and his organisation will continue to receive the full support of the Foreign Office and of Her Majesty’s Government.
Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Can the Foreign Secretary reassure the House that in the town of Tal Afar to the west of Mosul, which Shia militias are moving into, there will be no risk of sectarian violence, which would clearly set back any prospect of reconciliation and reconstruction in Iraq?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will know that Tal Afar is a town with a very complex religious and ethnic mix. I wish I could give him the full assurance that he seeks, but that would be premature. We are doing everything in our power, with the training operations that we have conducted and the support that we have given, to make sure that sectarian reprisals do not happen in Tal Afar or anywhere in the recaptured territories of Iraq.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Foreign Secretary spoke about the training of soldiers and vetted forces, and the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) explained why that was necessary. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that that training will take place in theatre and not in the UK, as we would not want to repeat the mistakes of 2014 in respect of Libyan forces in Basingbourn barracks in Cambridgeshire?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend will know that some of the training programmes over the past few years have not been entirely successful. As we step up our training efforts again and get on with vetting and security screening new candidates, that will be done outside theatre and outside Syria in order to get the best possible results.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Today I have written to the Prime Minister asking her to pay specific attention to the plight of the estimated 2,000 Yazidi women and children who are still held in sexual slavery in Mosul, and who, once released from the evils of Daesh, will need specialist care. Will the Foreign Secretary encourage the Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues to look at the great work being done by the Baden-Württemberg Government in Germany, who have a programme of specialist psychological care and emotional support for these victims of unimaginable horror, with a view to the United Kingdom following suit?

Boris Johnson: I think that the number of female Yazidi captives has been put even higher than the hon. Gentleman indicates—I have seen a figure of 3,500. Clearly their needs will be very important as Mosul is recaptured. As he will know, the UK Government attach particular importance to looking after the victims of sexual violence in conflict.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Foreign Secretary join me in paying tribute not only to our service personnel but to each and every one of our military families, the spouses and children, who are silently and resiliently supporting our service personnel?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point that I know the whole House will want to echo. The families of our servicemen and women face hardship, anxiety and, of course, terrible personal risk.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con) rose—

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) rose—

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: What a splendid troika. Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat: Would my right hon. Friend care to mention whether he feels that the inaction of the west over the crimes being committed in Aleppo has empowered the Russians, should they get the opportunity in coming weeks, to seek further territorial expansion?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend, who is a student of military history, will probably agree that a critical moment for this House, and indeed for the west, came in 2013 when we could have taken another path. The military space was effectively filled 18 months ago by the Russians, and indeed by Daesh, and we are now living with the consequences of that failure.

Andrew Selous: What are the most hopeful examples of harmonious relations between Sunni and Shia that the Foreign Secretary could point to that could best be spread across the middle east?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend asks a very good question. It goes to the heart of the crisis across the middle east. Everywhere we look, we see people failing to move off their sectarian base and reach out to the opposite community. There is a tragic failure of leadership across the whole region. That is the core of the problem. It requires people to have the imagination, the generosity and the courage to see that they have to be bigger and that they have to reach out to the opposite faction. I very much hope that Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqi Government are indeed made of such stuff, and I see signs of hope in the co-operation in that Government between Sunni and Shia. That is what we have to build on in that area.

Robert Jenrick: Presumably when Mosul falls the conflict could go into a new and equally dangerous phase in which Daesh fighters melt into the civilian population and become an insurgency. What support, in terms of retraining and re-equipping, are the Government offering the Iraqi security forces as they start becoming a counter-insurgency force?

Boris Johnson: Again, that is an extremely apposite question, because that is what some members of Daesh are already doing; they are acquiring razors, shaving off their beards and trying to melt back into the community. We must understand that this will be a long struggle for hearts and minds and for changing their mindset, but the UK is in there for the long haul; we are going to stay the course.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Foreign Secretary and to colleagues. In the presence of the Foreign Secretary, I should advise him that in his absence in the Robing Room on Tuesday afternoon, the Colombian President acknowledged in the most approving terms his book on Churchill. I trust that, as a result of that, the right hon. Gentleman will go about his business for the remainder of the day, as he should, with an additional glint in his eye and spring in his step.
A&E Departments: Winter Pressure

SELECT COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. Dr Sarah Wollaston, the Chair of the Health Committee, will speak on the subject for up to 10 minutes, during which—I remind colleagues of this relatively new procedure—no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, the Chair will call Members to put questions on the subject of it and call Dr Wollaston to respond to them in turn. Members can expect to be called only once each. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Those on the Front Bench may take part in questioning.

1.26 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Health Committee held an inquiry into winter pressures in accident and emergency departments. What we found, however, was that those pressures are now year-round, and that they worsen in the winter.

I would like to start by thanking all those who work in our national health service and our ambulances services, and all those who submitted written evidence and presented oral evidence to our inquiry. I also want to thank all fellow members of the Committee and the Committee team, especially Huw Yardley and Stephen Aldhouse, for their contribution to the report.

The root of the problem is unprecedented demand. It is not just about the sheer number of people arriving in our accident and emergency departments—on average, around 40,000 people attended a major accident and emergency department per day in 2015-16, which was 6,000 more per day than five years previously—it is also about the complexity of the conditions with which they are presenting. The worsening performance that we are seeing, which is of great concern to the Committee, is also a reflection of system-wide pressures across the whole NHS.

We noted that only approximately 88% of patients arriving at major accident and emergency departments are being admitted, transferred or discharged within four hours. That is concerning, because it falls considerably short of the target performance standard of 95%. We should not think of this as just an arbitrary target or a tick in a box; it matters for patient safety and for patients’ experience of the care they receive.

Our report identifies a number of factors. We are also concerned about the level of variation in performance of accident and emergency departments. Often that performance cannot be attributed only to local pressures or demographics. We acknowledge that there are many things that hospital trusts can do to learn from the best performing departments to help improve the flow from the front door to the point of discharge, and to prevent people from getting caught in that revolving door by being readmitted. I pay tribute to the efforts of NHS England and of all those working locally and regionally to try to make sure that the NHS starts to learn from best practice, and I particularly commend Pauline Philip and her team for what they are doing.

One thing, however, comes across very clearly from our report: the impact that the deficiencies in social care are having on accident and emergency. If we cannot discharge patients at the end of their journey because no social care packages are available, it has a domino effect throughout the whole system. Not only that, but people arrive in accident and emergency departments who could have stayed at home if they had had the right social care package. The Committee therefore repeats its request to the Chancellor to look at social care in his autumn statement and to prioritise it.

We also recognised that many accident and emergency departments are under particular pressure because of their working infrastructure—the premises may be completely inadequate to cope with the increase in demand and complexity—so we repeat our call to the Chancellor to look in his autumn statement at the capital budgets in the NHS and to make sure that the funds are available to allow the transformative changes that can bring struggling A&Es up to the same performance level as those that are functioning the best.

There are also, of course, issues with the workforce. We are concerned about the impact of workforce shortfalls in the NHS, and we ask Health Education England to redouble its efforts to look at them.

When we visited East of England ambulance trust we found that it was concerned, as were others who submitted evidence, about the impact of delayed transfers at the front door of accident and emergency departments. Again, there is great variation, and it is not all about infrastructure. If ambulances are all gummed up in one accident and emergency department it has a serious knock-on effect within an ambulance trust area, so we call on those who are not putting in place the correct procedures to look carefully at the impact that that is having and to make changes this winter.

The Government also need to look at issues around alcohol policy. Anybody who has attended an accident and emergency department on a Friday or a Saturday night will know of the pressures that problem drinking creates. We ask the Government to consider making health an objective for licensing and to look at doing all they can to reduce the impact of alcohol. That impact is felt not just on waiting times, of course, but on the morale and wellbeing of staff working in our emergency services.

I thank all those who have contributed to this inquiry, and I look forward to hearing the Government’s response.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I echo the words of the Chair of the Select Committee in thanking all the staff who work so hard in the health service. I also thank those who produced and contributed to the Select Committee’s report, which is important and concerning in equal measure.

The report is clear that years of underfunding in social care are now having a dramatic effect on A&E presentation. Does the Chair of the Select Committee agree that, ahead of the autumn statement, if there is to be the necessary injection of cash into the social care sector the Chancellor will have to come up with a better solution than one that relies on hard-pressed local councils raising the necessary funds locally?

Dr Wollaston: I thank the shadow Minister. The Committee agrees that there needs to be more funding for social care. We were concerned that the evidence we heard in this inquiry and previous inquiries is that the money raised from the social care precept has been
swallowed up by the cost of the living wage. We absolutely welcome an increase in pay for hard-pressed care workers, but we feel that the increase in funding is completely inadequate to deal with the scale of the increase in demand.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I would like to add my welcome for the work of the Health Committee in this report and to say how pleased I was to have the opportunity to appear before my hon. Friend’s Committee for the first time since taking up this post.

We all recognise that the system is facing a challenging winter, but we are determined to ensure that the NHS and the social care sector are focused on trying to deliver for patients and that the national organisations, where possible, are in a position to support them effectively this winter.

This year, the NHS is better prepared for winter than ever before, with NHS staff working incredibly hard throughout the year and more ready for what will be the busiest time for the NHS. Despite increased demand, the NHS is performing well, with nine out of 10 people seen in A&E within four hours.

We have ensured that there are robust plans in place. That includes providing for the availability of key services, such as primary and social care, during the Christmas and new year bank holiday periods in advance, which has not happened before. For the first time, there is also a national A&E improvement plan to improve flow through hospitals from the front door to final discharge, with the implementation of five initiatives, and there is a specific intervention on discharge.

The Select Committee’s report highlights continuing pressures on emergency departments, so does my hon. Friend share my welcome for the 25% increase in doctors—almost 1,200 more doctors—working in emergency medicine since 2010?

Dr Wollaston: Of course I welcome the increase in staff in our accident and emergency departments. As the Minister will recognise, there is further to go in this regard.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady agree that the four-hour A&E target is absolutely vital, because it, more than any other target, shows the overall performance of a hospital, and that the figures are extremely worrying? Does she also share my concern that last winter was very mild, and we were relatively lucky, with the absence of a big winter flu outbreak? If this winter is as cold as this Chamber, the NHS could face a very serious crisis indeed.

Dr Wollaston: Certainly, the evidence we heard in our inquiry was that there is grave concern about the level of existing pressure. As the right hon. Gentleman says, if we see a very cold winter, and the flu vaccine does not work as well as it did last winter, we are in serious difficulties. But I stress again that the Committee was very clear that we want to see the four-hour waiting time standard continued, because it is a good measure of whole-system pressure, and if people are facing very long waits that leads to a deterioration in patient safety. So it is a quality issue, as well as an issue about patient experience.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I note what the Chair of the Health Committee says about social care and delayed transfers of care. Would she commend an initiative taken in hospitals in Fife, where the most senior consultants were put into accident and emergency, which led to a 30% reduction in admissions to the hospital? Does she not agree that more junior staff are sometimes perhaps slightly more risk-averse because they do not have the experience? Does she not think that, where Fife has led, other hospitals around the UK could usefully follow?

Dr Wollaston: I thank my hon. Friend, and I welcome him to the Health Committee. Yes, he is absolutely right that one of the initiatives that has been put forward is to look at streaming at the front door, but what we heard is that this is quite nuanced. If very senior staff are tied up seeing every single person at the front door, that can be a waste of resources. However, if the patients who are most at risk of needing admission—the sickest individuals—are identified early on and seen by the most senior doctors available, then yes, absolutely, that makes a difference.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I had a little smile to myself at the Minister’s response. When I was a commissioner, we often said to each other, “It’s another A&E plan—it must be winter again.” On Monday, I asked the Secretary of State about the £2.4 billion protection for general practice, and I am afraid that there was not a satisfactory answer and the money will not plug the hospital deficits. There are very severe general practice problems in south Bristol and very worrying reports about sustainability. I am looking forward to the report, but will the hon. Lady say something about the role of general practice in the winter pressures issue?

Dr Wollaston: We have to think of A&E winter pressures as a marker for the whole system. The hon. Lady is absolutely right and I welcome her reference to primary care, because if people cannot get an appointment in primary care, they are more likely to end up in A&E. Luton and Dunstable is now co-locating primary care so that people arriving at the front door who are more appropriately seen there can be seen directly in that setting. There is, however, another viewpoint: co-locating can sometimes end up creating demand, meaning that more people go there directly, so our report calls for better evaluation of the different models. One of the things that Luton and Dunstable does particularly well is apply evaluation at every stage to the changes it makes. The answer is complex, in that co-location may sometimes be the right thing for some systems, but not necessarily the right thing across the board. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that people need to have decent, timely access to primary care.
Backbench Business

Leaving the EU: Financial Services

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): We have two debates to get through in three hours and 20 minutes, so brevity will help everybody.

1.40 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on financial and other professional services.

I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and for giving us time on the Floor of the House to discuss this important issue.

The UK’s financial and related professional services are critical to our economy. Together they account for almost 12% of GDP, employ more than 2 million people and contribute £66 billion a year in tax revenues. That is 11% of the total annual tax take, which is the largest contribution of any sector and essential for funding our public services.

While London benefits hugely from those sectors, two thirds of the jobs in financial and professional services are based outside Greater London. Some 160,000 people are employed in Scotland, with Edinburgh’s economy more reliant on financial services than any other UK city, including London. More than 54,000 people are employed in those sectors in Wales. Elsewhere, major employers include Citigroup in Belfast, Deutsche Bank in Birmingham, Aviva in Norwich, American Express in Brighton, and J.P. Morgan in Bournemouth. Overall, there are 22 towns and cities in the UK that each employs more than 10,000 people in financial and professional services, including Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool, Sheffield, Reading and Bristol, and Norwich, Portsmouth and Poole.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that keeping the financial services passport is vital for many people who work in the sector, not least a lot of my constituents, and that people in business would be the first to say that in financial negotiations it is not wise to give a running commentary?

Liz Kendall: I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s first point and I will come on to the issue of passporting later. I believe that businesses really want certainty, which is why it is right that hon. Members raise issues in the House.

In my own fabulous city of Leicester, almost 7,000 people are employed in financial and professional services, including by HSBC, Santander and Hastings Direct. Those people are not the extremely wealthy bankers or hedge fund managers that we often read about in the papers. They are ordinary people on modest wages who work in customer services, call centres and office administration, and who pay their taxes and spend their money in the local community.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I do not want to diminish the importance of the financial sector, particular that which operates and needs to continue to operate in Europe, but overwhelmingly domestic financial services have no involvement with the continent at all. Their export potential is virtually nil, in the words of the Commission itself. To what extent does the impressive list of employees that the hon. Lady has given divide between those that are involved entirely in the domestic market and those that are involved in transactions overseas?

Liz Kendall: The businesses in my constituency and those that I have talked about so far are deeply concerned about losing their membership of the single market and their passporting rights. I care about those jobs and the contribution that those companies make to our economy. It is right for us to raise questions, and it would be wrong to suggest that leaving the European Union does not give rise to serious concerns.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that today’s excellent ruling in the High Court gives the Government a chance to reflect on the invocation of article 50 and the impact that it is already having on the financial services employers to which she refers, particularly with regard to the uncertainty about our future membership of the single market?

Liz Kendall: My right hon. Friend is right. Many companies have been planning for months, even before the referendum, to try to mitigate the risks of Brexit. There is a mandate to leave the European Union, but there is no mandate about the terms. The Court’s decision today should allow this House to have its say, to raise the important issues and to hold the Government to account, and I hope that the Government listen.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): In answer to the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), does the hon. Lady agree that this is not just about passporting rights, but about the vital regulatory framework that the EU provides for the financial and banking sector?

Liz Kendall: I agree with the hon. and learned Lady, and I will come on to that point later in my speech.

As well as playing a crucial role in our domestic economy, the UK’s financial and professional services have an unrivalled reach and influence across the globe. The UK is the world’s leading exporter of financial services. We have the world’s fourth largest banking sector, third largest insurance industry, second largest fund management sector, and second largest legal services industry.

Many people believe that the British economy is too dependent on financial services and that, despite the significant number of jobs outside the City, that predominantly benefits London and the south-east. I agree. I have long argued that we need to rebalance our economy, develop a modern industrial strategy, and devolve power to our cities, towns and counties to boost jobs and growth in every region, in every part of the UK.

However, strong and effectively regulated financial services are crucial. They directly create jobs and growth, and support employment in related sectors such as legal and accountancy services. They are the bloodstream of the wider economy, pumping money through the country by lending to local businesses. They attract huge levels of inward investment, including about £100 billion over the past decade—more than any other sector—and they are crucial for our pensions and mortgages, and for
funding the public services on which we all rely. That is why I am so grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting today’s debate, because the decision to leave the European Union has serious implications for the future of this vital sector.

Membership of the single market has brought huge benefits. In particular, it has entitled financial services to use the passport—the mechanism that gives companies the legal right to provide services across the EU, without having to obtain separate authorisation from other member states. Those passports are the foundation of the single market for financial services, and they are essential for investment banks and international insurance companies. Many are now deeply concerned about losing their passporting rights, but I am afraid that some leading hard-line Brexiteers have poured scorn on the idea that we need passporting at all and say that third-country equivalence will do.

Equivalence is when the European Commission recognises that a country’s rules and oversight of a specific area of business are as tough as its own. It is true that some countries outside the EU have been granted equivalence in some areas of financial services, but the Commission is under no obligation to grant it. It can also take years to negotiate, be time-limited, and withdrawn at short notice, and it does not cover areas that are crucial for UK financial services, such as insurance, bank lending and bank deposits.

The new Under-Secretary of State for International Trade and envoy for financial services—I am disappointed that he is not here today—admitted the problems with equivalence in his recent interview with Bloomberg. He said that the UK will probably lose its current legal rights to provide services in the EU after Brexit, and that equivalence will not be “good enough”. He told Bloomberg that the Government want a better version of equivalence, but that in return we may have to accept future EU regulations handed down from Brussels. The problem with that is that we will not have a seat at the table when the EU decides how to regulate our financial services. We will therefore lose our ability to influence regulatory decisions for the better.

The risks of losing our membership of the single market and our passporting rights for financial services are clear. While passporting is permanent, equivalence is precarious. The UK will move from being a rule maker to being a rule taker, and that is not what our financial and professional services want. Although they may hope for the best, they must plan for the worst, and they cannot wait until the last minute to find out what deal they might eventually get. That would not be right for their business, their employees or their customers, who expect them to take action to mitigate any potential risks now. It takes three to five years to move operations to a different country. That is why most international banks, many asset fund managers and other financial services are now working out which operations they might need to move to ensure that they can continue to service their customers, how best to do it, and by when they should do it. The chief executive of Morgan Stanley has said:

“It really isn’t terribly complicated. If we are outside the EU and we don’t have what would be a stable and long-term commitment to access the single market then a lot of the things we do today in London, we’d have to do inside the EU 27.”

Other countries have not been slow to try to exploit the uncertainty. France and Spain have already launched campaigns to lure companies to Paris and Madrid after Brexit. The more likely risk is that some jobs will move to Dublin, Luxembourg or Frankfurt, and even more will move to New York or Asia, unless the Government get their strategy right.

The impact of losing passporting rights and the risks of relying on so-called equivalence are not the only major worries for our financial services. They are also deeply concerned about the Government’s plans for freedom of movement.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Stratham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) on instigating this excellent debate. Of course, people want financial services to make a bigger contribution to the Exchequer, but they already make a massive contribution, which is why it is right to have this debate.

In respect of the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West just made about the benefits and other issues beyond passporting, the desire of other EU member states to take part of the City’s market is illustrated by the fact that we have already had a tussle with the European Union over the City’s role as the clearing house for euro-denominated transactions. That has already been the subject of court action. If we leave the single market, it will not simply be a question of access; the likelihood of our losing the ability to be the clearing house for euro-denominated transactions is only likely to increase.

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend puts that point extremely well. There are a huge number of risks on the issue he raised as well as on access to services, but the Government have so far had virtually nothing to say. Businesses cannot wait to get that certainty. Their regulators, their boards, their customers and their clients want to know what will happen. This will have a huge knock-on effect on the rest of the economy.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important case. If the Government get this wrong and we lose substantial financial services business, is not the likelihood that that business will go to New York? New York has the capacity to take it on and already has the equivalence agreement in place.

Liz Kendall: I cannot read the minds of those in charge of the many companies that are considering those options, but my right hon. Friend is probably right to say that there may be a greater likelihood that New York will benefit, although I think some jobs will move to the EU, too.

Financial services greatly rely on employing people from across Europe and the rest of the world. Many people in the sector were dismayed and, quite frankly, appalled by speeches made during the Conservative party conference. They do not care about where people come from; they care about what people can contribute. They understand that the success of their business depends on getting people with the right skills in the right place at the right time. They know that we cannot somehow separate freedom of movement from what is best for businesses and the wider economy, because the two are inextricably linked. Companies in the sector are
clear: if they lose their ability to get the best person for the job, when and where they need that person, they will simply take their work elsewhere.

Even worse, young people just starting out in their careers, such as the 700 apprentices that HSBC takes on each year, may no longer have the chances that they currently do to travel and develop their skills. Brexit risks placing an unnecessary limit on our young people’s ambitions and opportunities.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Lady makes an important point. Is she aware of the particular importance of freedom of movement to the so-called Fintech sector? In the region of 30% of chief financial officers and chief executive officers in one of the major expanding areas of our financial services sector come from countries in other parts of the EU. Does that not illustrate what is at stake?

Liz Kendall: It absolutely does. The right hon. Gentleman raises an extremely important point. This growing and developing sector is driven by skilled people from across the globe, and we do not want to miss out on those possibilities.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The hon. Lady referred to the rhetoric at the Conservative party conference. Does she agree that such rhetoric causes a reaction, and that the reaction across Europe was wholly negative? That makes the politics all the more difficult as we try to secure a good deal for this country.

Liz Kendall: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It was a huge strategic mistake for the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary to say what they did at the Conservative party conference. That has not helped us to work better with our EU allies, with whom we need to get a deal. It has made people across the world think that Britain no longer wants people to come here to live and work. It has put off many people who already work in this country and are now thinking about going home.

Businesses in all parts of our economy want certainty, above all. There are things that the Government could be doing to give businesses greater certainty during the inevitably complex, difficult and lengthy process of leaving the EU, and I shall conclude by outlining three of them for the Minister. First, Ministers should set out the broad framework and priorities for their negotiations. Is the objective to secure for financial services their existing rights to trade in the single market; or have Ministers already accepted the loss of passporting rights, as the Trade Minister said in his Bloomberg interview, and do they seek instead to secure a different or hybrid version of passporting or equivalence? What are their objectives on freedom of movement for people working in financial and related professional services? Is this a priority area for the Government in reducing the number of people coming into this country? Do the Government seek to set quotas in this sector, require people to have visas, or both?

Secondly, the Government must commit to a transitional agreement—this has been raised time and again by those who work in financial services—to ensure that there is no cliff edge at the end of the article 50 process. It took four years to reach an equivalence deal on one small aspect of commodity futures dealing with the United States, so it will be impossible to agree a deal covering all the many complex areas of the UK’s financial services industry with the remaining 27 EU countries within two years. Without transitional arrangements, companies may have their passporting rights suddenly removed with nothing put in their place, which would create legal doubt for huge parts of their business. A transitional agreement is therefore essential, and it must come soon. We need at least a joint statement of intent from the UK and the EU before article 50 is triggered to give financial services the certainty they need. That should happen before politicians in France and Germany inevitably start focusing on their own elections next year.

Finally, the Government must make it a priority that they ensure that the remaining EU countries understand the benefits of maintaining an integrated market in financial services. Some £1.1 trillion has been lent to businesses in the remaining 27 countries by banks based in the UK. Putting up barriers to trade would be a self-inflicted wound that would make us all worse off—not just in the UK, but in mainland Europe.

One of the most important complaints I have heard during the past seven years is that nurses and teachers did not cause the financial crisis. That is true, but it was also not the fault of the call centre worker in a big insurance company or the bank teller in the local building society. Plenty of British people do a decent job working in our financial services, and they could be on the front line when it comes to Brexit. The Government must provide more clarity about their plans so that businesses can plan for the future, and so that we protect jobs and growth, and get the best possible deal for Britain.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I advise hon. Members that the speaking limit will be five minutes. I hope that we will not have to reduce it, but that might happen as we have very little time left.

2.1 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I should say at the outset that I am chairman of the all-party group on wholesale financial markets and services, and that I worked in the industry for a few years before I entered the House.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) on securing this incredibly important debate. We are concentrating on an industry in which we have the greatest comparative advantage. It is important for the economy not just because it means that we can help public services, but because, as the hon. Lady pointed out, it is the lifeblood of many other industries. She has set out the facts about how many people it employs. It is the largest taxpaying sector and the largest exporting sector.

The sector is also the one with the largest trade surplus with the European Union. It is absolutely clear that one reason for that is that we have had access to and membership of the single market. London was always a financial centre, but membership of the single market has allowed it to become the undoubted capital for financial services not just in Europe, but arguably in the world. We have had a common set of regulations, we have broken down barriers, we have attracted huge
investments, and global operations have moved to Britain. Leaving the single market or losing access to it would be calamitous for the financial services sector.

Some colleagues have argued that immigration was a key reason why we voted to leave the EU on 23 June, and that freedom of movement must therefore be at the forefront of our thoughts. I have heard colleagues argue that we should say to the EU 27, “Trade on these terms or we will leave on WTO terms.” Such an outcome would make access to the single market impossible. That would be hopeless for financial services, because we are already seeing, in both analysis and actuality, the impact of what has happened. The hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), who is no longer in the Chamber, mentioned passporting. We have already seen euro clearing for currency dealing leaving London, and euro clearing for securities would leave as well. As the hon. Member for Leicester West pointed out, many institutions are drawing up contingency plans for that.

Last night, I attended a meeting of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. Its most recent analysis shows that if we leave the EU on just WTO terms, which exclude most financial services, London would lose 60% of financial services business with the EU. I do not think that anyone, whatever their view, would regard that as anything other than a calamitous result.

The hon. Lady was right to concentrate on passporting. Passporting is necessary. It is not just a case of putting up a brass plaque on a door somewhere else in Europe; since the change in financial regulations, there is much more to it than that. It would be much more difficult to establish trade functions across Europe if we gave up passporting. The Chancellor told the Treasury Committee two weeks ago that he accepted the importance of passporting, and I hope the Economic Secretary will assure us that the Government recognise that.

Passporting is not only important for the banking industry. The Association of British Insurers put out a brief this week—I also met its representatives this week—about the ability of businesses throughout the UK to carry out insurance business across the world, and how they will be unable to do that if we lose passporting.

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend is aware that there is not a single market in insurance, and that 87% of all insurers operate through subsidiaries in the EU, rather than in branches dependent on passporting?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend would be right to claim that about asset management, but I think he is confusing the two industries. The London Market Group said this week that although the number is not as high as that for banking, the amount of business done in the EU is substantially higher than the number my hon. Friend cites. I am happy to ask the LMG to come and discuss that with him.

If the Government are prepared to be rational, a solution can be negotiated, and that is what many colleagues argue that we should say to the EU 27, “Trade on these terms or we will leave on WTO terms.” Such an outcome would make access to the single market impossible. That would be hopeless for financial services, because we are already seeing, in both analysis and actuality, the impact of what has happened. The hon. Member for Streatham (Mr Umunna), who is no longer in the Chamber, mentioned passporting. We have already seen euro clearing for currency dealing leaving London, and euro clearing for securities would leave as well. As the hon. Member for Leicester West pointed out, many institutions are drawing up contingency plans for that.

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political issues rather than company representatives looking at the bottom line of their finances. It could well be that issues such as the single market will be debated and negotiated in such a way that other EU countries will use them as the justification for refusing access to passporting.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West outlined the significance of the free movement of labour in the financial services industry. We could end up hitting ourselves twice—first by objecting to free movement of labour, which would be damaging to the financial services industry, and then by having that objection used by EU negotiators as a justification for ending the passport regime. The Government have to handle this incredibly delicately, with maximum support from the financial services industry, to arrive at a solution that will not be doubly damaging to the industry.

In the short time remaining I will mention something that is perhaps not so directly relevant to passporting within the EU but is relevant to financial provision in this country. The mutual sector contains companies that are often small and do not have or need passporting because they do not trade in Europe. Those companies have often been burdened by what they perceive as an EU-level of regulation. Now, I often think that it is our own regulators who needlessly apply the regulation, but that is a different debate. However, on coming out of the EU the argument about EU regulation can no longer be used. I look forward to seeing this country looking at its regulatory regime for those companies that trade only domestically and do not have or need passports, to ensure that we develop a regulatory system that is far more proportionate, and enables small financial services to thrive and provide better consumer options.

2.13 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): There seems to me to be a great deal of overstatement and exaggeration in this arena. The media have tended to overstate difficulties in this area to a very significant extent.

This is about confidence. For nearly 400 years, up to our entry to the EU under the European Communities Act 1972, the United Kingdom was able to run one of the most effective—if not the most effective—financial services centres, the City of London. The idea that somehow or other, because of the intervention of the European Union, things will get better is completely outweighed by the disaster area and dysfunctionality that the EU now represents.

Only a few days ago, in Bratislava, I heard the chairman of the European Parliament’s Committee on Budgets saying that the EU needed an “electric shock”, that there was far too much regulation, that it was far too intrusive, and so on. The chairman of ECOFIN said that the EU was facing the biggest economic and political crisis in modern political history. All that is true. The idea that we would not have to leave the European Union—thank heavens the British people made their own judgment about that—and the construal of our leaving the European Union as a disaster in itself simply belie the facts.

The reality is that EU legislation is deeply embedded in the financial services sector. Just to state the obvious, not only are we obliged under sections 2 and 3 of the 1972 Act to absorb all the legislation—I warned in a letter to the Financial Times in 2008 that that would lead to the kind of difficulties we are now experiencing with regard to financial services—but because of the Court of Justice we have to obey all the regulations. The massive regulatory overkill of the whole of the financial services sector as a result of that arrangement is an undoubted disadvantage. There are huge benefits to be gained by being outside the European Union, which I will come to in a moment.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Surely the hon. Gentleman is aware that most EU bank regulation—especially since 2008—has been at the behest of the G20, so we will be subject to it whether we are in the EU or not.

Sir William Cash: The problem that the hon. Gentleman has perhaps not quite taken on board is that because of the European Communities Act there is a legislative requirement for us to accept those rules. Outside, we will, I hope, be able to benefit not only the United Kingdom but the EU, as I will come on to in a moment.

We only have to look at places such as Singapore and Hong Kong to understand that one does not have to be in the European Union to have a successful financial services sector and compete in the global marketplace. The same applies to New York. The objective must be to keep the financial markets open throughout the European Union as a matter of mutual concern throughout the UK and the other 27 member states. Breaking up the London system would involve much greater costs for everyone. Europe would end up far worse off, in my judgment—and that of many others, too—if the financial sector migrated to New York, Singapore or Hong Kong.

The passport is not specific to any one aspect of the financial services field. It works best in relation to banking accounting for about a fifth of annual banking sector revenue. It works less well in relation to asset management, which my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) mentioned. It is vital to understand that there are subsidiaries set up all over Europe carrying on the business of other countries irrespective of a passport. A significant amount of EU assets are already in Dublin and Luxembourg and their management—this is the key issue—is run from the UK. Indeed, on a recent assessment I have read, only 7% of assets managed in the UK are thought to be threatened by the loss of the passport.

There is not a single market in insurance at all. I appreciate that my hon. Friend might wish to come back to me on that, and I am very happy to talk to the people he mentioned in reply to me, but I simply make the point that we are not always dependent on the passport. There is a special problem regarding Lloyd’s of London, but I am informed that the pool of underwriters across the EU amounts to only 11% of the market’s gross written premium, and only 3% is directly reliant on the passport.

We have three main alternatives: equivalence, bespoke agreements and local arrangements. Equivalence is granted by the European Commission. The Commission is guardian of the treaties and has the legal clout that we will get away from when we vote to leave, so equivalence would not apply to us if we left the EU. But we have the same regulations as the EU, and under the repeal Bill we have put together just before the referendum and am glad the Government are so interested in, we would be able to run parallel operations where it was in our mutual
interests to have regulatory arrangements in the UK equivalent to those elsewhere in the EU—and, indeed, internationally, as well.

As regards bespoke agreements, we have the potential to secure an agreement similar to that with Switzerland, for example. If no cross-border access arrangement is made, firms will still be able to set up subsidiaries. That would, I have to admit, cost money, but it would not be disproportionate. I do not want to go into the details of a private conversation so I will simply say that I got that straight from some very senior bankers the other day. It boils down to this: we can arrive at an arrangement similar to Switzerland’s or at a free trade agreement. Of the two, I must admit I prefer the latter.

2.19 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) and for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) on achieving this Backbench Business debate. Unsurprisingly, I agree very much with the contribution made by the latter.

I shall speak specifically about financial services outside London and the south-east. [Interruption.] I seem to have infinite time, which is fine.

I want to say three things: first, to correct an impression about who we talk about when we think of financial service; secondly, to correct an impression about globalisation and trade; and finally to correct an impression about what is required of the Government in face of Brexit in financial services and the broader economy.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West said, too often there is an easy, knee-jerk reaction when we think about financial services. People bang on about bankers, but people who work in financial services are not who we might think they are. They are ordinary working people from around the country. I was blessed to be able to find that out in person when I served as shadow City Minister for my party last summer. Several financial services companies were good enough to welcome me through their doors to shadow members of their workforce. It was absolutely fascinating. In cities, none of which was London, I sat with people working in financial services, including insurance and pensions, and talked to them about their daily lives. They worked incredibly hard serving their customers—the British public and exporting businesses.

I was struck by the story told to me by one set of workers who were recalling the global financial crisis. They were told by their manager: “Just don’t mention what you do when you go down the pub after work.” Nobody in our country should have to do that. Nobody should be made to feel ashamed of what they do. I am a Labour MP for a reason, and that is it. We should never engage in language that seeks to condemn people simply because of their employment.

I was also struck by the passion with which those in the insurance industry fought fraud and tried to get people a better deal. Those people deserve Members’ support and backing. This is not a London issue. We might call it the “City of London”, but 11,000 people in Belfast; 54,000 people in the north in Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester; 58,000 people in Edinburgh and Glasgow; 10,000 people in Sheffield; and 4,000 people in Norwich do a good day’s work for a good day’s pay and need our backing.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a national issue, but I hope she acknowledges the work the Mayor of London has done in drawing attention to the importance of financial services. It would be curious if London were not represented on a Brexit Cabinet sub-committee but the other countries and regions were.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) is in some difficulty because the clock is broken, but she is handling it with great competence. I have been watching. She has taken an intervention and can speak until about 2.25 pm and 30 seconds. I thank her for dealing with the matter so well.

Alison McGovern: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will do my best.

I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am happier to support the words of the current Mayor of London than those of the previous one, who said that no one could deny that London is the engine of our economy. In financial services, as with everything else, our regions should be on equal footing. One should not be over another. It is a fact that London has extra lobbying capacity because Parliament is located in the city, so a corrective is necessary.

The second point on which I want to correct people’s impressions is that, although the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) is right to talk about competitive advantage, which matters, when we talk about globalisation and international markets, not least in the financial service sector, we are talking not necessarily about increased trade but about increased multinationalism. Companies stretch themselves much more over borders, which is why I still believe that our membership of the European Union was important. I accept the result of the referendum, but when we have multinational companies, we need to be involved in global governance so that we can protect the people who work for them in our country. The 1,000 people who work for Santander in Bootle and the 1,000 people who work for Merrill Lynch in Chester work for global companies. They therefore need global protection and global response. I hope that goes some way to answer the points made by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), although no doubt he will not agree.

Finally and very briefly, we need to correct the impression of what is required. Passporting is absolutely crucial, as has been described by several Members, but it is not just that. The concentration of financial services in our country’s economy has meant that London has overheated for far too long. Financial services outside London have another crucial role. Building societies and the mutuals sector have been mentioned. We need to use our financial services outside London and the south-east to partner with Government to improve infrastructure investment and investment in small and medium-sized enterprises. Forty-two per cent. of start-ups happen in London and the south-east, which is simply not good enough. That is why I ask the Government not only for passporting but for rebalancing by supporting our financial services.

2.26 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The clock is back. The excitement! The hare is running!
I should briefly declare an interest. I have at times worked in the financial services industry. I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Like so many other hon. Members, I am here to talk about financial services outside the capital. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), who spoke very powerfully about that. In my constituency, I drive past the Fidelity asset management centre, which is based in Hildenborough and employs nearly 1,000 people. Financial services also support economies such as the legal economy, accountancy and various other innovators. As we have discovered from the success of start-ups in the United States, access to financial services is often a trigger for improvements in the tech sector.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I apologise for not being in the Chamber earlier because of Select Committee duties. Does my hon. Friend concede that it is important that we link access to financial services with access to other professional services including legal services, which are critical to building the infrastructure backing up the financial services sector?

Tom Tugendhat: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point and I will let it rest there.

Access to financial services is not just about the financial services industry but about all industries. Finance greases the wheels of the whole economy. It is important that we maintain the access we have in the UK. I therefore urge hon. Members to see Brexit not just as a threat, which sadly so many people do, but also as an opportunity. The United Kingdom used to be extremely good at taking the opportunity to innovate. Too often we have limited ourselves. Many people will look at the potential loss from the eurobond clearing and various other elements, but we should also look at the potential openings in financial technology, where we have already seen such innovations in the UK, to which I hope we agree we can add.

Services here in the UK are built on the foundation of skills that support the current industry and that will support future growth. Tomorrow’s growth will be based on those same skills, which come from a highly educated, highly literate and highly open population of people across our islands, whose languages, ethnicity and cultural links tie them around the world. They are able not only to do deals but to finance and enable entrepreneurs and businesses around the world. That is why I am less concerned than some about the potential closing off in markets in the European Union. We must remember that the EU itself depends on the City of London and that the depth of asset pools in the City gives the industries of Germany, Italy and France a reach they would not get from their own domestic markets. It gives the EU itself depends on the City of London and that the depth of asset pools in the City gives the industries of Germany, Italy and France a reach they would not get from their own domestic markets. It gives the industries of Germany, Italy and France a reach they would not get from their own domestic markets. It gives the UK a depth of asset pools in the City that gives the industries of Germany, Italy and France a reach they would not get from their own domestic markets. It gives the depth of asset pools in the City of London and that the capital gives their industries a reach they would not get from their own domestic markets.

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I mean this very seriously. In so many countries in the world, people define themselves as a “something-something”. In the United States, for example, people often define themselves as a Polish-American or an Irish-American. I, who am the son of a French woman, the grandson of an Austrian man and an Irishwoman, do not define myself by that. I define myself as British, as so many people here do. It is that openness and inclusivity that has made Britain the home for so many and the centre for so much.

That is why, when we look at the financial industry, we must not look at it alone, or indeed just consider the legal and accountancy aspect. We should not even consider its enablement of other industries. We should consider the ethos it requires. That ethos is the ethos that we have promoted on these islands for a thousand years. It is one that defines people by the breadth of their experience, skill and knowledge, and not in a narrow sectarian definition of origins or passports. It is much greater than that.

I will leave it there and urge the Minister, as he takes the negotiations forward and sits around the Government table, to see that the financial services around our whole country, particularly in the great kingdom of Kent, are not just a simple route to enrichment, but an avenue to openness, growth and the support of what the UK has always been: a beacon to other nations, an island of safety and in many ways an example to all to enrich all.

2.32 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I rise to speak about the impact of leaving the European Union on the financial sector and the legal profession, with particular reference to my constituency.

An estimated 7,000 of my constituents are employed in the financial services sector. Across the whole city of Edinburgh, there are 34,800 people employed in financial services. Edinburgh is the UK’s second-largest financial centre. It is a major European centre for asset management and asset servicing, and home to the global headquarters of the Royal Bank of Scotland and the UK headquarters of the Green Investment Bank. Edinburgh is the UK’s largest financial capital centre after London by both gross value added and employment. The financial sector in Edinburgh also supports many other jobs in the service sector. Some of the best coffee shops, sandwich shops and restaurants are in my constituency, supplying constituents who work in the financial and legal sectors.

Very worryingly, earlier this week an independent report for the Scottish Parliament’s Economy Committee revealed that Edinburgh’s reliance on financial services is greater than that in any other city in Europe. Therefore, Edinburgh is at most risk of being affected if we lose the protection hon. Members have been speaking about. I pause to pay tribute to those hon. Members who secured this debate.

There are serious concerns about the potential for lost jobs and business if there is a loss of full access to the single market. Leading economists gave evidence to members of the Scottish Parliament on Tuesday on the impact that Brexit and leaving the single market would have on Scotland’s economy. Across Scotland, the financial sector directly and indirectly employs almost 200,000 people, 20,000 of whom are European Union workers. It contributes £8 billion to the economy of Scotland. In fact, Edinburgh’s economy is more reliant on financial
services than London’s economy, or indeed any other city’s economy in the UK. As I said earlier, if we look at Edinburgh’s share of financial services, we see that it is markedly ahead of most large European cities.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Is my hon. and learned Friend concerned that the Scottish asset management sector is bigger than that in Frankfurt and in Paris put together? We stand to lose out significantly.

Joanna Cherry: Yes, I am concerned about that. Edinburgh’s reliance on financial services is 23.8%, compared with 18.9% in London, 17.3% in Brussels and 17% in Amsterdam. By comparison, Glasgow’s financial services sector is worth about 12.4% to its economy.

This is not fearmongering. Paris and Frankfurt are already angling for some of the jobs that may leave London and Edinburgh if we leave the single market. I attended a briefing last week at which the Irish ambassador spoke. He pointed out that while Britain leaving the European Union poses some problems for the Republic of Ireland, it will also provide some fantastic opportunities for Dublin to attract jobs that we really need in our financial sectors across the UK. In Edinburgh, we really want to hang on to those jobs.

I am happy to say that a lot of people in my constituency are employed in legal and accounting services, which is what I used to do before I came to this place. More than 3,000 of my constituents are employed in the legal services sector. Across Edinburgh, that figure for the legal and accounting sector is closer to 10,000. The Law Society of Scotland has its headquarters in my constituency, and the Faculty of Advocates, of which I am non-practising member, has its headquarters in the neighbouring constituency of Edinburgh East. A lot of lawyers and other people who work in law firms live in my constituency and are worried about the impact of Brexit on legal services. There are many aspects of EU law that have particular relevance to the legal system and professions, including the directive on the mutual recognition of diplomas, the lawyers establishment directive and the lawyers cross-border provision of services directive.

Sir William Cash: Does the hon. and learned Lady recognise—I imagine she might—that there is a certain circularity in her argument? It is not surprising that the legal profession inside the European Union, which is concerned about European law, would want to protect that particular part of their activities. She could perhaps be a little more generous in understanding that those who want to leave might actually end up with laws that are made in this place.

Joanna Cherry: That is not what I am actually talking about. I am talking about the way in which European Union law has enabled Scots lawyers, English lawyers and lawyers across these islands to practise across Europe not for their benefit but for the benefit of their clients. That is the point. It is also to the benefit, as earlier speakers pointed out, of the financial services sector and to the British economy in general. This is not naked self-interest on the part of the lawyers. Lawyers depend on their clients to make a living. If lawyers are not able to practise across Europe easily, they will not be able to provide such a good service to their clients. That does not just apply in the financial sector. It covers all sorts of areas, including, very importantly, child and family law.

In Scotland, the Law Society of Scotland will be urging the UK Government and the Scottish Government to argue in negotiations that the current arrangements for lawyers to be able to practise in the European Union should be retained. It would be very disappointing if the only route for lawyers to be able to practise in Europe in future would be to requalify in other EU jurisdictions and go through the cumbersome processes that we have done away with as one of the many benefits of being in the EU.

Clearly, the best way to protect the legal and financial services in my constituency and in the city of Edinburgh is to remain part of the single market. That would be the easiest way to give comfort to those sectors. Of course, we are not able to give any comfort to those sectors, because the Government “do not want to give a running commentary”. However, it appears, as the result of a legal decision today, that the Government may in due course be forced to come to this democratically elected Chamber and tell us a little bit more about what their plans are. It is worthy of comment that that is not as a result of European judges sitting in Brussels, Luxembourg or Strasbourg. It is the result of English judges sitting in London. As a Scots lawyer, I wish to pay tribute to those English judges for the decision they have reached.

Tom Tugendhat: Of course, a few judges sitting in Belfast came out with a slightly different decision, as the hon. and learned Lady may be aware.

Joanna Cherry: Ultimately, it will be for the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom to decide, and it includes, of course, two very senior Scottish judges. I believe that the Supreme Court has already allocated a few days in December. I read that the full Bench will sit, so the Scottish judges will be there as well. The Scottish Government have said that it is very likely that Scotland will intervene in that case, and I have every confidence that the Supreme Court will reach the right decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I shall have to reduce the time limit to four minutes: everyone has taken considerably more than five minutes because of interesting interventions.

2.40 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Members for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) and for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) on bringing forth this timely debate. They are both known as having been huge talents, and their absence from the Front Bench is unfortunate.

I come to this debate with a sense of frustration. Like the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), I worked in financial services for a number of years before I came to this place. I get frustrated when I hear politicians characterising bankers as greedy, yacht-going men who live in high-rise apartments, looking for ways to rip off the British public to make themselves even richer. That is not my experience of the banking
system, and it is not the experience of the people I meet in my constituency, such as those who work on the high street in Blackwood or people such as Jonathan Brenchley from Barclays, a community relations manager who works hard to improve community relations. I recently had a meeting with NatWest, which is trying to improve IT and promote small IT businesses so that they can grow in Wales.

It is true that financial services are the largest exporters in the world. Some 11.8% of our GDP is in the financial and related sectors. The financial industry employs over 2 million people, and not all of them are based in the City of London. It employs one in 14 people in the UK on average, and two thirds of them are based outside Greater London. In Wales, for example, 54,300 people are employed by the financial and professional services industry. These are people who really believe in their companies; they have a buy-in, and they want to provide the best possible customer service. That is why I am concerned.

Before the referendum of April 2016, PwC conducted an analysis of what effect leaving the European Union would have on the financial services sector. The outcome was grim, forecasting that leaving would result in the loss of 70,000 to 100,000 jobs by 2020, with a slight recovery over time, but remaining with a loss of 10,000 to 30,000 jobs by 2030.

As we have heard, work in the financial services industry involves helping businesses to grow and individual people to reach their potential. Suffice it to say, it is the base industry for everything in this country. The prospect of the UK leaving the EU is a real threat to the financial services industry. Our financial services industry does not operate in a vacuum; rather, it relies on international trade and the flow of capital around the world and particularly the EU.

At the moment, the sector makes extensive use of passporting, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West. The Treasury Committee’s publication of figures from the Financial Conduct Authority shows that 5,476 companies registered here in the UK depend on these passport rights to do business with the EU.

Sir William Cash: In the light of the hon. Gentleman’s condemnation of the vote to leave, will he remind us how his constituents voted in the referendum?

Chris Evans: The hon. Gentleman has spent 30 to 40 years in this House going on about the European Union. All his birthdays must have come at once on 23 June—that is all I can say! [Interruption.] He knows the answer very well. I think he is trying to create a bit of mischief for me.

Essentially, we need to ask whether this will mean the loss of passport rights. What structures will be put in place to allow people to continue doing business and paying their taxes? Banks and the financial service industry simply need to know that.

I am short of time, but let me say that my second key concern that generates uncertainty is the extent of EU-originated law that now governs financial services. The law itself, of course, is not the issue, but what replaces it and the process by which it will happen is still a mystery. It is hard to find reliable information to quantify the extent to which EU law governs the UK financial services sector. However, since the EU implements many international regulations and agreements relating to the financial services sector and the UK relies on that body of law, leaving the EU can raise questions.

Ultimately—I am running short of time—it is no good for the Prime Minister to come here and, when she is challenged, to say every week, “Brexit means Brexit.” It is no good her saying that she is not going to give a running commentary on the negotiations either. The financial services industry needs certainty. It needs to move on, and it is time that the Government came up with some answers to the questions I have raised today.

2.45 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Members may be surprised to discover that I am not going to focus on what happens outside the City of London. It is important to talk about the City of London, and not just the areas outside it. What happens in the City of London benefits the whole of the UK’s economy. Whether or not Scotland is independent by the time that Brexit happens, it will still be really important for us that there is a strong financial services structure in the UK.

Robert Neill: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Kirsty Blackman: Not right now; I do not have much time.

I have a couple of points to make, starting with the issue of capital flight and passporting, which has been widely mentioned. As the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said, passporting is important because banks have to make these decisions now. They have to make them today. They cannot wait for the Government to mess about while they come up with deals on Brexit. The structural decisions have to be made now, because it takes a number of months and years for these things to happen. Banks do not have the luxury of being able to wait until two years down the line when the Brexit negotiations are concluded to discover whether or not there is a cliff-edge at that stage. They need to make those decisions now. When we hear that the Government are not going to give a running commentary, it means that banks have to take those decisions now, and it is disadvantaging the whole of the UK as a result.

I understand that it is difficult for the Government to provide certainty. They do not yet have certainty even on what language the negotiations will be conducted in, let alone anything else about them. It is unlikely that we will reach a position where we have certainty by the end of the two-year period. That is why organisations such as the London Market Group are suggesting that what the Government need to do as a matter of urgency is to agree transitional arrangements. It represents insurers, who generate over 20% of the City of London’s total income. What it says they need is financial regulatory certainty and transitional arrangements for five years post-Brexit in order not to severely disadvantage the insurance industry. Five years post-Brexit is a very long time, and the Government have not given them any certainty at this point in time.

Clearing is the other really important issue that I want to talk about. The London Clearing House is a huge success story for the City of London, and it has become very important. Clearing is the process through which risk in the financial markets is managed. It catalyses growth by helping to manage that risk, and it
is central to the UK’s delivery of the G20 post-crisis legislative framework. Our financial markets are less risky and better regulated as a result of having so much of the clearing house function based in the UK.

There are conversations about euro-denominated currencies moving from London, but we will lose not just euro-denominated currencies. The London Stock Exchange Group and the London Clearing House work in 17 currencies, and the only reason the London Clearing House has such a large market share and is so successful is its access to all those currencies. If euro-denominated clearing is moved from London to New York—and let us not kid ourselves that it will move anywhere else—we, the United Kingdom and the whole of Europe, will lose out. As a matter of urgency, the UK Government need to secure agreement from the European countries that euro-denominated clearing will not be removed from London. The clearing house function supports 100,000 jobs in the United Kingdom. It is not true that, as the Chancellor said recently,

“in terms of…jobs and value…it is a relatively small part of the total.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2016; Vol. 626, c. 149.]

A huge amount of the market, and City of London services, rely on the clearing house function, and the Government must prioritise it.

2.49 pm

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Let me begin by welcoming the ruling that Parliament should be sovereign in this area as in others. That does not mean that Brexit will not proceed; as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), we have a duty to honour the will of the British people. However, as elected representatives, we also have a duty to ensure that article 50 is triggered in the right way and at the right time, safeguarding the best interests of this country. The referendum was clear about the act of triggering article 50, but it was silent on when that should happen and with what safeguards. I think that it is important for us in Parliament to stand up, as we are today, and, rather than leaving these issues to the Crown prerogative and to Ministers, to do our duty when it comes to this particular question.

I do not believe that there can be many other sectors as large as the financial services sector. It produces 12% of our economic output and millions of jobs: in Nottingham alone, 500 firms deal in financial services. Many Members have drawn attention to the significance of the sector, whose scale is very obvious. However, I think that there is some confusion among Conservative Members, particularly the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). The hon. Gentleman seemed to be saying, “Oh well, we can leave the European Union and it will all be fine. We will just muddle through. We will find our way to a sort of happy equilibrium where everything will be fine.” He is wrong, because the other 27 countries in Europe are massive markets for our industries and for those who are employed in the financial services sector in this country. The hon. Gentleman and others need to realise that it is not just a question of leaving the EU and then facing tariffs of 10% or 20%; it is a question of whether we will have a legal right to trade in those products at all with those other 27 countries.

Sir William Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Leslie: I do not have time to give way to the hon. Gentleman. Well, I may do so if I am tempted. The clock stopped after he spoke, and it felt like the 19th century.

Let me read out to the hon. Gentleman a list of the products that will be banned after April 2019, the time at which we would be out of the European Union. It will no longer be possible to trade in these services with the other 27 countries unless we secure a transitional arrangement or some solution from the Government.

There will be no deposit taking, regulated commercial lending services, trade finance, finance leasing, regulated receivables financing such as factoring, derivatives, hedging services, credit card services, payment services, consumer credit, mortgage lending, equity and debt capital markets, fixed income secondary market trading, regulated foreign exchange spot and forward trading, securitisation, regulated commodities trading, or clearing and executing brokerage. It will be illegal for British-based firms to trade into those 27 countries after April 2019 unless the Government manage to secure a decent deal.

The challenge to the Minister, who has already heard it from many Members on both sides of the House, is yes, to focus on the right solutions—automatic access rights to the single market must be our goal—but before we reach that stage, in January or February, he must start to ensure that we have some evidence on the transitional arrangement talks. A transitional arrangement must begin before we trigger article 50, in the reporting season, so that banks and other financial institutions can plan ahead. If the Government do not give a clear commitment to seeking a transitional arrangement, we will find that those financial institutions have a “stick or twist” option. Do they stay and risk it, hoping that something will crop up after 2019, or do they twist, leave the UK and try to locate elsewhere? That is too much of a gamble. It should not be so binary. I hope that Ministers will think very seriously about doing the right thing for the sector and those who are employed in it.

2.53 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Let me begin, as others have, by commending the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) for securing the debate. Let me also commend her for summing up everything that I think Opposition Members, as well as many Conservative Back Benchers, believe about the nature of the problems that will face the financial sector post-Brexit. If there were any political justice, the moment that the hon. Lady had finished speaking the Minister would have stood up and agreed with everything that she had said. That would have been the end of it, and we could have gone on to actually solve some of these problems. Sadly, though, the Minister did not do that. We are faced with a situation in which the UK’s major industry—in terms of employment, taxes raised and the nature of our links with the rest of the world—it is a key strategic industry—is left blowing in the wind, waiting to find out what happens.

I always listen with great interest to what the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) says because he is forensic and thinks things through. He came up with a whole series of fixes—sticking plasters—that could be applied so that the financial sector could legally maintain
its markets in Europe. However, I put it to him and those who agree with his line of argument that there is a problem: since 2008, the UK financial sector has been in a special place compared with many other industries. It has had to undergo massive regulatory change, which has produced massive uncertainty in the industry. That process has not yet fully played out. We still have to get to 2019 before we will have implemented all the Vickers proposals on ring-fencing, so the banks are in a major process of reorganisation. Many Members have been to bank headquarters in the City and know that the situation on the ground is very complex. To add to that process of uncertainty, we have another period of uncertainty when the institutions will not even know whether they have the right to trade any longer in the rest of Europe, and that is a step too far.

We all know what the Minister will say when he makes his speech as he has come along to a number of such debates. He will do a fine job of not telling us anything. He will say we cannot have constant reporting on negotiations, but we are not asking for that. Instead, we are saying that given the unique uncertainties in a major industry that is undergoing massive regulatory change, the Government must put forward a transitional period. It must tell the financial institutions, “Yes, we have a transitional period. We will put down a time period, and it will go beyond 2019, when the Vickers proposals bed in.” That would allow everyone to calm down. If the Minister will not do that and instead maintains the silence, the Government will be adding to the regulatory uncertainties that are piling up on the industry.

Joanna Cherry: My hon. Friend talks about the uncertainty that is caused by the Government saying that they will not give a running commentary. Does he agree with the First Minister of Scotland that the Government are refusing to give a running commentary and to allow a vote in this House not for reasons of high constitutional principle, but because they do not have a coherent position, and they know that if they come to this House, that fact will be exposed?

George Kerevan: It would be my guess that the Government’s silence may just cover up a lack of strategic vision.

I also want to address a point raised in an intervention by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). He said that only about a fifth of revenues from the UK financial sector come from Europe and that we have a huge domestic sector, particularly in retail banking, so we should not exaggerate the crisis in the financial sector that might emerge due to Brexit. I have an answer to that: the problem is that the strategic sectors of banking, particularly high-value investment banking, which is where the profits are, do relate to Europe, and the threat is not from Paris or Frankfurt, but from Wall Street.

I have no wish to force US banks out of the City of London, but the banking community that has gained most since 2008, and that has consolidated and expanded its market share, is the major US banks, particularly the five big investment banks. They have increased their market share in London and Europe while European investment banks are in major decline—Deutsche Bank is in financial trouble, as are the Swiss investment banks, and all we are left with is the European champions, Barclays. If we break up the European financial family in another period of uncertainty, all we will do is strengthen the arm of the US investment banks, and behind them is a whole series of other US financial institutions that are coming into Europe.

US private equity has driven a coach and horses through traditional German bank lending at a regional level. For example, Cerberus is coming in and using a network of Cerberus companies across Europe to buy its way into European property by buying distressed debt. It is using the fact that it can play off one of its divisions against another through transfer pricing to take a gain in taxation. The real threat to our banking system is that, unless we get a grip, Wall Street and the American banks will dominate it. The right hon. Member for New Forest West suggested that the British domestic market was strong enough to survive whatever happens in the next few years, but that is not true. As we weaken the entire European banking family, we open up the possibility that the British retail banking system, which has retreated into its own domestic market, will be very much weakened when it comes to further American competition.

We need a solution to the passporting issue. The Minister will probably not respond to my proposal today, but I will put it on record anyway. The Scottish Government are seeking to maintain Scotland’s position within the single market, and I want to make it very plain that we would do that while being part of the United Kingdom. The UK Government have already done a side deal with Nissan and said that they will keep an open border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, so side deals—by industry and by region—are already out there. If Scotland were allowed to stay in the single market as part of the United Kingdom, that would give us a solution to the passporting problem. British banks could use their offices in Edinburgh and Glasgow to continue to trade with Europe because they would have the passport, and the Treasury would still be able to tax their profits because they would still be in the UK. The alternative is that the major European and American banks will move their nameplates to Dublin and Frankfurt, and the bulk of the business will be run from New York. We need a solution, and one solution would be to accept the Scottish Government’s proposal—or at least give an assurance that it will be thought through, rather than instantly dismissed—that Scotland should remain within the single market.

3.2 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to contribute to what has been an excellent, thoughtful and timely discussion. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) on securing this debate to discuss one of our most important industries at a critical time for its future. The financial services sector and its related professional services form part of the backbone of the UK economy. According to a report published earlier this year by TheCityUK, these sectors together represent nearly 12% of UK economic output. They contribute £16.6 billion in taxes and generate an annual trade surplus of £72 billion.

We have heard from several hon. Members today, particularly from my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison Mc Govern) in her eloquent speech, that it is wrong to misinterpret the term “the City” as simply...
meaning London—it does not. The financial sector’s presence and contribution are felt throughout the UK. The City’s report also highlighted the fact that, when related professional services are included, the industry employs 2.2 million individuals across Great Britain, two thirds of whom are located outside the capital. For each of those workers, the value added to the economy is £87,000, compared with the annual average of £52,000 for workers in other sectors. It is evident from those figures that financial services go far beyond a handful of well-paid jobs in the square mile. This is an association that we need to break down to ensure that the future of the industry is given the careful consideration it demands in the Brexit negotiations in order to safeguard stability for the rest of us.

Next year will mark the 60th anniversary of the early stages of the global financial crisis. In the intervening decade, the City has made measurable progress towards becoming a fairer and better functioning sector through the combined efforts of regulators and the industry itself. None the less, public trust in financial services remains at an all-time low, in some cases for understandable reasons. There is still some way to go for the sector to rebuild its reputation and regain that trust. For that reason, the fact that financial services might suffer disproportionally as a consequence of Brexit might not elicit sympathy in some quarters. However, if the financial crisis proved anything, it is that the success of our economy and nation is inextricably linked to the performance of our financial services sector. Arguably, that relationship had become too dependent in several ways before the crisis, but it is still true that it is challenging for the UK to achieve its full potential if our financial sector is not in good health. The positive flipside is that when the City does succeed, it brings a raft of accompanying benefits.

Our financial services sector is world leading. There is good reason why centres such as Frankfurt and Paris are vying to capture a slice of our thriving activity. The Financial Times revealed this week that the French Government are on the cusp of launching a cross-party initiative to lure businesses across the channel, while local financial regulators have simplified the process for new financial companies to register in Paris. The city’s business district has unveiled new adverts that are designed to entice companies to move with the inventive strapline: “Tired of the fog? Try the frogs!” The tone may be light-hearted, but we must take seriously the hard-headed commercial motivations. These existential threats do not mean giving the sector preferential treatment at the other net exporting industries in the UK combined. We are discussing the future of our largest export industry.

Getting Brexit right is fundamental to the overall success of our financial services sector and our continued economic prosperity. We need to focus on three main outcomes for financial services to ensure that, at least in the interim, the Government do not inflict damage on one of the most productive elements of our economy.

The £72 billion trade surplus, as mentioned in the City’s report, represents more than that for all other net exporting industries in the UK combined. We are discussing the future of our largest export industry. The Government must therefore consider carefully how to provide clarity and equal access for every single link of the chain.

I want to conclude by sharing two scenarios that underline the importance of today’s debate. We are operating in an environment of extreme uncertainty that seems to be benefiting no one except currency speculators.
Despite that, a recent report by consulting firm Oliver Wyman managed to produce two reasonable forecasts of what might happen, depending on which type of Brexit we can achieve. Its analysis suggests that an exit from the EU that can deliver passporting and equivalence, alongside access to the single market in a similar scenario to that enjoyed currently, would prompt a decline of about £2 billion in revenues from EU-based activity and put 3,000 to 4,000 jobs at risk. That is the best-case outcome. In the worst-case scenario, with the UK moving to third-country status, without equivalence, and our relationship with the EU being principally through the World Trade Organisation, the implications could be severe. That framework puts up to 35,000 jobs at risks and could cost approximately £18 billion to £20 billion in revenue each year.

I am most grateful for this debate, which has taken place at a critical juncture for the UK economy, and I thank hon. Members for the valid points they have raised. I urge the Government carefully to consider this sector, which sits at the heart of our economic health, and to take on board the arguments that have been made about protecting future jobs, future revenue and the future prosperity of the United Kingdom.

3.10 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):
I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate, and to the hon. Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) for requesting it.

Earlier this year, the British public made it clear that they want a new relationship with the European Union. Although we are under no illusions that this will not mean hard work and adjustment, we are committed to getting on with the job to make Brexit a success for people across the UK and for businesses across our industries. That includes, of course, our world-leading financial services sector, because it is clear, both from the many points raised today and the regular discussions I have with Members on these issues, that we are all in agreement on the importance of this industry to the British economy and of making sure this sector remains robust, highly competitive and open for business after our withdrawal from the EU.

First, it is worth reflecting on why this sector is of such importance to our economy. We have heard many statistics today, and they tell a compelling story. Last year, this industry contributed more than 7% of the value of all goods and services produced in the UK. The industry also exports £63.7 billion of services worldwide every year, making it the world’s largest exporter of financial services. From a Treasury perspective, the sector also brings a huge amount of money to our Exchequer. Let me give hon. Members a sense of the scale: in 2015, the banking sector alone contributed £24.4 billion through just corporation tax and PAYE. Recent analysis suggests that if we look at the broader financial services sector, we find that the tax contribution increases to £67 billion.

Leaving aside the enormous value this industry adds to what we produce, the services we export and the taxes we receive, we also have to remember how many jobs this industry workers. As British workers cross the country, more than 1 million people have jobs in this sector, with two thirds of these outside London, and in addition more than 1 million people are employed in jobs related to the financial services sector. To give just one example, the north-east has more than 50,000 people working in financial services.

What are the Government doing to ensure the continued success of an industry of such huge importance to our economy? First, since the referendum result we have been engaging extensively with companies across the financial services industry, to understand how we can make sure that our withdrawal from the European Union is a success for the financial services industry.

Secondly, the Prime Minister has made it clear that we will invoke article 50 no later than the end of next March to begin our formal negotiations with the EU. The Government are determined to continue with that plan. Finally, we have said that the European laws and regulations will be transferred to British law on our exit from the EU to provide continuity for businesses that operate in the EU.

On the points that have been raised, the hon. Member for Greenwich West (Liz Kendall) asked me for some clarifications. I am very pleased to say that, hopefully, I can do just that. She asked about passporting. I can say that the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), was not correct on this matter. Passporting, or rather the access to EU markets that comes with it, is one of the key areas under negotiation. The UK is looking for a sensible discussion on how our two markets can continue to serve one another, and on what is needed to support that. She also mentioned freedom of movement. It might be helpful if I were to quote the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who said:

“I see no likelihood of our using powers to control migration into the UK to prevent companies from bringing highly skilled, highly paid workers here.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 134.]

The hon. Lady mentioned transitional arrangements. We are determined to secure the best possible deal for UK goods and services, and that is very much in the interests of both the UK and the EU. Given the strong level of interconnection between our economies, continuity of service and an orderly withdrawal from the EU are also very much in the interests of both sides.

The hon. Lady finally asked me to agree with her that the best possible Brexit for the UK was also the best possible Brexit for Europe. I do agree with her, and that is a message that we should all do our very best to persuade others of: it is in everyone’s interests that we get the best possible deal.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) for his thoughtful and sensible contribution. The hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Bailey) asked about the impact of withdrawal on smaller businesses. It is a very important point and we must always remember that companies involved in financial services are not necessarily all huge firms in the City of London. My hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) obviously knows a great deal about Europe and I am always very pleased to hear from him. He made an interesting contribution, and I can reassure him that it is our intention to secure the very best possible deal.

The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) made the good point that not all financial workers are fat cats in the City. Indeed, they are hard-working
people up and down the country, two thirds of whom operate outside the City of London. From Edinburgh to Brighton, and from Belfast to Bournemouth, the financial services industry is a very important employer, and I pay tribute to all those people who work so hard in it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) made an excellent point about the benefit that the UK offers to all of Europe, and it is in our common interest to get the best possible deal. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) might be pleased to know that I am planning to visit not only Scotland but Northern Ireland and Wales in the near future to look at financial services and to demonstrate the Government’s interest in all parts of the country. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) will also be pleased to hear that Wales is an important part of the solution. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) sought certainty. What I can say is that I am certain that we will seek the best possible deal, and the clearing function is an important element of that deal.

As usual, the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) made some thoughtful points. I can assure him that I listened to them carefully. The hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) thanked me and said that I was doing a fine job. Who am I to disagree? I can tell him that Brexit does mean Brexit, we will not be giving a running commentary, and we do intend to get the best possible deal. I thank the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) for his sensible and constructive contribution. We all want Brexit to work for everyone and I look forward to working with him where we can to make sure that we get the best possible deal.

In conclusion, it is important that we retain our reputation for excellence in financial services and remain the most competitive place in the world to do business. It is not only about doing what is best for the British economy, but about doing what is best for everyone throughout the country, maintaining the quality of financial services available to British customers and taxpayers.

Once again, this has been a useful debate. I thank everyone for sharing their thoughts. We are very much in listening mode and I look forward to listening as things progress.

3.21 pm

Liz Kendall: Once again, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. We heard many excellent contributions. I am only sorry that we did not have more time and that some Members could not speak for as long as they wanted to.

I do not think we learned any more from the Minister’s comments than we knew before the debate—[Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) says that the Minister may regard that as a triumph. I am glad the Minister said that passporting is important, but he did not say that the Government would set out the broad framework and their objectives for the Brexit negotiations. He did not say that it was a priority to get the same access as we currently have to the single market for financial services, and he did not commit to a transitional agreement, let alone such an agreement any time soon. That is a huge mistake. If we want to protect this vital industry as well as jobs and growth, the Government need to act now, because businesses cannot wait. They have to plan for the future. Their customers, their regulators and their boards demand it. I ask the Minister to think again.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect of the UK leaving the EU on financial and other professional services.

Joanna Cherry: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is 49 years today since my colleague Mrs Winifred Ewing won the Hamilton by-election and came to this House as a solitary Scottish National party MP, and of course that means 49 years of SNP representation in this House, although we are rather more than one now. How would it be appropriate for me to mark this illustrious occasion in the history of my party and have it entered in the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. and learned Lady has just proved herself to be a very adept and clever lawyer. Coming from me, that is a compliment. She will appreciate, as the House appreciates, that the point she made is not a point of order and does not, fortunately, require any comment from the Chair. However, she has made her point and it will be on the record that an historic event occurred 49 years ago today. I am sure the House will note that and, in its own way, celebrate it.
Living Wage

3.24 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House recognises Living Wage Week which began on 31 October; believes that the use of the introduction of the national living wage to drive down conditions and take-home pay is against the spirit of the law; calls on the Government to close down those loopholes which make this possible; and further believes that any move to reduce the value of the national living wage to a level below the promised £9 per hour in 2020 is unacceptable.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this debate. Living Wage Week is about celebrating the real living wage—£9.75 in London and £8.45 outside London—which provides an income that meets a minimum cost of living.

I called the debate to highlight the inadequacies of the so-called national living wage, the new statutory minimum rate of pay. Initially, the main criticism of the wage was its name, because, at £7.20 an hour, it is far lower than the actual living wage. However, since April a growing number of high-profile companies have used its introduction to cut total pay for long-standing employees, despite the former Chancellor’s promise that “Britain is getting a pay rise.”—[Official Report, 8 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 337.]

Back in February, I was approached by a constituent who worked at B&Q and had been told that his contract would change. His contractual entitlement to double-time pay and seasonal bonuses meant that he would be losing £3,500 a year, after the increase in his basic pay. He is a man with two children, living in London and earning around £15,500 a year. B&Q is one of the main employers that have offset the basic pay increase with a total pay cut for employees on old contracts. It has cut the majority of its discretionary payments to staff on older contracts, stripping their pay and removing almost all their employee benefits. Although B&Q’s chief executive has promised me that all affected employees will continue to receive transitional payments to top up their pay, I know that thousands still believe that they will be significantly worse off.

It is a similarly sad story at Marks & Spencer. As one of Britain’s premier retailers, Marks & Spencer employs tens of thousands of workers across the country. It forced a consultation a few months ago to cut the terms and conditions for its employees on pre-2002 contracts. Like those at B&Q, these employees have been penalised for their long and loyal service. Their double time has been cut, as has their unsocial hours entitlement. In fact, M&S went even further than B&Q and scrapped its employees’ pension scheme at the same time.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): As my hon. Friend is aware, my mother was a long-time member of staff in Marks & Spencer—45 years. Such was the affection for the company that it was known by the staff, and indeed in our house, as “our shop.” Does my hon. Friend agree that this betrayal of loyalty of long-time members of staff is nothing short of, in the words of one staff member, a “kick in the teeth”?

Siobhain McDonagh: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for her involvement in the campaign. She will know that 11,000 employees were adversely impacted by the changes. Of those, 2,700 have lost at least £1,000 a year, 700 have lost at least £2,000 a year, and a significant proportion will lose up to £6,000 a year.

The human cost of those actions is huge. Literally hundreds of employees from across the country have contacted me in desperation. Let us consider just two examples. There is a gentleman—w e will call him Connor—to keep his identity secret—who has worked for M&S for more than 20 years, mainly on night shifts. He told me:

“I have enjoyed those years... getting satisfaction from delivering our goals and feeling like I was contributing greatly to achieving our targets. But as you are aware, M&S are cutting my night premium, Sunday premium and bank holiday, totalling several thousand pounds worth of shortfall in my wages per annum. On top of that, they suggest I also start to contribute into a pension. How am I going to be able to do that? I am sick but have a wonderful, large family to support, as well as a mortgage. I stand to lose everything... I have nothing to fall back on. I have given my best years to M&S... I feel cheated and betrayed.”

Let us consider Ms Smith from Yorkshire, a hard-working, low-paid mum. As a result of B&Q’s contractual changes, she is going to receive a staggering 30% pay cut and will lose £2,000 a year from 2018. She told me:

“How exactly am I going to make up this wage deficit? I have a young son to support, and next year is looking very bleak for us...I am worried about how I will support my family...I am heartbroken that the company I have worked so hard for; done 16-hour shifts for, come in on days off for, and valued greatly, has treated me like this.”

Two companies, one sad pattern of hard work and loyalty being punished. Thousands of employees at these two companies will never earn again what they earned in April. Indeed, the general public have been shocked by these actions, with a quarter of a million people signing Change.org petitions against these practices.

What is so shocking is the ease and speed with which these companies have legally cut staff pay. Both companies launched 90-day consultations, which is the statutory minimum. Neither recognises a trade union. Both targeted those workers on older contracts, and both conducted consultations that ended with these pay cuts being pushed through, regardless of the employees’ heartache and the reputational damage the companies have faced.

The consultations are a foregone conclusion. In fact, M&S’s head of retail told me that the company had been planning these changes for 18 months. M&S’s board will meet tomorrow to finalise these contractual changes, and it will be issuing notices a few weeks before Christmas to staff members who refuse to sign their new contracts. I ask the Minister to address that point in summing up.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for her tireless campaign on this issue. Given that a Resolution Foundation survey of employers found that there was no evidence for the claim that the national living wage leads to job losses, does she agree with John Hannett, the general secretary of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, that “employers must not be allowed to blame higher wages for every job loss, every cut in hours and every change to terms and conditions”?

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I will go on to say how cuts in pay never seem to apply to those at the top of an organisation or to impact on its profits.
Steve Rowe, the chief executive of Marks & Spencer, still refuses to meet MPs to discuss these changes, and he has not accepted that he should have a pay cut in solidarity with his shop-floor staff. I hope Members will bear all this in mind when they are doing their Christmas shopping at M&S next month.

The fact that this happens at the same time as low-paid workers have been promised a pay rise by the Government is incredible. In many ways, B&Q and Marks & Spencer have just been unlucky in being singled out, because there are many more doing the same thing.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): My hon. Friend has secured a really important debate. Is she aware of very similar problems at Samworth Brothers in my constituency? Long-serving workers are seeing their night shift and weekend work pay cut; there is no recognition of a trade union; and the bosses are refusing to provide information and are not taking a pay cut themselves. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is unacceptable and that they should commit to the spirit and the law of the legislation?

Siobhain McDonagh: My hon. Friend has anticipated my next paragraph, which was to congratulate her on the work she has been doing at local employer Bradgate Bakery, which is part of Samworth Brothers. Somebody doing the Saturday night shift at Bradgate this week will earn 30% less in three years’ time than they will this Saturday. How can that happen in the 21st century? Over the way in Grimsby, the Seachill fish factory, which works for The Saucy Fish Co, has cut overtime payments, despite the fact that overtime work is written into the employees’ contract.

Smaller benefits are also being ruthlessly got rid of. I hope Members will excise the way I pronounce the name of the next company, but Le Pain Quotidien, where a cup of tea will set you back £3, cut paid breaks this year, while Zizzi has cut the range of free food options available to staff. Caffè Nero baristas are no longer eligible for free food on their lunch breaks, which saves the company about £3.60 per staff member. It seems that all retailers are racing to the bottom and cutting everything they possibly can to save a few pennies here and there.

It looks like the John Lewis Partnership—the top retailer on our high streets—will be the next big employer to cut staff pay, potentially going the same way as M&S and B&Q. Having already got rid of Sunday and bank holiday premiums for new starters, its chairman has outlined plans to “review historic pay structures”. In other words, it, too, will potentially cut the terms and conditions of the oldest and most loyal employees.

Each of those cases demonstrates that we desperately need to tackle in-work poverty and the unscrupulous pay practices and governmental inaction that lead to its entrenchment. Years ago, a typical family in poverty would be out of work, but now they are far more likely to be in work on low pay. According to the Resolution Foundation, almost a quarter of UK workers earn less than the real living wage—the equivalent of £16,500 a year for a full-time week outside of London, and £19,000 in London. A staggering 1.5 million workers earn only the statutory minimum wage of £7.20 an hour—that is just £15,000 a year for a 40-hour week.

Siobhain McDonagh: There seems to be an issue in retail and I completely understand that, but it appears—contradictorily and counterintuitively—that the living wage has precipitated companies looking at issues other than the hourly rate. The hourly rate has become king and everything else is being cut, but I am absolutely convinced that that was not the Government’s intention.

Not everybody’s pay is being cut or terms and conditions undermined. It is a completely different story for our country’s chief executives. The High Pay Centre has shown that the UK’s top bosses earned an average of £5.5 million each last year. That means that chief executive officers enjoyed a 10% pay rise last year, while wages for low-paid workers rose by just 2%, according to the Office for National Statistics. On average, FTSE 100 CEOs now earn 129 times more than their employees, when we take into account pensions and bonuses. The UK’s top bosses could take a page out of the book of Berkshire-Hathaway’s CEO, Warren Buffett, who paid himself a much more modest salary of $100,000 in 2015.

All of that demonstrates that the link between productivity and remuneration is breaking. It should be common sense that those who make a company’s profits possible should receive a decent day’s pay. They certainly should not be rewarded for their years of loyal service by a receiving a pay cut.

I share the Prime Minister’s sentiments when she said earlier this year that “there is an irrational, unhealthy and growing gap between what these companies pay their workers and what they pay their bosses.”

I just hope that she will act on those words and encourage companies to think about a whole company pay policy and how much they pay their poorest employees.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): I, too, pay tribute to the great leadership that my hon. Friend has shown. On the issue of raising wages, the average salary in my constituency is the fifth lowest of anywhere in the west midlands, with a median average salary of £22,000. Having a proper, real and decent living wage will make an extraordinary difference to some of the lowest paid in our communities.

Siobhain McDonagh: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. I ask the Government not to renege under any circumstances on their promise to ensure that the national statutory minimum wage will reach £9 by 2020. The British public were promised £9 an hour, so that should be the minimum they receive. The Government must also act to tackle the unscrupulous employment practices of employers who cut staff pay to offset the higher per-hour rate. In the words of the former Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), although such practices may be legal, they are not in the “spirit of the law.” Given the Prime Minister’s vocal desire to champion the situation of the poorest in the UK, I sincerely hope that she will review the ease with which employers can scrap long-standing and historical terms and conditions.
Companies have a responsibility to show a lot more respect to their loyal, long-standing staff. Company boards should count among their members not only lawyers and accountants but ordinary employees. Whether they are HR representatives or shop-floor workers, those who make a company’s profits possible deserve a place at the table.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s forthcoming employment review led by Matthew Taylor, a man who is known to many Labour MPs. I am pleased that the review will consider the issues I have raised over the past year. We need a public discussion that considers more than just pay per hour. We need to consider how the world of retail is changing, leaving many employees behind and offering less and less in the way of career progression. For example, at B&Q and M&S, new members of staff with little or no professional experience will now receive the same per-hour pay as much more experienced members of staff. Where is the incentive to work hard if someone cannot work their way up? As the fourth industrial revolution beckons, what will happen to communities that have, until now, relied on retail work? What repercussions will that have for the way in which we educate and train citizens and the skills with which we equip them for the world of work?

We also need to consider the repercussions of the new gig economy. Over the last few months, we have seen how employers such as Hermes and Uber mistreat their self-employed workers to keep costs to a minimum. I was extremely pleased that the hard work of the GMB paid off with its win in a monumental employment case against Uber. But the Government need to be more proactive and champion the rights of the self-employed and the responsibilities of employers; the Government should not just pick up the pieces when things fall apart.

We have called out these actions, and our words in this place have been heard. They have been heard by top corporate executives who have flocked to me after debates to try and explain a way their companies’ behaviour. Our words have been heard by thousands of staff nationwide whose pay has been cut unscrupulously and who have felt alone and ignored. Our words have been heard by countless employers who have felt alone and ignored. Our words have been heard by top citizens and the government, and that will all realise that a society in which the poorest flourish is one in which we all benefit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. We have to move immediately to a time limit for Back-Bench speeches of five minutes.

3.42 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this debate via the Backbench Business Committee. It is not the first time I have supported her application for a debate. This is another example of an issue that she has raised about which we can agree on a significant amount.

Living Wage Week provides a good opportunity to raise the issue of low pay with employers, and to encourage them to pay their employees a fair wage and thus reduce employers’ dependence on Government subsidy of their payroll costs through in-work benefits such as tax credits. The living wage is paid voluntarily by employers and set according to the cost of achieving an adequate standard of living. I question whether it is a real living wage, but it is a living wage as judged by the Greater London Authority for people in London, and by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University for those outside London.

I have employed people, on and off, for the last 20 years or so. As, I hope, a responsible employer, I try to pay more than the market rate if possible. People are more than commodities; they are the shop window, the engine room and the support team of any business. Investing in their people should be a top priority for any employer. I hope that my parliamentary staff, who may be tuning into this debate, will not be too inclined to raise a quizzical eyebrow at what I have just said.

Satisfaction at work is not all about pay. It is about conditions; it is about how bosses, managers and colleagues relate to and value an individual; and it is about career development. In this debate, we are focusing on the lowest-paid in our society—the people who are struggling to pay their bills and who are having to make difficult daily choices to be able to survive, let alone thrive. The Government have made a lot of progress since 2010 in improving the circumstances of low-paid employees. We will lift another 1.3 million people out of income tax altogether, while basic rate taxpayers will be more than £1,000 better off than they were five years ago. A full-time low-paid worker aged 25 or over now earns about £900 more than they did last year.

The national living wage means that earnings have risen for the lowest-paid workers at the fastest rate since records began. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimates that in total up to 6 million people could receive a pay rise as a result of the ripple effect that causes pay to rise further up the earnings distribution. By increasing the national living wage, taking millions of people out of tax and making welfare reforms, the Government are ensuring that it always pays to be in work.

Joan Ryan: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation evidence that a third of families earn less than they need for a decent standard of living? Given that, does he agree, as he supports a living wage, that the Government should provide firm guarantees that no employee will earn less as a result of the national living wage?

Paul Scully: I will deal in a second with what the Government are doing and the manifesto commitments we made last year, but I agree that we can always do more to lift the low paid out of poverty and low pay. It is very important that we continue to move to a higher wage, lower tax and lower welfare society, building a more productive country, because we must give families the security of well-paid work. It is important for the Government to help businesses to offset the costs of the national living wage, including the ripple effect that I have mentioned. Corporation tax will therefore be cut and businesses will benefit from a 50% increase in the employment allowance.

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the problem is that businesses sometimes do not pay corporation tax? When I made such a point to
Kingfisher, the owner of B&Q, it said that the cut was of no help because it did not pay any corporation tax last year.

Paul Scully: It is important to encourage businesses to pay their fair share of taxes. Despite what the hon. Lady says, many companies pay a significant amount in corporation tax, and I know that businesses value lower taxes and the employment allowance. I benefited from employment allowance in the company I ran before I was elected in that it allowed me to create another job.

The Low Pay Commission is charged by the Government with recommending the level of the national living wage premium each year, to increase the national living wage to 60% of median earnings by 2020. According to independent OBR forecasts, the Government expect it to reach £9 by 2020. I have heard nothing that implicitly or explicitly suggests that the Government are wavering in that commitment. I will be interested to hear the Minister reaffirm that, as I am sure she will, when she sums up.

Beyond supporting pay initiatives, the Government have sought to boost jobs and apprenticeships by involving businesses in the design of new apprenticeship standards and offering grants of £1,500 for businesses with up to 1,900 employees to take on new 16 to 24-year-olds as apprentices if they have not taken one on in the past year. That has been extended for another year. From this April, employers have not had to pay employer’s national insurance contributions for apprentices under the age of 25.

I know that the Government understand the ripple effect on companies, which I have mentioned, and that Ministers—including the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), who is in her place—have pushed companies to implement the national living wage in the spirit in which it was introduced. We should also hold up good examples of where the Government have moved on from the productivity argument and are actually doing something for the individual and their family. Let us get on with it and do the right thing.

We hear that young people are not as productive, so how are the Government measuring productivity? I asked in a written question for their figures on the productivity of young workers. I was told that they had absolutely no evidence to support the claim. In his answer, the then Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock),—now the Minister for Digital and Culture—at last year’s Conservative party conference. Outlining the rationale for the decision to pay under-25s less, he said:

“Anybody who has employed people knows that younger people, especially in their first jobs, are not as productive, on average.”

As someone who was doing three part-time jobs at the age of 17 while studying for my A-levels, I can sympathise with those workers under 25 who find that sweeping generalisation grossly unfair.

We hear that young people are not as productive, so how are the Government measuring productivity? I asked in a written question for their figures on the productivity of young workers. I was told that they had absolutely no evidence to support the claim. In his answer, the then Minister for Skills, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), told me that there are no official statistics estimating the productivity of workers by their age.

So we know that the Government cannot give evidence to support the reasoning of the right hon. Member for West Suffolk. I accept that those embarking on a new role often require training and support from their employers and perhaps therefore initially represent a reduced return on investment for an employer, but that could be said of any employee, of any age, taking on a new role or returning to the workplace. Up and down the country there are countless examples of young people who give it their all and are a huge asset to their firms, yet now face the demoralising prospect of unequal pay.

Recently, it feels as though the Government have moved on from the productivity argument and are instead arguing that the ability to pay under-25s less will incentivise firms to hire young workers. Indeed, when I asked the former Leader of the House for a debate on this issue at business questions, he replied:

“I think it is important to do everything that we can to incentivise employers to take on young people.”—[Official Report, 28 April 2016, Vol. 608, c. 1564.]
We all want to see youth unemployment addressed, yet organisations, including the Federation of Small Businesses, have pointed out that the Government’s approach could see any prospect of lower wage costs to cut wage costs to almost certainly fall foul of age discrimination legislation. An employer that actively seeks to recruit under-25s to cut wage costs will almost certainly be caught by the Equality Act 2010 prohibiting discrimination on a number of grounds; section 5 of the Act recognises age as one of those characteristics. It is direct discrimination if, because of a protected characteristic, one person is treated less favourably than another. The House of Commons Library has confirmed that if to recruit workers on the basis of their age would constitute direct age discrimination.

In evidence to the Low Pay Commission, the Federation of Small Businesses said that “our survey data suggests that some businesses may focus their recruitment on the under 25s. However by doing this they run the risk of potentially breaching age discrimination legislation, which should lead many employers to re-evaluate this stance.”

Will the Minister clarify the Government’s intention on the threshold for 25-year-olds as a financial incentive, and respond to the advice of the FSB? If, as a result of the Equality Act, the threshold for under-25s is not permitted to have a purpose in boosting youth employment rates, why have a lower rate at all?

Having campaigned on the issue, I joined my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) earlier this week to meet a number of young workers who were brought together by the GMB trade union—I thank them for their work on the campaign. Those young workers told their stories, including a testimony from a 20-year-old retail worker called Rebecca, who said:

“Earning less than older workers stops me from socialising with friends, studying part time to get a better job and I can’t afford to have driving lessons or even think about owning a car. I’m frustrated at the fact that I am expected to live on so little, whereas if I was older I would automatically be paid more.”

I hope the Minister reflects on Rebecca’s story and responds, and I hope the Minister reflects on Rebecca’s story and responds accordingly.

3.55 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for bringing the debate to the House. I enjoy working with her on human rights in Sri Lanka, and I enjoyed hearing her comments in the debate. I welcome the speech of the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), whom I am following for a second day running.

The national minimum wage was introduced by the Labour Government in 1999 at £3.60 an hour for those aged over 22. Successive increases based on recommendations from the independent Low Pay Commission meant that it reached £6.70 by last year. I commend the Labour Government for introducing the national minimum wage, but this progressive Conservative Government introduced the national living wage, increasing the lowest rate of pay for those aged 25 and over to £7.20 this April, and to £9.35 from April 2020.

That was significant for at least three reasons. First, some had often wrongly characterised the Conservative party as an opponent of statutory minimum wages, which was clearly not the case. Secondly, the 2016 rate represents a 7.5% increase, or a 10.8% year-on-year increase, which is the largest cash increase ever to a living wage. Thirdly, the independent Low Pay Commission concluded that the real value of the new national living wage would restore and surpass the value lost in the economic downturn. I was therefore delighted when the Government announced the national living wage, as were many of my constituents in Kingston and Surbiton who were among the 1.8 million workers in the UK benefiting from the introductory wage increase.

I was concerned about the effect of the national living wage, particularly in sectors such as nursing homes. Members on both sides of the House raise the issue of the high cost to councils of placements in nursing homes, and the high costs to private users of nursing homes, which I thought would only go up if the minimum wage was increased. I discussed that with a number of care home owners in my borough of Kingston, who pointed out that they were either already paying in excess of the then proposed national living wage or planning to do so—there was such a shortage of nurses and healthcare assistants willing to work in nursing homes that they had to pay the additional amount to get quality staff.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has started a very curious train of thought. Let us say that the employers had said that the increase would have an impact. Would his view have been that the staff who look after some of the most vulnerable people in his community should not be allowed the increase?

James Berry: My concern was that the cost would be passed on to the customer, which would either be the council or private payers, who often have to shell out a huge amount to pay for the care of their parents or loved ones. As it happens, as far as I have seen, that has turned out not to be the case. In fact, I have seen no significant evidence of widespread transfers of the cost of the national living wage to customers.

How have the costs been absorbed? Some companies have absorbed them by taking a hit to their profits. Others are doing the very things that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden listed, many of which are absolutely disgraceful—I have no quarrel with her about that. There are other examples of companies forcing staff to buy their own uniforms or pay for their training, which I similarly condemn, as I am sure she would.

What action are the Government taking? First, with minimum wage enforcement, an employer can take their employer to an employment tribunal for breach of contract. Secondly, when there is non-payment of a minimum wage, the employee can complain to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, which investigates every single case and can require repayment of the underpayment. Following changes made by the Government in April, a fine amounting to 200% of arrears can be levied. There is also provision for naming and shaming, which is popular in this context at least, as 687 companies have been named and shamed so far. As far as I am aware, there have been no complaints of this action not being taken when it has been demanded of HMRC.

What happens when the rule is not breached, but the spirit of it is? I hope that the Government will continue to criticise employers that do not follow the spirit of the
rules in exactly the way the hon. Members for Mitcham and Morden and for Halifax and my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) have taken the opportunity to do today so that we, as customers, can also take direct action by not shopping at Marks & Spencer this Christmas if we are not happy about how it treats its staff.

What we did not hear from the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden was any suggestion of how the Government could do more to deal with employers who do not behave according to the spirit of the rules without wrapping them up in regulation after regulation. If I had an answer to that, I would certainly give it to the House, but I have not heard of one yet. I am pleased without wrapping them up in regulation after regulation. If I had an answer to that, I would certainly give it to the House, but I have not heard of one yet. I am pleased

4.1 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on running an excellent campaign over many months and bringing to light a significant problem. I think the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) is well intentioned, but he is perhaps a little over-optimistic about how easy it is for people to get into conflict with their employers, especially now that tribunal fees have been increased. My hon. Friend motivated me to find out what is going on in my constituency. I have heard stories very similar to those that she told about Marks & Sparks and R&Q from the GMB trade union with respect to Asda, but the story that shocked me most was what is going on at Morrisons.

Morrisons made an increase to its basic hourly rate of £1.27, taking the figure from £6.93 to £8.20. A person working 20 hours mid-week would therefore appear to gain £25.40 a week, or more than £1,000 a year. To pay for that, however, paid breaks became unpaid, at a cost of £2.05 for each break lost. Morrisons also abolished the Sunday premium of time and a half. Instead of being paid £12.30 an hour, people received a pay cut from £10.39 to £8.20. This has had a particularly bad impact on those who regularly work weekend shifts. One of my constituents gained a miserly £1.64 a week from these changes. Their partner told me that this had caused a lot of “heartache”—that was the word she used. One very unpleasant aspect of this, of course, is that it sets workers against each other. One person’s pay rise is literally at the expense of another person’s pay cut. It is not necessary, because the people I have spoken to who work for the Co-op have not been treated in this way.

Morrisons no doubt told its employees that this was all that it could afford, so hon. Members will imagine my astonishment at a parallel development in my constituency. They might know that I have an extremely large constituency of 300 square miles with very contrasting communities at either end. At the same time as Morrisons was cutting the pay of its Sunday workers, William Morrison was buying a castle at the other end of my constituency for more than £3 million.

When most of us buy a house, we haggle to get the price down—not Mr Morrison. He saw the advertisement for the castle, priced at £3 million, in Country Life. He was so keen to have it that he offered a quarter of a million pounds more. As is recorded by the Land Registry, he paid £3.34 million. The increase is more than enough to buy a family house in my constituency. Of course people are free to spend their money as they like, but I am afraid that this paints a picture of modern capitalism that is ugly and exploitative. I am not sure what his great grandfather would have made of all this, but there seems to be something very Victorian about the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate.

The Morrison family shareholding is now worth some £270 million. Over the past two years, the dividend payments have been 20p per share, so the family has been getting about £24 million on their shareholding. In real terms, the pay deal for Morrisons’ Sunday workers has been a cut. This inequality is not necessary. It is not efficient, it is not just and it is wrong. There is really only one word to characterise what has been going on—greed. That is why people need Labour’s real living wage, independently set and properly enforced.

4.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on securing this important debate. I also welcome the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) to his shadow ministerial position; this is the first time that we have faced each other across the Dispatch Box.

I congratulate everyone involved in the Living Wage Foundation on all that they have done to promote the concept of a living wage and to motivate more companies to pay it. As the Minister for small business, I was pleased to see that research carried out by the Universities of Middlesex and Liverpool about the adoption of the living wage by SMEs showed that 70% of respondents said that becoming a living wage employer had had a positive effect on their brand and corporate image.

I am proud to be part of a Government who have introduced the first national living wage, so let me take some time to acknowledge the magnitude of this change for workers. New earnings data released last week by the Office for National Statistics shows that 1.5 million workers will have seen a pay rise this April. The introduction of the national living wage meant that a full-time, low-paid worker working 35 hours a week would be earning about £900 more this year than last year, and even more workers will benefit as we make our way towards 2020.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) set out, new data have confirmed that wages have continued to grow by more than inflation. That is even more the case for the lowest paid, for whom the gains are by far the largest this year. I listened carefully to what hon. Members said about certain companies, to what hon. Members said about certain companies, to what hon. Members said about certain companies, but the overall impact of the new living wage has seen even more workers will benefit as we make our way towards 2020.
The Minister refers to the lowest-paid people gaining an increase of 8.2%, but that does not compare well with the top FTSE 100 chief executives, whose pay increase was 10%. My fear is not just for the lowest paid, but for the group of people just above them, who are finding that the introduction of the living wage is stripping out all the other benefits, leading to an overall reduction in their pay.

I shall be dealing later with some of the points that the hon. Lady made in her speech about other benefits, and the overall impact on wages and take-home pay, but she should bear in mind that 8.2% is not very dissimilar to 10%. That does not mean that I am defending what many people have described as excessive pay rates at the top end. Indeed, the Prime Minister has asked my Department to produce a discussion paper on corporate governance. She has made it clear that she expects some of that top-end remuneration to come under the microscope, especially when it does not seem to reflect improved corporate performance.

I have listened carefully to representations about the level at which Governments should set the national living wage and the way in which overall pay should be managed. Higher pay needs to be affordable for employers, because if they cannot afford to pay it they will not hire workers and, worse still, may even lay workers off. The Low Pay Commission is led by an expert panel and is absolutely independent of the Government. We will continue to take its expert and independent advice, which will help us to set the national living wage. The commission will make its recommendations after careful consideration of the state of the economy to ensure that we can afford to make the living wage as high as possible without costing jobs. It will gather extensive evidence across the economy from workers, their representatives and employers, and will then reach an independent view.

As the Minister will know, the merchant marine service has been one of the most difficult areas of employment when it comes to enforcement of the national minimum wage. When will we have the updated guidance on the application of the minimum wage to seafarers that we were promised?

I will ask Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs what stage its investigation has reached. As one of my hon. Friends pointed out earlier, HMRC investigates every single complaint for underpayment, but it also mounts sector-based inquiries into such matters as the circumstances of seamen.

Let me now deal with some of the overall issues raised by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden. I share some of the concerns that have been expressed today. We know that employers are responding to the national living wage in a range of ways, depending on the markets in which they operate and the current state of their businesses. The extent to which they may be able to absorb the extra costs from profits, pass them on in the form of increased prices, increase the productivity of their staff or reduce other costs will vary between and within sectors. We think it essential for employers to ensure that their overall packages are competitive, and that they reward staff for their work in order to retain and develop workers who are fundamental to their success.

Ultimately, however, although we can set the minimum wage, it is for employers to decide how to manage those increases in their costs. Any changes in contracts must be agreed with workers, and must be in line with the law at the very least. Any instances of unfair dismissal that might result are, of course, a serious matter, and would be dealt with through employment tribunals, but employees could always contact the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service for guidance at the same time.

It is worth noting that changes in pay structures in the retail sector can reflect long-term changes to introduce greater consistency, perhaps the sort of changes that we have heard about this afternoon. Some may be coincident with, but not a consequence of, the introduction of the national living wage, and I do not accept that they are in any sense loopholes. The Government will continue to set a minimum hourly wage, and remuneration over and above that rate is a contractual matter between the employer and the employee.

Will the Minister give way?

I will give way one last time. I am aware that many other Members wish to speak.

I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She talks about going to ACAS or a tribunal in a way that makes that sound extremely easy. However, companies only have to have a 90-day consultation, and when that is finished they can take the measures they wish to take that lower wages by reducing overtime and bonus payments, despite the fact that they are implementing the Government’s national living wage. Surely this is a loophole and the Government should act; otherwise, what is the point of any of the Government’s measures?

I do not see these matters as loopholes because there is no proof of a connection between the introduction of the national living wage and some of the cases we have heard about this afternoon. I object to the automatic assumption that the changes that Marks & Spencer has made to its contracts and conditions are exploitative or a direct result of the national minimum wage. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden stated that Marks & Spencer had scrapped its pension scheme. It has not done so; like a host of other firms—the vast majority of private sector firms—it has moved from a defined benefit scheme to a defined contribution scheme. Indeed, the hon. Lady herself pointed out that the John Lewis Partnership had moved in such a direction several years ago, and it is not surprising when we consider what has happened to some of our large corporations’ defined benefit schemes in recent years. In August alone the deficit of those schemes increased by a massive £100 billion—and that was just in one month.

These pension schemes have to be sustainable; otherwise, we are going to see a calamity unfold over the next decade. Marks & Spencer has, along with the vast majority of other corporations, taken the entirely reasonable decision to move over, after consulting their employees at length and after putting in place a compensation programme to cover a three-year transitional period.

I took the precaution of talking to Marks & Spencer representatives to find out about the wider impact of some of these changes on employees of one of our most famous high street stores. I found that a rather different
picture emerged from what we have heard from some Members in this debate. The company has put in place a Marks & Spencer living wage of £8.50 as a minimum for all store staff from April next year, and all those staff will receive a pay rise for every hour worked, and longer serving employees, who I agree have had to give up premium rates for Sunday and bank holiday working, will at least receive a lump sum in compensation. The conclusion is that approximately 90% of M&S employees will receive higher pay as a result of all the changes, which staff are free to accept or reject. M&S has also undertaken a very lengthy consultation covering all its store staff.

Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will; I did say I would not give way again, but it is the hon. Lady’s debate.

Siobhain McDonagh: As I have always done, I am specifically referring to those long-standing loyal members of staff who have worked at Marks & Spencer since before 2002—they have worked for at least 14 years for the store. Thousands of those members of staff are going to lose thousands of pounds each year. There is a two-year lump sum to be had. They have no choice; the 90-day consultation has taken place. If they reject their new contract, they will be sacked for another substantial reason. Does the Minister, on behalf of the Government, believe that that is a fair way to treat thousands of long-standing loyal staff who have gone into work at weekends and on bank holidays to keep the company they love going?

Margot James: I do not accept that that is a fair representation of what Marks & Spencer is doing at the moment, for many reasons. I note that the hon. Lady said that if staff did not accept the terms, they would be sacked for another reason. That would be illegal and I do not believe that Marks & Spencer would go down that road. I think it has been much—

Siobhain McDonagh: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. What the Minister has just said is legally and factually incorrect. The law states that if a company has a 90-day consultation with its staff about changes to terms and conditions, it can then issue a new contract. If a member of staff refuses to sign that contract, they will be sacked for another substantial reason. Does the Minister, on behalf of the Government, believe that that is a fair way to treat thousands of long-standing loyal staff who have gone into work at weekends and on bank holidays to keep the company they love going?

Margot James: I do not accept that that is a fair representation of what Marks & Spencer is doing at the moment, for many reasons. I note that the hon. Lady and others have brought to the House today. I do not accept what the hon. Lady has said. The 90-day consultation has taken place. If they reject their new contract, they will be sacked for another substantial reason. Does the Minister, on behalf of the Government, believe that that is a fair way to treat thousands of long-standing loyal staff who have gone into work at weekends and on bank holidays to keep the company they love going?

Siobhain McDonagh: I think I will move on—[Interruption.] I do not accept what the hon. Lady and others have brought to the House today. I do not accept what the hon. Lady has said. The 90-day consultation has taken place. If they reject their new contract, they will be sacked for another substantial reason.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Lady has put it on record for people to see.

Margot James: I think I will move on—[Interruption.] I do not accept what the hon. Lady has said. The 90-day consultation period ended with Marks & Spencer still having a few people not agreeing to the contract, and those people are still employed by Marks & Spencer. Also, 99% of employees have accepted the contracts. The other point that I would contest in what the hon. Lady accuses Marks & Spencer of doing—[Interruption.] I make no apology for trying to set the record straight. Hon. Members are free to speak in this House without fear or favour, and I make no apology for trying to set the record straight when I feel that a company, or perhaps an individual, in the outside world has been maligned unfairly. I make no apology whatever for that.

I shall conclude my remarks, because time is marching on. The national living wage has brought immense benefits to the workforce in this country and I am absolutely delighted that, for the first time in many years, wages have risen more than twice as much for the low paid as they have for those on average or higher pay around the country. That is to the credit of companies and workers alike, and for that reason among many others, I am delighted to support the whole notion of the national living wage.

4.22 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to this important debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this time from the Backbench Business Committee. I am grateful for the many examples that she and others have brought to the House today. I do not in any way seek to diminish those examples when I say that the people I am about to speak about would probably bite your hand off if they were offered the terms and conditions that the hon. Lady and others have described. I want to talk about the pay levels and employment practices on offer to our seafarers that are all too common in the maritime sector in the United Kingdom.

The recent detention of two vessels operating in the North sea—the Malaviya Seven and the Malaviya Twenty in Aberdeen and Great Yarmouth respectively—lifted the lid on payment and employment practices that are frankly scandalous, and from what I hear from many of those who work in our merchant marine in the North sea, this is just the tip of the iceberg. These practices are much more widespread and there is much more to be found. To put it bluntly, if these practices were happening on dry land, enforcement action would be taken immediately. They would not be tolerated. Because they are happening at sea, however, they are somehow out of sight and out of mind. I hope that when the Minister speaks to representatives of HMRC, she will impress it upon them that that attitude has to change.

I want to bring to the House’s attention the situation regarding two ferries that run lifeline freight services to my constituency from Aberdeen. The Helliar and the Hildasay are operated by Seatruck Ferries, but they are on contract to Serco, which operates the Scottish Government-funded lifeline ferry service. The RMT tells me that in 2014, when it last had sight of the contracts, some 20 ratings on the two ferries were being paid £3.66 an hour. The ferries’ journeys start in Aberdeen and finish in either Orkney or Shetland in the Northern Isles, but the company is able to pay that rate because it is deemed to be operating wholly outside UK waters. It beggars belief. It is wrong not only for the ratings, most of whom are probably Estonian nationals, but for UK seafarers whose jobs and livelihoods are being undercut by such employment practices. It is outrageous that a taxpayer-funded service is being operated in a way that undermines the opportunities of British seafarers to get working conditions and employment rates to which they would otherwise be entitled.

Seatruck Ferries recently said:

“Seatruck Ferries operates in a worldwide shipping market where NMW”—
Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The time limit is now four minutes.

4.27 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Thank you, hon. Friend. The Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this important debate. The fact that the time limit that has now been applied is testament to how many Members wanted to speak.

I will talk about the national minimum wage, in particular its impact on young workers over 18-years-old. A fair society should recognise hard work and contribution. In doing so, it should ensure that work pays a decent wage in return. In this country, it should be about more than just getting by; people should be paid enough to get on and do well.

I took exception to the living wage brand being hijacked by the Government, who tried to claim it for what is basically a discounted living wage that is not enough for people to live on. Putting that cynical, cheap ploy to one side, now that the brand has been adopted—some commentators say “stolen”—by the Government, it is important that a genuine fist is made of trying to ensure that it is enough for people to earn a decent living. That will be good not only for workers and their employers, but for society and the Government, too.

To realise that ambition, we must move to a real living wage. Much has been said about the Government needing to honour their existing commitment, but even that does not go far enough. A real living wage by today’s standards is about £10 an hour. I commend the work of the Living Wage Foundation and our trade unions, and I am proud to be a member of the GMB, particularly at this moment in time, when it is leading the “£10 Now” campaign. That is about recognising the real cost of living and the real cost involved in people having a decent lifestyle as a result of their hard work and toil.

The situation is even more unfair for the under-25s. Younger workers can be working alongside someone slightly older who is doing the same job in the same location, for the same employer and with the same commitment, yet they can be paid between 3% and 23% less. That cannot be fair or just in a decent world. The current estimate is that 3.4 million people are in exactly that circumstance, where they are working for less than the national living wage.

I want to bring to the Chamber my own experience. I have always been a hard worker, and when I left school I worked as an apprentice during the daytime and as a delivery driver in the evening. On Saturdays, I worked in a newsagent’s, which I did just so that I could run a car. My shock came when we discovered that our first son was on his way. I was earning very little at the time, but it was enough to get a mortgage, which we did. I was 21 when Jack came along. I was 21 and paying a mortgage and council tax; paying for utilities; and trying to keep the food stocked up in the fridge and the cupboards. Under the current proposals, in today’s world, I would be earning far less than somebody doing the same job with the same expenditure, and I cannot see how that can be right or fair. If it was not for the University of Manchester taking me on as an apprentice technician, I would be in that same circumstance today, as many of my friends and family have found themselves.

I would like to believe that in a just society and a fair society today they can achieve far more than just getting by. I wish to read out an important quote, which comes from Rebecca Pitchford, a young 20-year-old retail worker. She says:

“Because of my age the Government says I can live on £5.55 an hour whilst my colleague earns £7.20 an hour for doing exactly the same job. Rent and living expenses are exactly the same, so why aren’t the wages?”

Let us give Rebecca the answer. More importantly, let us give Rebecca and the 3 million people like her a solution and pay them a decent wage.

4.32 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): First, thank you, hon. Friend. The Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for securing this debate and for her exceptional work on this issue since the Government’s national living wage took effect. She has campaigned tirelessly for the rights and wages of workers, to make sure companies do not renege on their contractual commitment to the rate of statutory pay by reviewing and diminishing their staff benefit and reward structures.

She has held firms such as B&Q and Marks & Spencer to account. They have tried to offset the cost of the national living wage by cutting Sunday pay, bank holiday pay, company pension contributions and unsocial hours. I echo the words of the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne): that is not “in the spirit of the law.”

I commend my hon. Friend’s unshakeable belief in following through on this undertaking, persistently raising this issue inside the Chamber and relentlessly campaigning outside the House. I am sure the thousands of affected workers would also like to thank her, too.

Many of those people are in my constituency. This week, I received a letter from a constituent, Lynn, who works for Marks & Spencer and has done so for 34 years.

These are her words:

“I feel I have been blackmailed and threatened to sign the form to accept the small pay-out because I was told I would not receive this; also they would change my contract and that would mean I...”
would have to start working Sundays and work all bank holidays. No matter what they say the loyal long service worker has been sold down the river and threatened.”

Lynn clearly feels that she has been forced into an “agreement”, despite the warm words from the Minister, and that she has been blackmailed—those are her words, not mine. It is disappointing to hear reports like this from employees of stalwarts of our high streets, which really should be striving to be seen as exemplar employers. While all this has been going on, Marks & Spencer has reported a 4.3% increase in profits; the total is £689 million in the UK and £1.1 billion internationally this year alone.

As we are all aware, this week is Living Wage Week—the real living wage, as determined by researchers at Loughborough University, not the Government’s misnamed “national living wage”, which is a new national minimum wage, no more, no less. The real living wage is good for the individual, good for the family, good for society and good for business itself. Two thirds of employers who pay the living wage—the real living wage—reported a significant impact on recruitment and retention. They also saw a sharp fall in absenteeism. More than 80% reported improvements in staff performance. It was my privilege yesterday to visit the living wage event held in Parliament and to talk with many small and medium-sized enterprises about the benefits of having living wage status and what it brings to their businesses. Large companies such as Marks & Spencer could learn a lot from them.

The former Prime Minister said that the genuine living wage was “an idea whose time has come”, and yet here we are, six years on of Conservative rule, and it has not been implemented.

James Berry: Instead of making tendentious points about the name of this living wage, perhaps the hon. Lady will explain why her party’s manifesto at the last election did not include bringing the living wage up to the level of the London or national living wage?

Liz McInnes: I believe that my party’s manifesto championed a decent standard of living for all workers. [Interruption.] I will have to go back to the 2015 manifesto and see what we actually said and get back to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Do not think that we will be debating the manifesto.

Liz McInnes: I have no intention of debating the manifesto, but I appreciate the warning.

The time is now upon us to commit to making work truly pay. I hope that the current Prime Minister will not fall short on her promise to make “Britain a country that works for everyone.” I will give the last words to Lynn, my constituent. She wants the Government to step in and stop Marks & Spencer, as well as other companies, reducing their employees’ rates of pay via benefits just so they can pay the national living wage. I hope that this Government will rise to this challenge and do the right thing for Lynn, and for workers up and down the country. What “party of the workers” could refuse that?

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) on bringing this debate forward.

We are celebrating Living Wage Week, which is about raising awareness of the vital need for all those who go out to work to earn enough to meet the cost of living and to applaud those employers who have signed up to this scheme, committing to pay their staff the living wage. Of course I am talking about the real living wage of £8.45 an hour, which has just come into effect. It is not the same as the UK Government’s “pretendy” national living wage, which is set at £7.20 for people over the age of 25.

The national living wage relates to average earnings, not living costs. Therefore, it should not be called the living wage and it is disingenuous to call it so. By contrast, the living wage is calculated according to the basic cost of living and so takes account of adequacy of household incomes for achieving what everybody should aspire to have—an acceptable minimum standard of living. It cannot be too much to ask employers to pay their staff literally enough on which to live.

James Berry: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Patricia Gibson: I will indeed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Let me explain. The Minister had probably 18 minutes in which to speak. The Front-Bench speeches are down to six or seven minutes. It is not fair. It is up to Patricia Gibson whether she wishes to give way.

Patricia Gibson: On the basis of what you have just said, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will proceed so that others can get in.

In the light of all that I have said, how can we not conclude that the UK Government’s so-called national living wage is not a living wage at all? By contrast, the Scottish National party Government have long championed the payment of the living wage and they see the real benefits to our economy of treating working people much more fairly.

Paying the real living wage—not the pretendy one—makes economic sense for employers. It increases productivity, reduces staff absence and reduces staff turnover. All the research on this area bears that out. Some 80% of employers felt that their staff delivered better quality work after paying the living wage and 75% of employees agreed that their work improved after receiving it. We know that low pay is a driver of in-work poverty, so with around 20% of Scotland’s workforce still earning less than the living wage, there is still much more work to do. However, the UK Government’s so-called national living wage also creates problems because it discriminates against people under 25. People aged 24 do not have a cheaper lifestyle than those aged 25, so the distinction is false and spurious.

The real living wage pays all workers over 18 years old the same pay. I am proud that Scotland has the highest proportion of employees paid the living wage—some 79.9%. A job should help people out of poverty, not keep them there. It is important that we understand that a real living wage makes a real difference to the lives of
working people. It ought not to be controversial that
workers earn a wage that they can live on. I wish the
UK Government would take a leaf out of the Scottish
Government’s book. The Scottish Government have
long championed the living wage, understanding that it
is important and it is a matter of social justice that
people earn a minimum standard of living, not a wage
pretend national living wage, as the Government try to
tell us.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The
two Front-Bench speakers have nine minutes each.

4.40 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a
pleasure to take part in this debate. I congratulate the
hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain
McDonagh) on securing the debate. I know that she has
been a tenacious campaigner on the issue and has
contacted many MPs about it. I am pleased to support
the motion in her name.

It has been an excellent debate. I look forward to the
hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)
telling us on a future occasion what the pay rates of the
butlers and housekeepers are in Mr Morrison’s castle. I
want to pick up on some of the themes in the speeches
of the hon. Members for Halifax (Holly Lynch) and for
Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) in particular.

As others have said, the UK Government’s national
living wage is not a living wage, but an additional tier of
the national minimum wage. The national living wage
does not benefit those under 25, who still face the lower
rates of the national minimum wage. I view that as
direct discrimination against young people. Differential
pay for young workers is not acceptable and our long-term
aspiration should be that the living wage becomes the
norm across the board. There is no justification for
paying people in their early 20s 25p an hour less than
those who are younger.

Let us take the example of two workers in a fast food
outlet, one aged 17 and the other aged 37. If they are both
flipping hamburgers in that fast food outlet, surely
they should be paid the same, but they are not. One is
paid £4 an hour and the other is paid £7.20 an hour.
Because of the way the Government have done the
calculation and added the living wage to the national
minimum wage, for someone who enters employment at
16 or 17 and stays with that employer, it will take eight
or nine years to qualify for the highest minimum wage
rate. No employer in the UK would keep a worker on a
grade for that length of time before they reached the top
of their pay scale. This is clearly discrimination against
young workers, and it is one of the reasons why today’s
young generation is likely to be poorer than generations
before them.

There has been no adequate explanation in this debate
of why the living wage applies only to those aged 25 or
more. More importantly, as the hon. Member for Mitcham
and Morden pointed out, the real issue is the enforcement
of minimum wage rates. The National Audit Office
confirmed last year that 209,000 workers were not paid
the national minimum wage. That is a scandalous figure,
and the pernicious practices of rogue employers who
are trying other means to get round paying the living
wage should be investigated. These are multinational
companies that should be paying their tax and are not
doing so. That should be addressed.

I support the comments of the right hon. Member for
Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who made the
very serious point that somehow seafarers are exempt
from the living wage and the national minimum wage. I
hope Members will consider signing early-day motions 231
and 516 on this subject. The information that I have
from the RMT is that seafarers are paid less than £2 an
hour, which starkly illustrates the issue.

The so-called national living wage relates to average
earnings, not living costs, and therefore cannot be a
living wage. It is calculated according to the adequacy of
household incomes for achieving an acceptable minimum
living standard.

In Scotland the SNP continues to set the bar on fair
work. On Monday 31 October the First Minister welcomed
the new rate of the real living wage of £8.45 an hour,
which will benefit thousands of workers in Scotland,
and urged more Scottish organisations to sign up as
accredited living wage employers. Peter Kelly, director
of the Poverty Alliance, said on Monday:

“Today’s announcement of the new, increased, Living Wage
rates of £8.45 brings a welcome pay rise to thousands of workers
across Scotland. 430,000 people in Scotland still earn less than the
wage they need to get by. This is an increase on the number of
people struggling since last year’s figures. That’s why it’s more
important than ever for leading employers to join the growing
movement of businesses and organisations that are going further
than the government minimum and making sure their employees
earn enough to cover the real cost of living.”

The knowledge exchange project, carried out by the
University of Strathclyde and the Living Wage Foundation,
has found that implementing the real living wage encourages
businesses to re-evaluate their approaches to staffing
and payment, leading to more effective and efficient
working patterns. Implementing the real living wage
encourages businesses to re-evaluate their business model
and increases skills development, staff performance,
job satisfaction and staff retention.

According to the New Economics Foundation, one study
found that when employers transitioned to paying
staff at least the real living wage, they experienced
significantly lower rates of staff turnover, reputational
benefits, a reduction in sick leave, better motivated staff
and an increase in productivity. A massive 80% of
employers felt that their staff delivered better quality
work after paying them the real living wage, with 75% of
to employees agreeing that their work was improved.
One major UK firm found that paying contractor staff
the real living wage cut staff turnover by half, saving it
£75,000 on the value of a single contract.

There are now more than 624 Scots-based living wage
accredited employers paying the real living wage, and
the SNP Government have set a target of 1,000 by
autumn 2017. I want to thank those living wage employers
in Glasgow South West, including housing associations,
Money Matters, Ypeople, Lifelink and Agripa, which is a
local printing company.

4.47 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I welcome
the Minister to the Front Bench. I congratulate my hon.
Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain
McDonagh) on her fierce advocacy of the living wage,
and on exposing those who seek to avoid their responsibilities, rightly naming and shaming employers such as Marks & Spencer. She is right that I have met employees in my constituency who are affected in exactly the same way, so I think that the Minister—I say this with respect—will have to be careful not to sound like an apologist for Marks & Spencer. I hope that tomorrow Marks & Spencer will hear this debate and do the right thing.

Fifteen years ago I was a founding member of the drive for the living wage, together with what was then TELCO, which became London Citizens, which became Citizens UK. I ran the organising department of the Transport and General Workers Union. In what was a moral alliance with TELCO, faith groups and community organisations, we organised and won the living wage for 3,000 cleaners in Canary Wharf and the City of London, tackling the obscenity of cleaners on the minimum wage cleaning the toilets and boardrooms of those who earn millions.

Next, I am proud to say that I organised the first ever strike in the history of the House of Commons to win the living wage. I have in my office to this day a cartoon from The Times showing, in a wonderful parody of Black Rod at the state opening of Parliament, a cleaner with a mop in one hand and a bucket in the other, knocking down the doors of this place. We won the living wage.

I am proud to say that Birmingham, the city I represent, is now the most advanced in the country. We have 4,000 directly employed people on the living wage, with cleaners such as Elaine Hook saying it has transformed their lives. She said:

“I can now afford the little things in life that have made such a difference to my life.”

The same is true of care workers, with the council now rolling out the living wage and saying, “Why should we pay the least to those who care for those we love the most?” There is also a whole raft of private sector employers, such as National Express and Aviva, that have said that the living wage is right for them and right for their business.

I say with respect to the Minister, who talks about what we “can’t afford”, that the evidence we now have after 15 years of experience shows that the living wage is good for workers—of that there is no doubt—because it ends working poverty and contributes to the dignity of labour. It is good for the employer and for business in terms of productivity, flexibility and reduced staff turnover. It is good for the family, and I remember one of the Canary Wharf cleaners saying to me, “Mr Jack”—he kept calling me Mr Jack—“previously I had to sleep on buses between jobs. I did between three and four jobs to make ends meet, and I bitterly regretted it because I never saw my kids.” It is good for the local economy, because if the low paid get an increase, they do not salt their money away in Swiss bank accounts; they go out and spend it locally. And it is good for the national economy, because the workers concerned pay more tax and claim less in benefits. Quite simply, it is good for our society, and this is about what kind of country we want to be. The kind of country we need to be to succeed in the 21st century is one with an economy that is not based on low pay and low productivity, but that recognises, crucially, that how we treat workers is vital to the quality of the service they provide and the product they produce.

Three issues have been identified today. First, my hon. Friend was absolutely right to talk about the industry of avoidance, which ranges from bogus self-employment in the gig economy—now exposed by the successful GMB test case last week—to companies such as Fujitsu that should know better. Right now, there is a dispute there involving my union, Unite. Last year, Fujitsu made £85 million in profit; it paid one director £1.4 million. Yet it has been resisting the living wage.

Now that it has started—finally—to concede, it has been doing exactly the same as Marks & Spencer, cutting bonuses for the employees concerned. It is a case of now you see it—the living wage—and now you don’t. People lose so much money that they end up worse off. When my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) said that this was about greed, she was absolutely right.

Secondly, we need to tackle age discrimination. Together with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), I met those young GMB workers earlier this week. It is simply wrong that someone who can join the Army or get married is not entitled to the living wage until they are 25. That is unacceptable age discrimination, and it needs to end. My hon. Friend quoted Rebecca, and the point that came out of that discussion was that this was somebody who was coming out of university and who had built up all sorts of money they had to pay back, including tuition fees, but who was not able to earn the living wage. In addition, there was Thomas, another young worker. He said:

“In the end I had to take more jobs and borrow money from my family which has now put me into debt, all because my work is apparently worth less than if I was born before 1991.”

That is unacceptable age discrimination, and we are determined to stand up for the young people of this country and their entitlement to the living wage.

Thirdly, this is about the real living wage. With respect to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry), who may have had a damascene conversion on these issues, I remind him that the Conservative party resisted the national minimum wage every step of the way, year in, year out. The conversion is welcome, but I need to put history right.

The real living wage matters because, sadly, not least as a consequence of Government policies, we have had a low-wage, low-investment, high-debt economy, in which productivity has stagnated. We have an economy of grotesque contrasts. Andrew Haldane of the Bank of England has exposed that, whereas 30 years ago £10 in every £100 would go on company dividends, the figure is now £60 to £70 in every £100, with labour and investment being increasingly squeezed. Average weekly earnings are not expected to return to pre-crash levels until 2020, following the longest fall in wages since world war two. Between 2007 and 2015, wages in the UK fell by 10.4%—a drop equalled only in Greece. According to the ONS report, 3.9 million people in the UK are in persistent poverty. The Trussell Trust gave out more than 1 million three-day emergency food supplies through a network of 424 food banks in 2015-16.

Working poverty is quite simply shameful in 21st-century Britain. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) was absolutely right to say
that we are determined not only to enforce the existing national living wage properly and to prevent employers from taking other money away from employees who enjoy it, but to fight for a higher national living wage and ultimately to win. That is why we have set out a more ambitious approach than the Government of £10 an hour by 2020.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to all the hon. Members who have stood up today for the working poor and a proper living wage. I also pay tribute to the whole range of players from the public and private sectors who have been involved nationwide over the past 15 years, but in particular to Citizens UK. Had it not been for its work, we would not be where we are now. It has made and changed history with an idea that is in our blood in the Labour party, which is that no one should endure working poverty. The dignity of labour is paramount, and that means a wage with which someone can enjoy life with their family and kids, without having to scrimp and save, which has been the case for too long, and which still endures in this country.

4.57 pm

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the Backbench Business Committee and all the Members who have contributed to this great debate. This, in essence, is about fairness. If someone is promised a pay rise, they should receive a pay rise. There are employers—large, well known, respectable companies—that are simply not doing that. They can dress it up whichever way they like, but that is what is happening, and we as politicians of all parties need to call it out. The vote for Brexit was in part a cry from people that life is not being fair—that they are not having the opportunity to get on; that there is no connection between productivity and pay; and that a fair day’s work does not get a fair day’s pay. If we are to keep our country together and get everybody to act as one, we need to ensure that that happens, and it will happen only if we do what we say and take on all those companies, well known or otherwise.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises Living Wage Week which began on 31 October; believes that the use of the introduction of the national living wage to drive down conditions and take-home pay is against the spirit of the law; calls on the Government to close down those loopholes which make this possible; and further believes that any move to reduce the value of the national living wage to a level below the promised £9 per hour in 2020 is unacceptable.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered.

That the First-tier Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) Fees (Amendment) Order 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 928), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(Michael Ellis.)

Care Homes for Older People

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

4.59 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I am delighted to have secured this debate about the regulation, inspection and complaints process for care homes for elderly people. Let me be clear about something from the start. In half an hour on a Thursday afternoon, it is not my intention to tackle the huge, overarching issue of social care provision in this country.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9 (3)).

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

Peter Heaton-Jones: Members on both sides of the House know that social care provision is one of the biggest challenges that we face, but that debate must be for another day. My debate is about something very specific: the way in which privately run care homes for elderly people are inspected and regulated, and the process that exists to raise complaints when relatives believe that something is going wrong. This is vital for two reasons. First, we are talking about nothing less than the welfare of vulnerable elderly people. Secondly, I believe it is possible to make significant improvements at relatively little cost, and I hope in the next 15 minutes or so to set out why.

Before I do so, I will provide a little background. Why have I taken up this cause? Three years ago, while I was still a mere parliamentary candidate, a local resident in North Devon told me a very moving story. John Barrass’s mother, Vera, a former resident at a private care home, died in 2009. Mr Barrass had serious concerns about the care she received in the final weeks of her life, and believed that a poor system of inspection, regulation and complaint handling was a significant factor. Specifically, he believed that a mechanism did not exist to allow him satisfactorily to raise his concerns about shortcomings in his mother’s care.

I do not seek to reopen that case, and neither does my constituent. In the years since his mother died, Mr Barrass pursued all avenues available to him to have her case fully investigated. He invariably hit a brick wall, so he began to look beyond his individual circumstances to examine instead the more general question of how care homes are inspected and regulated, and how complaints are dealt with. He came to the conclusion that the system was simply not fit for purpose, and he met me to explain why. That was the birth of a long campaign, which reaches another milestone with this debate.

Tomorrow marks the first anniversary of my raising this matter in Westminster Hall on 4 November 2015. Since then, I believe we have made some progress, but much of what I said at the time still stands today. What I have to say is based largely on a report produced by Mr Barrass, which I have here, called “Care means care, Justice in care”. The report was created in memory of his late mother Vera who, in Mr Barrass’s words, “spent a nightmare in care,” which led him to spend seven years producing this document.
I have helped Mr Barrass to take this to the very top. The previous Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the former Member for Witney, received a copy and arranged a meeting with the former Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt). I am delighted to see him in the Chamber and pay tribute to him for the work that he did in this area, and for his sincere engagement with me and this campaign. Recently, the document was sent to the current Prime Minister. I quote Mr Barrass’s letter to her:

“I cannot bring my mother back or stop what I have agonisingly had to witness and go through, but I can try to stop this happening to others”.

I agree. An estimated 300,000 older people currently live in some 15,000 registered care homes in England. The average age of those people is 85, and a significant proportion suffer from dementia. They are largely without a voice, and that needs to change.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign and his persistence with it. The matter affects many of us in this House; my constituents are still concerned about Orchard View care home and the issues that arose out of that. Does he agree that we have to learn from the mistakes of the past? We should have proper inquiries and proper investigations, and we should learn from those mistakes.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend; I am sure that the Minister will have heard his comments. We need to move forward, and when things go wrong, we need to put them right.

The body responsible for the regulation and inspection of care homes is the Care Quality Commission, with which I have worked closely since launching this campaign. I believe that it is listening, but there is still considerable room for improvement. Today, the CQC’s website tells us that of the 448 care homes it has inspected most recently, a staggering 200—45%—have been rated as “requires improvement” or “inadequate”. There is no reason to believe that those figures are unrepresentative of the sector as a whole, which means that more than four in 10 of all establishments are not reaching the required standard. Surely the purpose of any system of inspection and regulation must be to drive up standards. The figures alone suggest that the current system simply is not working.

In June 2013, the CQC issued a consultation called, “A new start”, which proposed a whole new approach to inspection across all sectors, including care homes. That approach was confirmed in October 2013, and the new inspection regime was introduced. I broadly welcome it, but there are still huge question marks over its implementation. The original deadline for carrying out an initial inspection of all care homes was February 2016. However, in July 2015, the National Audit Office found that just 9% of care homes had been assessed because of a shortfall of about 160 inspectors. Not surprisingly, the original February 2016 deadline to complete the work was not going to be met, so it was pushed back to this October—last month. Yesterday, when my office asked the CQC for an update, it told us that it is “committed to completing the first phase of the comprehensive inspection programme by March 2017”.

In other words, this new deadline—the third—is more than a year later than the original target.

I absolutely recognise that the CQC faces many challenges. The managers and inspectors are working hard, but my point is that we would not accept a delay of more than a year in the inspection of NHS services, so we should not accept it just because we are dealing with private sector care homes. We are still talking about vulnerable people who might well be suffering. We need to get a grip on this problem and to challenge the CQC to undertake its inspection programme in as timely a way as possible. I seek to be helpful when I say, “Let us, as a Government, work with the CQC to ensure that it delivers what seems to me to be such an important inspection programme without further delays.”

That brings me to another major area of concern: the CQC’s role in handling complaints, and indeed the role of myriad organisations and authorities involved in this area. What can someone do if they fear that an elderly relative is being neglected or mistreated, or is not being given the right healthcare? What can they do if they fear that their relative’s life might even be in danger, and the care home provider has dismissed the complaint or will not even listen to it?

When things go wrong, and a member of the public needs to make a complaint against a care home, they are faced with a bewildering labyrinth, and that needs to change. The website of the CQC, the body responsible for the regulation, says that the CQC “is unable to investigate individual complaints” against providers. To many people, that will seem odd.

Many people are in care homes commissioned by their local authority, so that offers another route for making a complaint. However, the complaints procedures in many local authorities—I speak as a former councillor in a unitary borough—consist of several layers, shall we say, and such a system does not lend itself to a speedy resolution. Not all people in care homes are in places paid for by local authorities, but even if they were, their complaint may fail to get through those many layers.

Should such an individual go to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman? Again, no, because that is another brick wall. The ombudsman says:

“By law the Ombudsman cannot look into complaints about privately funded healthcare.”

There is another possibility, which is an organisation called the Independent Healthcare Sector Complaints Adjudication Service. The ombudsman’s website states that people “may”—I stress that word—“have the option” of going to that organisation, which covers some independent healthcare providers, but if the healthcare provider of the person concerned is not one of them, they are stuck.

In a nutshell, the system is bewildering. It lacks accountability and transparency, and would leave most people confused and frustrated. People simply do not know who to turn to when they are worried that something is not right. Given that level of confusion, let us imagine what the situation is like for people whose elderly relative is in a care home. They are worried and in an emotional state, yet still have to deal with an incredibly complex complaints procedure.

I believe we could solve this quickly and cheaply, simply by requiring every care home to display a standard notice clearly setting out the complaints procedure with
the relevant contact details. It seems incredible—I use the word in its literal sense—that that is not already mandatory. I ask the Minister to investigate with the CQC the possibility of producing such a notice. Something that simple really could make a huge difference.

As for the longer term, in the document I referred to earlier, my constituent John Barrass is convinced that we need one body only to investigate, regulate and handle complaints about care homes, with that being its one and only purpose. That suggestion deserves serious consideration.

A further problem thrown up by this entire process has been highlighted effectively by an organisation in Devon—not in my constituency, as it happens, but elsewhere in the county—called Your Voice Matters. I pay tribute to its founder and director, Jenny Moore, who has done very good work in this area. I have met her a number of times, most recently yesterday, in preparation for this debate. The issue in question is the growing number of cases where relatives are banned from care homes simply for complaining. This can take the form of a complete ban or of restricted visits; in some cases, it has even been known to lead to the eviction of the elderly person from the home.

Your Voice Matters has launched a good campaign called “Rights 2 Speak Up 4 Care”. It has identified the issue succinctly. In a nutshell, it is that private care homes are defined in law as ultimate landlords. Quite simply, they can decide who goes on the premises and who does not. Families who raise concerns are threatened or banned. As I have said, sometimes residents are evicted, and a private paying resident is not protected under any legislation—not the Health and Social Care Act 2012 nor the Human Rights Act 1998, for example. A private care home also has the power to prevent health professionals from visiting the home. Let us think about that for a moment: a care home has the power to stop doctors and nurses going into it to visit its clients.

Something has to change. Recommendations from Your Voice Matters include legislation to close those loopholes and to give protection to all residents and their families, a review of the relevant legislation and an independent panel to offer a fair hearing should a private care home want to place restrictions on a family member or a resident. Your Voice Matters has been working on this for some time, and literally yesterday—just yesterday—there was something of a breakthrough. In the run-up to this debate, there has been a flurry of media activity, with TV and radio programmes covering the issue. Yesterday, the CQC published new guidelines on its website. Care homes will now be required to keep a register of any occasions when relatives are banned or people are evicted. I am not convinced that that goes far enough, but it is a start, and I will keep working with Your Voice Matters to ensure that we go further.

That campaign group has made a number of other recommendations that I will mention briefly, as they have considerable merit. It suggests there should be better protection for whistleblowers who wish to highlight shortcomings in homes, as well as better training, with a mandatory training course for all those who work in or manage care homes.

I have referred several times to my constituent Mr John Barrass. He has carried out an investigation lasting seven years but, as he says, he is only one of the 65 million little people in the UK—those are his words—who are very rarely listened to but whose experiences, and what they have witnessed and suffered, should not be ignored any more. He says:

“I just wish we had been raising these issues before mum had this serious stroke, and helped to change the care system. Maybe, just maybe, my mother would not have had to go through what she did and my father and I would not have gone through 11 years of suffering.”

I want to leave enough time for us to hear from the Minister, but let me be clear about one further thing before I conclude. Many fantastic caring professionals work in care homes. They do their jobs on low wages and care brilliantly for many people. The owners and managers of many care homes are committed to providing the best possible service. They face all the pressures of running a small business and the costs that that entails. There are good managers, investigators and staff at the CQC. I do not wish to criticise those who are doing well, but I do seek to call out those who need to do better.

I should briefly mention the many organisations and individuals who contacted me in advance of the debate. I am unable to name them all, but I have received good representations from the British Medical Association, Independent Age, Hootvox, which is an organisation looking at ways to measure the success or otherwise of care homes, and many other individuals and constituents.

I end with this thought. The problem is that we have a growing number of cases in which care homes are simply not coming up to scratch. I have spent many days, weeks and months on this, discussing it with my constituent John Barrass and the Your Voice Matters campaign group in Devon. Whenever we discuss it, we keep coming back to one thing. I said exactly this a year ago in Westminster Hall and I say it again now: this is not about processes, systems or organisations, but about people—people who do not have a voice in a system in which, let us remember, four in 10 care homes fail to reach a satisfactory standard on the CQC’s measures. That means that some vulnerable, sick and elderly people are not being properly cared for. That cannot be right. I look forward to hearing from the Minister. We have to do something and we have to act now.

5.17 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): With the permission of my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and the Minister, I am grateful to be able to take just a moment to speak.

I am here to encourage both my hon. Friend and the Minister. I was very moved by the debate last year, which chimed with my sense that something needs to be looked at in the care system. The stone in the shoe or the grit in the oyster often brings something necessary to the surface. I am grateful for what my hon. Friend said about the progress made by the Department and the CQC in continuing to work to ensure that care homes realise their responsibilities to others. I encourage him and the Minister because great work is done in care homes. However, there are still dark corners on which the light must be shone. To protect families, it is essential that the things brought out by my hon. Friend’s campaign and the media in the past couple of days must come to an end to give the public confidence. I have every confidence that the Minister and her colleagues will continue to work on this and that we will be reassured.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) for securing this important debate. He is a doughty campaigner. As he said, it is almost a year to the day since he last raised the issue in the House and he has taken much action since. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend. The Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), for his work. He has laid great foundations for the work we are doing now. As he said, care homes play a vital role in our society, but the decision to move into a care setting or place a family member there can be exceedingly stressful. It is essential that the public have confidence in the quality of care that they seek. Poor care, abuse and neglect are completely unacceptable at all times, whatever the cause, and we are determined to stamp them out.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) is right that we must learn from the mistakes of the past. That is why in October 2014 we introduced a tougher CQC inspection regime based on the five important questions that matter most to people: are services safe, caring, effective, well led and responsive to people’s needs? It is why we brought in a new criminal offence of ill treatment and wilful neglect, and why a fit and proper person test has been introduced to ensure that providers do not recruit directors who are known to have been responsible for unacceptable standards of care.

The CQC can and does take robust action against providers that breach regulations and standards, from issuing warning notices and fines, through imposing conditions on a provider’s registration, to cancelling that registration altogether. During 2015-16, the CQC took 901 enforcement actions in adult social care, ranging from warning notices to prosecuting providers.

The CQC now has specialist inspection teams, which under the leadership of the chief inspector of adult social care include people who have personal experience of care. Inspections are required to take into account the views of service users and their families. Furthermore, the great majority of its adult social care inspections are now unannounced. The timing of inspections is based on assessment of provider risk, but their frequency in usual circumstances can be expected to be at least every 24 months.

The CQC’s fundamental standards that registered providers are required to meet include two very important registration requirements. The first is the duty of candour, which requires providers to be open with service users about all aspects of their care and to inform service users where their failures are in their care. The second is, as I have said, a fit and proper person requirement for directors that ensures that accountability for poor care can be traced all the way to the boardroom if necessary. These standards now give the CQC an effective power to prosecute providers in cases where a failure to meet standards results in avoidable harm or a significant risk of such harm.

Jeremy Quin: Will my hon. Friend or one of her ministerial colleagues kindly meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) specifically on that point in relation to Orchid View? We would be most grateful if that was possible.

Nicola Blackwood: I am absolutely sure that the Minister with responsibility for this area will do so.

The point I am making is that together we now have a more robust inspection standard and the fundamental standards to ensure greater accountability for providers of unacceptable standards of care. The CQC now has a much stronger baseline of information that tells us about the quality of adult social care across the country. From October 2014 to the end of July 2016, it inspected and published ratings for more than 16,000 adult social care services, out of a total of some 25,000.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon highlighted, I recognise that delivering this more comprehensive inspection programme has taken longer than originally planned. The National Audit Office itself acknowledged that the CQC would have been hard pressed to have been aware of the amount of work needed to complete the initial round of inspections and re-inspections. The CQC acknowledged that it experienced early difficulties in recruiting sufficient inspectors with the right speciality and calibre. These problems are now resolved and the Department agreed with the CQC that it should consider the quantity and rigour of inspections, and having the staff to carry them out, as the most important issue. The CQC is now on track to complete adult social care inspections by their published deadline of March 2017. We are closely monitoring its progress towards that delivery date.

We should be pleased that this work is starting to bear fruit. We have seen improvements since the observation that

“four in ten establishments are not reaching a required standard.”

At the end of July 2016, 72% of all adult social care services were rated good or outstanding, compared with 60% when the CQC published its findings in the 2014-15 “State of Care” report. The 2015-16 report shows that about 70% of care homes were rated good or outstanding, and 2% of all adult and social care services were inadequate at the end of July 2016, compared with 7% when the CQC published its last report. These quality ratings matter, because they are an important starting point for driving improvements. They are an encouraging early sign that this is happening.

The regulation of adult social care has three key roles to play: to identify poor practice and to take action to protect service users from the risk of harm; to encourage improvement by identifying areas of weakness; and to highlight and share good practice and success. All those roles are built on the foundations of effective use of data and rigorous inspection. The evidence shows that this is now happening. I would like to quote the National Audit Office, which confirms that the

“CQC has made substantial progress since 2011 and its new regulatory model strengthens the way it monitors and inspects hospitals, adult social care providers and GPs.”

We are by no means complacent, and we recognise the work that needs to be done to ensure that we are exactly where we want to be. Care homes look after some of the frailest people in society, and if there is a possibility of a home closing or of other serious problems, it is completely understandable and reasonable for the families to have the reassurance that it will end up in the position they want it to be.
In recognition of the wider social care challenges, the Government are giving local authorities access to £3.5 billion of new support for social care by 2019-20. Since April, councils have been able to introduce a new social care precept, enabling them to increase council tax by 2% over the existing thresholds. This could raise up to £2 billion a year for social care by 2019-20. In addition, from April 2017, the spending review will make social care funds available for local government, rising to £1.5 billion by 2019-20 and to be included in the better care fund. Together, the new precepts and the additional better care fund contribution means that social care spending will increase in real terms by the end of the Parliament.

Funding issues, however, are no excuse for poor care or—worse—abusive treatment. It does not cost any more to treat someone with kindness and compassion and to respect their dignity.

Finally, I want to address the important concerns around complaints that have been raised this evening. I know my hon. Friend is due to meet the Minister with responsibility for community health and care shortly on this matter and that he has previously met the Minister with responsibility for care services, the local government ombudsman and the CQC’s chief inspector. On the earlier point that he raised, I want to assure him that there is a statutory requirement for care home providers to operate a complaints system. Care homes are held to account for the effectiveness of the complaints process by the CQC.

We know from discussions we have had that the system is not working perfectly. Despite the progress we are making, we still hear too many stories that highlight people’s real concerns about quality and safety in social care—and we are determined to do better. We also hear that those receiving care or their families can be reluctant to make a complaint for fear of the consequences, especially if it is about a care home where someone is living. Indeed, only this week there was a story on the “Victoria Derbyshire” show about care homes banning relatives who made a complaint about the quality of care. We find that completely unacceptable. It is right that people and their families should feel able to raise concerns without fear of reprisals.

Ministers and the sector are looking to develop an adult social care quality strategy that will look at complaints and the culture of why people fear speaking up, as well as how we can improve the system to make it easier for them to complain. Care homes must have a complaints procedure, and if people are not happy with the response they receive the local government ombudsman can investigate complaints on their behalf. It is clear that everyone—not just the Government, and the CQC in its role as regulator, has a part to play in bringing about improvements in the quality of adult social care.

The Government are committed to improving the quality of social care, because care homes play a vital role in our society. There are many good and even outstanding homes, and we need to encourage them to share best practice so that it becomes the norm everywhere. We know that while a robust regulation and inspection regime is a key part of encouraging providers to improve, it is not the only influence. Sustained quality demands a commitment from everyone—from staff and providers to commissioners, funders and regulators—to make adult social care the best it can be. We are committed to working with all parts of the care system to make sure that we achieve just that, because our constituents deserve no less.

Question put and agreed to.

5.28 pm
House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[M R Speaker in the Chair]

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163).

The House divided: Ayes 1, Noes 45.

Division No. 77] [9.34 am

AYES

Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob

Tellers for the Ayes:

Philip Davies and

Mr David Nuttall

NOES

Argar, Edward

Atkins, Victoria

Barclay, Stephen

Barwell, Gavin

Bone, Mr Peter

Bottomley, Sir Peter

Brennan, Kevin

Brown, rh Mr Nicholas

Duncan, rh Sir Alan

Eagle, Maria

Eustice, George

Furniss, Gill

Gamier, Mark

Gibb, Mr Nick

Greenwood, Margaret

Griffiths, Andrew

Hancock, rh Matt

Heald, rh Sir Oliver

Heaton-Harris, Chris

Heaton-Jones, Peter

Hinds, Damian

Hollern, Kate

HollowBone, Mr Philip

Hopkins, Kris

James, Margot

Jones, Andrew

Jones, Gerald

Kirby, Simon

Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma

Mackinlay, Craig

Maskell, Rachael

Mowat, David

Pawsey, Mark

Penning, rh Mike

Pound, Stephen

Rees, Christina

Shelbrooke, Alec

Smith, Henry

Spellar, rh Mr John

Stewart, Rory

Stuart, Graham

Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa

Wallace, Mr Ben

West, Catherine

Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

Phil Wilson and

Jeff Smith

Question accordingly negatived.

National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill

Second Reading

9.49 am

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I have raised this matter in the Chamber on a number of occasions, not least when I presented a ten-minute rule Bill to ban unpaid internships on 13 May 2014. Despite a Division being called by the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), that motion passed by 181 votes to 19. Today, I am delighted, having been drawn in the private Members' Bill ballot, to introduce a Bill that makes provision for the remuneration of individuals undertaking workplace internships.

The Bill will bring an end to a practice whereby employers regularly flout national minimum wage legislation by taking on unpaid interns to work for up to a year, often in London, for no pay but with the promise of experience and the hint of a future job. Unpaid internships are the acceptable face of unpaid labour in modern Britain today and should have no place in a meritocratic country that aims to work for the many, not the privileged few. This is a Bill to stop young people being exploited by those who gain from their unpaid endeavours. It sets about bringing an end to a new rise in the class society that means only those from a wealthy background can gain a privileged leg-up with an unpaid internship in their chosen profession. This is a Bill to level the playing field for many of my constituents in Elmet and Rothwell, who, like many parents across this country, cannot afford to pay for their child to work for up to a year with no pay.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Will my hon. Friend set out how many of the current unpaid internships he objects to will become paid and how many will just not happen at all?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's intervention, and if he will bear with me I will give several statistics as I go through my speech.

The starting point of today's debate must be to define what a workplace internship is. It is already illegal under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 to employ someone without pay, so, in principle, unpaid internships should not exist—but they clearly do. Let us look close to home as a starting point. A quick scan of w4mp, the work for an MP website, shows about 22 MPs advertising for unpaid interns, outside the politics and parliamentary studies scheme. As we are talking about 13 Conservative MPs and nine Labour MPs, among other parties, this is not a left-right argument; this practice takes place across this House, and it sends a message to businesses across the UK that exploiting the will of young workers is acceptable.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What evidence does my hon. Friend have that employers, including MPs, are seeking to flout the legislation? Are they not simply trying to give some valuable experience to young people at a sensible time in their lives?
Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will elaborate on the argument as I move on, but a job is a job, and if work is adding towards an output, it should be paid for.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend’s Bill does not distinguish between people who advertise seeking somebody to work for them on an internship and those who ask, “Can I come into your office to do some work experience?”, but I wonder whether he does. There is a massive difference between those two things, but the Bill draws no distinction between them.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which is that there is a difference between people advertising for unpaid internships and people coming in on a voluntary basis because they have taken the initiative to see whether they could do something. However, that still removes opportunity for others, because there may not then be the need to advertise for a paid role. I will address that issue later, because I have specific points to make about the voluntary side of this and the charity sector.

Many of the interns in this place, much like those who work in private businesses, are undertaking day-to-day activities similar to those that many of us employ staff members to help us with in our offices. The fact of the matter is that, despite your commendable efforts, Mr Speaker, working in Parliament has often been a matter of “Who you know, not what you know,” and young people who are eager to work here and with the financial means to do so for free will find that there are Members taking on interns and refusing to pay at least the minimum wage for their labour.

I remember an exchange of views in this Chamber with the former Member for Bolton West. When I pushed her during an Opposition day debate on the national minimum wage on whether she would accept unpaid internships, her response was

“I have volunteers—I do not call them interns—and I have no money in my budget to pay them.”—[Official Report, 15 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 350.]

When Members have access to a staffing budget of more than £140,000 a year, it beggars belief that a Labour Member would stand in this place and defend a practice of workplace exploitation with a claim that she could not afford to pay her staff. Imagine the outcry if large multinational firms across the UK stopped paying their workforces because of similar arguments. It is the exploitation of this “volunteer” loophole that means young people are not being paid for their labour.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Is this not a very important point? What about those people who work for charities on a voluntary basis, sometimes doing so for decades?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend, who has pre-empted another section of my speech. If he will bear with me, I will address that issue specifically.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) may well have pre-empted another section of the speech, but I hope that when my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) gets to it he will set out where the Bill makes any reference to volunteers, as that is what matters.

Alec Shelbrooke: I can answer that now. If my hon. Friend looks at clause 1, he will see that it defines what the internship is, not what it excludes. I will come on to deal with that in more detail.

Mark Pawsey: Does my hon. Friend have any evidence of interns having to sign contracts of employment setting out the same terms and conditions as for those people who would receive a wage? My understanding is that the majority of internships are provided on the basis of a gentleman’s agreement, and if the intern decides that they do not want to proceed, they are not subject to the same disciplines as would apply to an employee.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am delighted at that intervention and those from my other hon. Friends, as they show that we can often assess all these arguments with the same eyes, and I will deal later in my speech with every point that has been raised so far. This all shows a certain amount of probing from colleagues.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is talking about clause 1, which says that these provisions will apply to people who undertake “regular work”. Will he tell us what the definition of “regular work” is, because the Bill contains no such definition?

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend moves us on to a point about specifics and definition. To get the Bill to this stage, we have opted for a more general approach. If, as we hope, the Bill gets to Committee, we could get more into that detail, because he makes an important point. It is difficult to pin these things down, but this is where these loopholes occur and it is how they are exploited. In response to what my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) said, I am going to elaborate on the Bill and how, for example, the Institute of Directors showed a neat way to get around this issue.

This Bill simply brings interns in line with all other workers in terms of the right to be paid for their work. Importantly, it also removes the requirement for employers to pay national insurance, as is the case for apprenticeships, and therefore offers incentives for businesses to take on paid interns.
The loophole I refer to is regularly exploited, not only in this place, but in the world outside—a starting point is the IoD. Until shortly after the First Reading of my Bill, the IoD’s website included a helpful “model internship agreement” for its members, which said:

“This letter confirms the arrangements relating to your unpaid internship. The purpose of this letter is to describe reasonable expectations between us. This letter is not intended to be or give rise to a legally binding contract between us and your internship may be terminated at any time by either of us.”

I now come to the important part, which said:

“You will have no fixed hours of work, but we hope that you will usually be able to attend during our normal office hours on Mondays to Fridays.

We expect you to perform the activities and achieve the learning objectives to the best of your ability”.

That last bit is fair enough. It continued by saying that interns should

“maintain appropriate standards of behaviour at all times.”

Again that is fair enough. It continued:

“We also expect you to comply with our rules, policies, procedures, standards and instructions.”

Learned Members in the Chamber will know that all contracts are agreements, but not all agreements are contracts. That loophole is exploited by some companies that issue internship agreements under which it is expected that an intern will perform workplace activities, but that refuse to pay a wage because no formal contract of employment is signed. Under current legislation, an intern is not explicitly described as a worker and can therefore be exploited for their labour, but the law offers employers protection via this loophole.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend sets out the contents of that letter. Would he prefer that there was no such letter from employers to those taking up work experience in an office? The arrangement would then be subject to different interpretations by both parties.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend used the term “work experience’; I will come on to that later. The direct answer to his question is yes, I would rather that this form of contract did not exist; I would rather that there was no need for it to exist, and that things moved on.

Mr Nuttall: The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, which we have to deal with daily, has its own model intern agreement. Has my hon. Friend had the opportunity to compare the terms of its agreement with the one to which he referred?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend; I must admit that I have not looked into that. Perhaps he would like to elaborate on that later, when he comes to speak—at length, I am sure.

As I said at the start of my speech, this practice takes place in the House, and that sends the message to businesses across the country that we think that it is acceptable. I do not think it is, which is why I introduced the Bill. The broader societal issue is that internships are becoming a prerequisite for graduates looking to access their chosen profession. As was reported by the Social Mobility Commission, over 30% of newly hired graduates had previously interned for their employer. That rises to 50% in some sectors. According to the Sutton Trust, 31% of graduate interns are unpaid. Most of them are unable to claim jobseeker’s allowance or universal credit, as they are unable to accept offers of work by virtue of their internship.

That point about the ability to claim welfare is important and goes to the heart of the problem. The IoD’s model internship agreement establishes that companies expect their interns to be present during office hours; how can interns then be expected to look for work, let alone attend interviews? Although legally and technically an intern is able to leave, in reality the threat of a poor reference or the perception that leaving would create a bad impression and lead to the intern not being hired by the company at the end of the internship make that worthless. Even those who go on to work for a company are often unwilling to speak out, for obvious reasons, but when young people have taken employers to employment tribunals they have been successful; companies such as Sony and Harrods have been required to pay their former interns’ unpaid wages. However, is it right that the issue should have to go before an employment tribunal before people are paid?

I would describe myself as a trade unionist. Indeed, I was a member of the Unite union before it became more interested in internal Labour party politics than representing the interests of working people. The ordinary man or woman in the workplace is the reason I believe that representation is vital. We forget that a lot of people do not have the courage to put their head above the parapet. They may well fear for their livelihood and not want to be a target.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alec Shelbrooke: If my hon. Friend bears with me one moment, I will come to him. I just want to build on this important point about representation in this place. All of us in this Chamber forget that we are very thick-skinned people. We have to be, given the nature of the job. We take abuse from many directions, all the time.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Sometimes from our own Back Benchers.

Alec Shelbrooke: Indeed. We have to stand up for our convictions and put our case, as I hope I am doing today. Many people in this country do not have the ability to do that, and that is why representation is important. As MPs, we should stand up for people. We can argue in this Chamber about the value of a Bill, but it is important to introduce this kind of Bill and to look at how we can change the law, because many people out there simply cannot find the courage to stand up and do so. That is why we have trade unions and Members of Parliament.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I make the rather pedantic point that unpaid interns cannot be fearful about their livelihood, because they are not earning their living.

Alec Shelbrooke: But they can well be fearful about their future livelihood.

The campaign group Intern Aware has long campaigned to encourage those who have had internships and experienced this problem to speak out. It remains the UK’s leading campaign group against unpaid internships, and I thank it for its support over the past three years.
It is right that we today attempt to give people the protection they need against hugely wealthy organisations such as Harrods and Sony. We must not forget that this is about young people submitting themselves to a process to increase their social mobility, and that their entire future is reliant on its success. It is fundamentally a Conservative principle that the state should encourage, and do all that it can to allow, people to better their lives. Successive Conservative Governments have used their time in office to allow people the social mobility to move forward, whether it be through the 1819 cotton mills and factories Act, the Factory and Workshop Act 1901, the Factories Act 1961, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, policies such as right to buy and Help to Buy, universal credit or the national living wage. The key to social mobility is ensuring that everyone, regardless of background or affluence, has the same opportunities in the working world. The driver of many of our reforms and policies is, and has been, the idea that hard work should always be rewarded.

Philippa Davies: I understand that my hon. Friend wants to level the playing field, but his philosophy appears to be that he would rather that no one had an opportunity than that somebody had it. That sounds to me; I will give my justification for my stance later in my speech. I am sure that he has the grace to let me explore the argument.

Only those from wealthy backgrounds are able to do unpaid internships without fear, and in years to come that will mean that those who have the most influence on our society come from an elite minority. To quote from the Government’s May 2012 report on social mobility by the right hon. Alan Milburn, progress has been made on moving away from the top jobs being the preserve of those with elite backgrounds. The civil service is quoted as an example. In 2009, 45% of senior civil servants had been privately educated, but by 2012 the figure had been reduced to 27%, with 18% having attended comprehensive schools, as I did.

In other professions, there have not been similar reductions. The legal profession, in which, as we all know, would-be barristers have to do a pupillage, is dominated by those whose parents could afford to send them to private school. The last figures that I had, from 2012, showed that 15 of the 17 Supreme Court judges were privately educated; 26 of the 38 lords justices of appeal attended private schools; and 43% of barristers went to fee-paying schools. It should be borne in mind that only 7% of the population are educated at private schools. The foreword to the 2012 “Fair Access to Professional Careers” report by Alan Milburn said:

“The exponential growth in internships in the professions adds up to a profound change in the British labour market. Access to work experience is a new hurdle that would-be professionals now have to clear before they can even get onto the recruitment playing field. Given their centrality to young people’s career prospects, internships should no longer be treated as part of the informal economy. They should be subject to similar rules to other parts of the labour market. That means introducing proper, transparent and fair processes for selection and reasonable terms of employment, including remuneration for internships.”

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and for holding this debate. I had to do a six-month pupillage that was completely unpaid, and there travel and other costs. I was able, through part-time work and the help of my parents, to withstand that. Does he accept that the Bar has tried to mend its ways? It now funds the first six months of pupillages, in the hope of attracting people from a whole range of backgrounds, and not just those who can afford it.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful for that intervention, because it shows that these practices are slowly being addressed. In this debate, and through further legislation, I am seeking to accelerate that process. My hon. Friend makes a very important point: people want to address the fact that perhaps the talent pool is being restricted to those with financial means, because they want to pick from the largest pool.

In an updated report two years ago, Mr Milburn said that if nothing improved for interns, the Government should act to ban unpaid internships. From what I can see, there has been very little improvement. It is therefore my sincere hope that the Social Mobility Commission’s soon-to-be published “State of the Nation” report will formally support this Bill and urge a ban of long-term unpaid internships in the United Kingdom. As my wife put it to me when we were discussing this Bill, it is ridiculous that for those who do not take an academic route through education and instead opt for an apprenticeship there is provision within legislation requiring payment of a national minimum, yet for those who choose higher education we offer no such legislated assistance when they undertake an internship.

The Prime Minister said in her recent conference speech that we must start believing in “the good that Government can do”. A Government should act to “tackle the unfairness and injustice that divides us”. A Government should step up, right wrongs, challenge vested interests, take big decisions and do what it believes to be right,

“because that’s the good that government can do… To stand up for the weak and stand up to the strong… and to put the power of government squarely at the service” of ordinary working people.

To re-emphasise exactly why unpaid internships are locking those with abilities out of the jobs market, I would like to share with the House a job advert that was recently shown to me. The advertisement offered a £45,000 base salary, plus bonuses, for a graduate trainee trader/asset manager. It sought only those who had a first-class degree from a Russell Group university with A grades, including A-level maths. So the application process appears to be open to anyone academically able, until one gets to the line that states “we would expect you to have a minimum of 6 months internship within a front or middle office role.”

Once again, a fantastic career opportunity for someone who demonstrates clear academic ability is limited by the affluence of their parents. This highlights a disparity of values in society today. We want our children to believe that their opportunities are endless as long as they have the ability and aspiration to reach them, yet the arms of the state are not acting successfully enough to ensure that this can happen.
I have often said that I want the children of today to feel that their future opportunities are a bit like going on “The X Factor”. I do not know how many of those here were fans but I am a big fan. I have seen the way through to the live shows, having proven their talent, only to be told by the management that they have to do unpaid internships to get a chance. They should have been paid for their work. Without an income, they are expected to pay rent, travel and living costs to remain in the contest.

It is not just the professions that I referred to earlier that exploit the labour of young people with unpaid internships. As reported in The Mail of Sunday last weekend, a high-profile left-wing political activist in the fashion industry seems to advertise for unpaid staff on terms that can only be described as utter hypocrisy. While researching for this Bill I came across live advertisements for volunteer internships with Vivienne Westwood. I stress that these are volunteer internships being advertised. That answers the point that my hon. Friends made earlier and answers the question of whether there is a difference between advertising for an internship and people offering their services as volunteers. With an advertisement for a volunteer internship, we are getting into murky water.

The ads explicitly state that “The roles will be for approximately 5 days a week, Monday to Friday, although as this is a voluntary position we are looking for a candidate with a can-do/proactive attitude to work”. It seems that Ms Westwood has not learned the lessons of previous media exposures. Despite a previous exposé in 2011, it appears that this fashion house has carried on exploiting young people by taking on more unpaid internships. What makes this all the more unbelievable is that these internships are for live advertising. It is not just the professions that I referred to earlier that exploit the labour of young people with unpaid internships.

This is 2016, yet in Britain today a young person has to ask their employer to consider paying them for the hours that they have worked. It is a scandal. It is a disgrace. It is a flashback to a Victorian Britain that most of us in the Chamber would not have thought believable. The more we investigate this shoddy workplace practice, the more it feels like the opening of Pandora’s box, and the worst culprits seem to be the high-end business, fashion or entertainment industries.

Following the First Reading of this Bill, a young man wrote to me about his experiences as an unpaid intern in the entertainment industry. He said he felt that taking an unpaid internship was the only way to get his foot in the door of this notoriously difficult industry. The internship was both enjoyable and worthwhile in terms of the contacts that he made during his time there, meeting people he would otherwise not have met, had he not taken it. However, he felt as if these opportunities, which he assumed would be a part of the day-to-day job, were more of a reward for doing repetitive menial tasks.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend is giving valuable examples of the experience of young people. If his Bill were to proceed, how many youngsters does he think would be denied the very opportunities that he has spoken about?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am keen to make progress because in the course of my speech some of my hon. Friends’ points will be answered. I will come to the statistics that I have.

The young man who had worked as an unpaid intern was, for the most part, a spare pair of hands, and he noticed that there were several other interns and a high turnover rate. He called it “a conveyor belt of interns”. Working unpaid meant that he had to undertake extra paid work to support himself, as my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) said she had done during her pupillage. The young man often worked a seven-day week, daytime and evenings, in order to make ends meet. Although he says it was an invaluable experience, he feels that the industry believes that interns should be delighted and grateful that they are there, and that the privilege of being among wealthy and successful people negates the need for pay. That is an appalling abuse.

I raise these examples to align this Bill not with the politics of envy, but with the basic principles of fairness and equal opportunity. There are many former interns who recognise that their wealthier backgrounds gave them internships that were not available to their less fortunate peers. One former intern in the arts told me that she took a year out in her third year of study at a London art college to take some internships to improve her CV and therefore her chances of securing a job after her studies. In one year she interned for five different businesses, none of which paid her. She felt that she had enough financial support from her parents and that she was able to take this year out unpaid. She admits, however, that some of her peers missed out on this opportunity through fear of not being able to fund it. She notes that there was a stark difference in the ability of those who had taken a year to intern and those who went straight into their final year of study. It is almost a pre-requisite to succeed in the art world.
Alec Shelbrooke: Of course, in words at least, professional organisations representing the industries that I have commented on so far say that they are opposed to unpaid internships. The Arts Council, UK Music, Creative Skillset and the Royal Institute of British Architects all support a four-week limit on unpaid work experience but, as we have seen from the case studies that I have described, these are just statements, not policies.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is being very generous. He mentions the four-week time limit that some consider justifiable. Unfortunately, his Bill does not set any time limit. That is one of its flaws.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am exceptionally grateful for that intervention from my hon. Friend, who has identified what I initially wanted to do with this Bill. However, my advice from the Clerks and from people who understand legal matters far better than I do was that it would be full of so many legal loopholes that it would be worthless. We therefore moved to the current position. I hope that it is a matter that we could explore in much greater depth in Committee and reach a simpler and more robust legal definition. My hon. Friend has touched on an important aspect. I am a mechanical engineer, not a lawyer, so I have to take advice from those who are more learned.

Philip Davies: Don’t listen to lawyers.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am sure my hon. Friend speaks from experience.

The disparity between words and action is starkly highlighted by the Institute of Directors, which describes itself as an organisation that opposes long-term unpaid internships yet publishes a model contract for members to get round minimum wage legislation.

I come to some of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) made it clear that the legal profession recognises that point as well. Essentially, creating a system in which only 4% of people feel they would face no financial restrictions to entering unpaid employment could mean that a talent pool of 96% of the rest of the market remained untouched.

It is well recorded that private schools in this country give a marvellous and privileged education to those lucky enough to attend, but in every job I have worked in so far it has been apparent that those with state educations have been just as capable as, and in many cases more capable than, those whose parents were rich enough to send them to a fee-paying school. I do believe there is a role for private schools in the UK, and I believe in parental choice, but it is also the responsibility of the state—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are all extremely interested in the views of the hon. Gentleman on fee-paying education and other, related matters. Given that he has been addressing the House for 33 minutes with an eloquence worthy of Demosthenes, to which we have been listening with rapt attention, and in the light of the fact that the Bill contains three substantive clauses and another formal clause on the short title, commencement and scope, I wonder whether he is going to proceed relatively soon to a description of one or other of the three substantive clauses. I am very eager to hear what he has to say on those important matters.

Alec Shelbrooke: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for your advice. Indeed, I am merely painting the landscape in which the Bill is meant to encourage change. The Bill makes an important argument: we in the House today cannot ignore the fact that some people, who can come from the poorest backgrounds academically and who can work their way up to be on a level pegging, can then see their opportunities cut off because others are getting around an Act that was brought in specifically to protect them. That is what the first clause of the Bill addresses. It describes what a workplace internship is:

“For the purpose of this Act, a workplace internship is an occupation or profession.”
What I hope I have done so far this morning is highlight how some companies are getting round that and how the existing National Minimum Wage Act allows that.

I think we would agree that defining the “volunteer” unpaid internship at Vivienne Westwood as involving working regular hours from Monday to Friday would mean it fell within the scope of the Bill, which would protect somebody who “undertakes regular work or provides regular services in the United Kingdom”.

I think that gets to what I hope to achieve in the Bill. I am simply trying to close down loopholes in legislation that has been very useful in protecting people in the United Kingdom.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Does clause 1(b) not create a loophole in the Bill? If somebody took on a person to do unpaid work for the purpose of being a harmless drudge, to quote Dr Johnson on lexicographers, they would be entitled to do so, because it would not be for the purposes set out in subsection (b).

Alec Shelbrooke: The important distinction that needs to be drawn is that we are talking about deliberate, advertised, unpaid internships. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) made an important distinction between people who come along, volunteer and want to work, and people who advertise for somebody to come and work for them for six months. When we see the perversion of the two words put together—“advertising for “volunteers” to come and work—it is a bit like saying, “You need to go on a suicide mission, men. Who will volunteer?” and then telling them, “You’ve volunteered.” That makes a mockery of things.

I want the Bill to really bring these issues to the fore. I have heard the interventions from my hon. Friends. Some very reasonable points have been made, but that does not mean that we should turn away from doing anything, and I hope the Bill will start us on the route of trying to address this issue.

Mr Nuttall: If my hon. Friend’s concern is the advertising of these positions, why is that not mentioned anywhere in the Bill?

Alec Shelbrooke: The Bill refers to exclusions—people who are on internships that are part of an accredited degree course and who are “of compulsory school age”—and to employers not making national insurance contributions. That shows that a system is being developed whereby there are exemptions to the Bill, and there are opportunities for people to come along and do exactly the things outlined by my hon. Friend, but that does not mean that this should be a catch-all for everybody. Having been able to put those exclusions in place, we should be able to move things forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) asked me very specifically why a period of 28 days was not included. As I said, that was my initial intention, but the legal arguments I have heard say that that approach was full of just as many loopholes.

I very much hope that more learned colleagues than I may be able to explore those arguments further today. That could be taken on in Committee.

Mark Pawsey: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alec Shelbrooke: I will give way very briefly, but I am conscious that you want me to make some progress, Mr Speaker.

Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend makes a distinction between businesses that advertise their internships, and young people speculatively applying to organisations. If there is a restriction on advertising, how are the young people to know which businesses would welcome their application?

Alec Shelbrooke: I will come to some good examples of businesses that are very successfully making this system work in the way it should. It should be borne in mind that 66% of internships are paid; we are talking about the bottom third, which are very exploitative.

Let me come on to some of the arguments that have been made. Why exclude students? It is simply because they have access to student finance—it is a level playing field. Why exempt people of compulsory school age? I think everybody would agree that work experience makes an important contribution to people at a very early age.

Probably—I do not think I am alone in this—a majority of people in this Chamber did at least one week’s work experience during their schooldays. That first step into the world of work is important.

Urban Outfitters is already within the scope of this Bill. It says:

“You must be a student at a UK university undertaking an accredited placement year as part of your sandwich year”.

That shows that the Bill does not reduce opportunity—that someone can work within the exemptions I have put into it, which ultimately bring fairness to it.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend is painting a grand picture. We fully understand your concerns, and I agree with them—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me say very gently to the hon. Gentleman that I have not expressed any concerns at all—the debate goes through the Chair. The hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) may well have done so, and to judge from experience he may wish to dilate further on them before giving the hon. Members for Bury North (Mr Nuttall), for Shipley (Philip Davies) and for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), and possibly the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) himself, the opportunity to do so. It is important to be accurate about these matters.

Craig Mackinlay: I am grateful for the advice, Mr Speaker.

I fully understand my hon. Friend’s concerns about wealthy families being the only people who can possibly afford to send their children into internships, but let us get back to what happens in this place. Under the alternative that he suggests, a volunteer contract would be illegal, so we would still have a vast number of youngsters applying to all of us, but some sort of statutory barrier would be saying that that was now impossible. I do not think that is the route we wish to take in allowing youngsters a new experience in life. My experience of the internships I have had—I am one of these evil intern users—is that they have a lot of latitude to do as they please in understanding the work. This Bill would put barriers in the way of good experience.
Alec Shelbrooke: I would like to probe my hon. Friend further—I more than welcome another intervention on the average time people work with him for, and what areas they work in. I hope that he will contribute later and outline those specific areas.

As we have heard, there are companies out there that do, to my mind, do the right thing. Those who worry about opportunities being closed down should take note of the approach of some of these major institutions. KPMG provides internships that last three years, allowing new graduates to hone their skills in a wide range of areas such as technology, tax and pensions, marketing, and human resources. Throughout the graduate scheme, interns receive continuous training and development, as well as opportunities to study for industry-accrual qualifications. All its programmes provide a competitive salary. As it says on its website, “we are proud of our culture—it’s one that recognises hard work, encourages new ways of thinking and embraces diversity and inclusion.”

I repeat—“recognises hard work.” It is a company that values everyone who works not just for it, but within it, and recognises that everybody makes a contribution to its ongoing success. There is no question about whether the company can afford to pay interns, but a recognition that if it did not, it would not get the best people the market has to offer.

At Ernst & Young, graduates can join many different programmes in many different locations. The company operates across four service lines: assurance, consulting, tax, and transactions. Each has a graduate programme carefully developed to help hone strengths, build skills, and broaden knowledge as an all-inclusive business environment. It should be made clear that there is no guarantee of a job at the end, and the positions are described as internships, but these are companies with extreme wealth that would not cut out any opportunities because they feel there is a reward to be had for contributing to the company, whatever is done. AXX’s placement programmes have a basic salary of at least £26,000, with a £1,500 increase and performance-related bonus at the end of each completed placement within the business area. It has a two-year programme comprising three eight-month placements, with a particular focus on learning and development through on-the-job learning. Microsoft offers a 12-month paid internship programme where interns receive on-the-job coaching, mentoring, and personal development.

These multi-billion-pound companies do not see the need not to pay people based on the allure of working for a big name. They value their interns in the same way as they value their employees, and not all our constituents who are not lucky enough to be in such a fortunate position have access to it. As such, I am pleased that the Bill makes an exception for those placed in internships as a requirement of a higher education course. However, these small businesses are a small minority when compared with the number of unpaid internships that require a university degree to work for free.

Social mobility in the UK is lower than in many of its European neighbours. While I welcome the rhetoric from this Government regarding enhancement of social
mobility and the promotion of meritocracy, substantive action needs to be taken. The Institute for Public Policy Research has found that the current system of unpaid internships “excludes young people who come from less well-off families. This helps to ensure that certain industries and professions continue to be dominated by people from particular backgrounds, perpetuating inequality and dampening opportunities for social mobility.”

Even more concerning is the finding from the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, which found that unpaid internships, particularly with more well-known companies, often hold greater esteem than paid placements. While this is all well and good for graduates whose families are able to offer them financial support on completion of their higher education course, those from less privileged backgrounds do not have the luxury of being able to work for free. For too long, the fields dominated by the elites have been run as a chumocracy.

In this day and age, one’s prospects should not be dependent on one’s family connections. However, the current system of unpaid internships perpetuates inequality and reinforces the lack of meritocracy in the workplace. It is important to note that although unpaid internships are prevalent in London, this is not only a London-centric issue. My constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill is 50 minutes away from Edinburgh. Capital cities have a tendency to become power centres, with opportunities for the elites but not the masses. Despite my constituency’s proximity to Edinburgh, the differences in opportunities are so stark that, to many, Edinburgh may as well be a million miles away. I spoke to a constituent recently whose case exemplifies the challenges that young people face, particularly those from less advantaged backgrounds, due to the prevalence of unpaid internships and the expectation that graduates will undertake an internship without pay before being hired for even an entry-level position.

My constituent asked not to be named. She graduated from a Russell Group university with a first-class honours degree in the field in which she wished to work. She began looking for work in Glasgow and Edinburgh, as both are well connected to my constituency by train. However, she quickly found that nearly every relevant job listing required several years’ worth of experience, despite being advertised as entry level—also something that the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell touched upon and illustrated so well. In fact, the only entry-level jobs that my constituent found in her field of work that did not require years of experience were unpaid internships, and even then they required at least an upper second-class honours degree as a prerequisite.

My constituent’s personal circumstances meant that she was unable to live with her parents. As such, she was unable to undertake an unpaid internship to gain the relevant work experience, because she needed to earn an income to pay for food, rent, utilities and the like. She eventually found herself forced to apply for jobs at call centres and coffee shops, and ultimately accepted a job for which she felt she was far over-qualified, in a field unrelated to her degree.

Unfortunately, my constituent’s story is far too common, and it represents both a waste of human resource potential as well as the entrenchment of a system in which someone’s family background determines the opportunities available to them—shocking in 2016. However, in this Chamber today we have the chance to change that and to help to create a system whereby we all have the same opportunities and those who excel do so through merit. I commend the Conservative party for trying to implement that change.

I welcome the contributions made today in support of requiring interns to be paid a wage. Requiring a company to pay a wage to interns would open up scores of opportunities for those from less privileged backgrounds. It would also mean that those professions traditionally dominated by the elites could be opened up to all, helping to create a level playing field, whereby social mobility is enhanced.

It is not right that we deny so many the opportunity to choose their own path in life and it is time that we rectified that inequality. I fully support the Bill promoted by the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell.

10.42 am

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is a great pleasure indeed to follow the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell)—I hope that I have pronounced his constituency correctly.

Philip Boswell: “Cryston.”

Mr Nuttall: I apologise.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I tell my hon. Friend that Scottish National party Members are very willing to give advice on how their constituencies are pronounced and that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) spent some time helping me to get it right?

Mr Nuttall: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention and I think that I need to go for those lessons, too, because I always dread having to follow the hon. Gentleman in case I am asked to pronounce his constituency. I think that I need to sign up for that course.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on presenting this Bill this morning and on coming third in the ballot for private Members’ Bills. As he made clear when he introduced the Bill, and to be fair to him, he has spent years campaigning on this issue; I think that is fair to say. That in itself demonstrates his determination on this issue and I know that he is introducing the Bill with the very best of intentions. He listed this cause as one of the six points in the plan that he put before his own electorate, so I do not criticise him in any way for introducing the Bill.

To be honest, I agree with my hon. Friend on the other five points that he put forward: focusing on jobs, action on dementia, supporting schools, calling for affordable family homes and tackling crime. Unfortunately, I have to say very gently to him that I do not support the Bill, and I will set out why. I hope that he will accept that I do so in a spirit of helpfulness.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am genuinely pleased at the number of my colleagues who are here today, perhaps to argue against the Bill, but this is a subject that, step by step, I have pushed further up the agenda and there are many issues to be explored. I say in all honesty and in all
[Alec Shelbrooke]

integrity that I sit here today to hear the points that he has to make, and I will listen very carefully to what he has to say.

Mr Nuttall: I am very honoured to hear that; to be perfectly honest, I am humbled to hear it, because I am not sure that my speech is worthy of that. Perhaps I have gleaned one or two things from looking at my hon. Friend’s Bill that will genuinely help. I will certainly be able to draw his attention to one or two details, which will assist him.

Philip Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that we and our hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) are on exactly the same side when it comes to social mobility and wanting to extend opportunities, but that we feel that the Bill will restrict opportunities rather than enhance them? If I can catch your eye later, Mr Deputy Speaker, I might be able to suggest to my hon. Friend how we can work together to extend opportunities, as we both seek to do.

Mr Deity Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I am sure that you will be able to catch my eye, Mr Davies, subject to the length of Mr Nuttall’s speech.

Mr Nuttall: I have not started my speech yet, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I entirely agree with the brief point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). What I want to do in making the points that I will shortly make is to do all I can to try to increase the number of opportunities available to young people. My genuine fear is that, rather than enhancing those opportunities, the unintended consequence—I entirely appreciate that this is not the intention of my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell—is that what is likely to happen if the Bill reaches the statute book is that those opportunities will be reduced.

I accept that at first sight the purpose of the Bill—the idea that by passing legislation we can somehow ban unpaid internships—might superficially appear to be a good idea, but I am genuinely concerned that on closer scrutiny we will find that that is not the case.

My hon. Friend cited a number of examples as evidence to support his contention that young people are being taken advantage of—I think that is a fair summary of what he said—because the national minimum wage legislation apparently does not apply to young people undertaking internships.

My hon. Friend has been lucky not only because he came third in the ballot for private Members’ Bills, but because this debate has fallen during Living Wage Week, which was marked by a debate in this Chamber only yesterday. This House has therefore had two consecutive debates, sandwiched on either side of yesterday’s Adjournment debate, on the minimum wage. Living Wage Week, which runs until Saturday, is a nationwide celebration of 3,000 employers who have voluntarily committed to ensuring that employees and sub-contracted staff working on their premises earn a real living wage.

I draw the House’s attention to that because, as my speech will show, the whole problem with the Bill revolves around how we define contracts of employment and a minimum wage. I should say at the outset that, personally, I do not like the word “intern”. It is not a word with which I was familiar previously. I did not grow up with it and I do not like the word “internship” either. I think that it is an American import—I can see hon. Members nodding in approval. I will be honest about it: I have nothing against our friends on the other side of the Atlantic, but I grew up with the term “work experience”, which I think more accurately describes the issue under discussion.

When I was at school, there was a work experience scheme called Trident. I do not know whether any colleagues have been on a Trident course. I do not think that I was able to secure a Trident placement—I certainly do not recall having had the opportunity to go on one—but many people I was at school with did have such an opportunity. Under the scheme, someone approaching the end of their compulsory school life was given the chance to go on a three-week placement with a local employer, but it was work experience, not an internship.

I want to consider, much as my hon. Friend did in promoting the Bill, how we arrived at this problem. Last Friday, we considered a Bill that was 18 pages long. This Bill is just two pages long. Unfortunately, it does not contain the answers to the problem it seeks to address. Indeed, it raises more questions than it provides answers.

The whole problem with the Bill revolves around the definition of three key terms: “work”, “internship” and “work experience”. Someone who is deemed to be a worker will have the right to be paid the national minimum wage—that is already the position. The regulation of wages in this country can be traced back to the end of the 19th century and then to the Trades Board Act 1909. After the second world war, wages councils arrived on the scene, with the Wages Council Act 1945. At their peak, 3.5 million people were covered by those councils. After they were abolished in 1993, pressure began to build for a new national scheme of a minimum wage. Despite the view of the Confederation of British Industry, which said in 1995 that “even a low minimum wage would reduce job opportunities and create major problems for wage structures in a wide range of companies”:

two years later the Labour party included in its manifesto ahead of the 1997 general election a commitment to introduce a national minimum wage. To be fair, immediately upon election, it set about putting that into law, and the national minimum wage that we have today is still governed in primary legislation by the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, while the most recent secondary legislation is the National Minimum Wage Regulations 2015.

Section 54 of the 1998 Act gives the key definitions of employees, workers and contracts of employment. Subsection (2) states categorically that “contract of employment’ means a contract of service or apprenticeship, whether express or implied, and (if it is express) whether oral or in writing.”

Subsection (3) defines a worker—again I quote so that we have it absolutely accurately—as someone “who has entered into or works under...a contract of employment; or...any other contract, whether express or implied and (if it is express) whether oral or in writing.”

Subsection (4) for Internships (Workplace) Bill

National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill

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Subsection (4) for Internships (Workplace) Bill

National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill
party to the contract whose status is not by virtue of the contract that of a client or customer of any profession or business undertaking carried on by the individual”.

Workers are already, under the existing law, entitled to be paid the correct minimum wage if they are part-time, casual labourers, including even someone hired for one day, agency workers, workers and home workers who are paid by the number of items they make, trainees, workers who are on a probation period, disabled workers, agricultural workers, foreign workers, seafarers and offshore workers. Apprentices, who are separately provided for, are entitled to be paid a special apprentice rate, if they are either under 19 or 19 and over but in the first year of their apprenticeship. Apprentices over the age of 19 who have completed their first year are then entitled to be paid the actual minimum wage, depending on their age.

The Government set out the national minimum wage after considering the advice of the Low Pay Commission, an independent advisory, non-departmental body, sponsored by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The commission is comprised of a chairman—currently Sir David Norgrove, a former private secretary to Margaret Thatcher—and a further eight low pay commissioners, who are drawn from a range of employee, employer and academic backgrounds and who make recommendations to the Government on appropriate pay.

Failure by any employer to pay at least the national minimum wage to those whom I have listed as employees is an offence and in breach of the national minimum wage legislation. To secure compliance with the legislation, the Government have introduced a naming procedure. In August, they published a list of 197 companies that had failed to pay one or more entitled workers the national minimum wage. Between them, those companies owed a total of £465,291 in arrears, and the most significant example was £99,541.98 owed to 30 workers. The naming and shaming scheme was introduced by the coalition Government in October 2013.

Those companies, which have been publicly identified and will undoubtedly have received negative publicity, may suffer an impact on their future relationships with customers and suppliers. Some 687 employers have been publicly listed as having failed to pay the national minimum wage to workers, and the wage arrears owed to staff have exceeded £3.5 million. That appears to be—

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).

Outsourcing and Tax Credits

11 am

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): (Urgent Question): To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the change in Government policy in relation to outsourcing and tax credits.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby) rose—

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): That’s not the Chancellor.

Simon Kirby: Not yet.

I can confirm that there has been no change in Government policy on outsourcing. I suspect that the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) has asked this urgent question in the light of the recent concerns surrounding the Government’s outsourcing contract with Concentrix.

Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs places the utmost importance on providing a quality service to its customers. As the Government have made clear, high standards were not met in recent months by Concentrix, the company HMRC had engaged to help us in the important work of tackling fraud and error in the tax credits system. Once this became clear, HMRC took steps to rectify the situation and deployed HMRC staff as quickly as possible. From that point, no new cases were passed to Concentrix, and HMRC took back 181,000 individual cases that were being managed by Concentrix. I can reassure the House that not only have all the 181,000 cases been finalised, but HMRC has now restored the expected quality levels of customer service to ensure people receive the tax credits to which they are entitled. HMRC continues to review outstanding cases in which a mandatory reconsideration has been requested, and it has taken steps regarding the future of the contract with Concentrix.

On 14 September, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury informed the House that HMRC would not be renewing the contract with Concentrix. Last week, she informed the House that HMRC is currently in discussions with Concentrix to agree a negotiated early exit to the contract. These commercial discussions continue. I want to be clear that HMRC will not go back to the market to seek another partner to replace Concentrix and provide additional capacity to challenge error and fraud in the tax credit system. There has, however, been no change in Government policy on outsourcing, which can be an appropriate way to deliver both quality public services and savings for the taxpayer. I assure the House that HMRC is committed to learning the lessons from the problems that have arisen over the past months, supported by the independent review of the National Audit Office.

Louise Haigh: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I think we all agree that the continuing fallout from the debacle surrounding Concentrix will not be going away soon.

Last Thursday, the day after a debate in this House, the chief executive of HMRC announced to the Treasury Committee:

“We will not go back into the market for this kind of thing”.

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).
He also said:

"We will not be going back to the market to seek a third party to help us in any way with this kind of thing”.

He was obviously referring to the outsourcing of tax credits. This announcement was unequivocal, and it represented a considerable shift for the Government and their policy on welfare. The implications of such an announcement for private sector involvement in our welfare state are profound.

The contract between Concentrix and HMRC has revealed the grotesque consequences of the profit model in our welfare state. The chief executive of HMRC now clearly agrees that the private sector has no place in the delivery of welfare. He is absolutely right, but it is still embedded deep within our social security system. The company Maximus is still operating a £500 million contract to deliver the work capability assessments for personal independence payments conducted by Atos that are causing deep distress for thousands. If having a trade-off between profit maximisation and the principles of our welfare system has been deemed inappropriate for those on tax credits, why is it considered appropriate in other sensitive areas of our welfare state?

By setting this precedent, is the Treasury not accepting that, when it comes to the sensitivities around welfare, the private sector is uniquely incapable of determining the best interests of individuals on welfare? If not, what were the principles underlining the unequivocal announcement that there would be no longer be any third party involvement? Will this extend to the operation of universal credit? If not, many will see these words as a cynical manoeuvre to raise the hopes of many who should never again have to deal with a company that has so singularly failed them in the delivery of welfare.

Furthermore, I seek clarity on something the Minister’s colleague said in a debate in this House last month. The Financial Secretary said of the way in which Departments do something, that “there are circumstances in which the use of a private company offers a cost-effective way”.—[Official Report, 14 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 910.]

Are we now right in thinking that, after this announcement, the Government do not believe that those circumstances extend to our social security system?

Finally, I want to press the Minister to release the key characteristics used by HMRC to profile the individuals whom Concentrix was then unleashed to target. Given the unprecedented distress that the targeting by key characteristics has caused and the commensurate levels of error that they evidently caused, it is very clearly in the public interest that they are now released. I would be very grateful if the Minister gave me a firm commitment this morning to provide me with that information.

Simon Kirby: Clearly, there are lessons to be learned from this—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

Simon Kirby: I have had the pleasure of responding to debates on this in Westminster Hall and in this Chamber, and this is now the third occasion I have had such an opportunity to respond. There are clearly lessons to be learned. The Financial Secretary has made the Government’s position very clear: Concentrix will not be providing the service in the future. However, there is no change to Government policy on outsourcing, which can be an appropriate way to deliver both quality public services and, importantly, to make savings for the taxpayer. We will have to wait to see what the independent National Audit Office review shows, but I am sure we are all looking forward to it. As I have said, there are many lessons to be learned.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Our constituents expect the Government to spend taxes wisely and efficiently. Is it not entirely right that the Government should seek to minimise error and fraud? Is this not a case of the Government having taken some action, discovered that it has not worked in the way they sought and then taken effective action to deal with that?

Simon Kirby: That is a fair point. It is worth saying that most of these problems are errors—there is always, sadly, some fraud as well—but this is about getting the balance right between, on the one hand, the taxpayer and, on the other hand, making sure that people receive the service they rightly expect. We have cut fraud and error in benefits to some of the lowest levels ever, making savings to the taxpayer. As I have said, there are lessons to be learned and there is a balance to be struck.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for securing this urgent question, and for her brilliant work in bringing this issue to light. Like her, I do not understand why it was not deemed appropriate for a Minister to come to the House to make a statement on a significant change in Government policy last week, not least because that happened the day after we had had a full Opposition day debate on Concentrix. Having listened to the Minister, I am not sure whether the policy has not actually changed again this morning. How can the Minister reconcile what he has just told the House with the statement last week that there would be no further outsourcing for such matters?

As my Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), made clear in the debate last week, our party continues to stand by the victims of this terrible fiasco, the majority of whom were single mothers. There is clear human suffering at the centre of this chaotic debacle. These people did not deserve to face the hardship and stress they suffered. In order to move forward, we need confirmation that those unfairly targeted by Concentrix will at the very least be properly compensated, and that that will happen as soon as possible. The Government need to announce as a matter of urgency the timetable for a comprehensive investigation into the increasing number of systematic failures that continue to be brought to light.

As we are continuing to hear the details of these terrible cases from Members on both sides of the House, it would only be proper and decent for the Minister to make a formal apology on behalf of his Government for the distress and hardship that they have caused. We are pleased that the Government have conceded to the Opposition that this was an unacceptable episode.
Such contrition is welcome, but now the Government must proceed by putting right the wrong that has been caused, and they must properly report to Parliament on their progress towards doing so.

Simon Kirby: Compensation is available where error has occurred. That has been made very clear. The hon. Gentleman asks whether I am prepared to apologise; I think this is now the third time I have done so. If people have not received the high-level customer service to which they are entitled and if mistakes have been made, I do apologise. I also say, however, that this is a necessary part of government and there are lessons to be learned. We will all make better decisions as we go forward. We will have to wait for the independent NAO report. That has all been said before.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): May I commend my hon. Friend for his balanced and reasoned responses today? The Opposition seem to think that everything done by the state works perfectly and that whenever it is outsourced it may go wrong. I think they forget that, over the years, HMRC has had quite a few internal problems of its own—failing to answer the telephone and the chaotic initial introduction of tax credits, for example. It is absolutely right to look to securing savings through outsourcing to the private sector throughout Government Departments where it is the right thing to do.

Simon Kirby: As ever, my hon. Friend makes a valuable point and worthwhile contribution. He is right that there have been mistakes and lessons to be learned over a large number of years in a number of different Departments. What is important is that we get the balance right, pay the money that people—often the most vulnerable in society—are owed, while at the same time protecting the taxpayer from unnecessary overpayment, error and fraud.

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): While Concentrix certainly has questions to answer, the model for indiscriminately targeting low-income families was devised by the Conservative Government and designed to place the burden of the failing austerity agenda firmly on the shoulders of the most disadvantaged in our society. As tax credits are to be overtaken by universal credit, there have already been reports on the delay of the roll-out of UC as well as on continued problems with the system. With private companies such as Atos, Maximus and Concentrix under the spotlight for their poor handling of contracts intended to support social security claimants, does the Minister agree that we must ensure that all future contracts are kept under close scrutiny by his Department, that they are fit for purpose and that they protect vulnerable people?

Simon Kirby: I agree that everything that the Government do should be kept under close scrutiny. It is worth saying again that HMRC has reduced error and fraud in the tax credit system, so that it remains on target and is at a near record low since tax credits were introduced in 2003—some 13 years ago. We are always well advised constantly to check and ensure that the service we deliver is appropriate.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): Does the Minister agree with this recent statement about the Government’s position on this matter:

“We welcome this recognition from the government”?

That was said by the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union.

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend makes a valuable point. It is, I think, important to say that, particularly for vulnerable people, overpayments lead to debt. That is why it is important to make sure that we get the payments right and do not make mistakes. We must act in a fair, appropriate and customer-focused way.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Ashley Davenport was one of many who suffered for three months under this contract. She had two children, one of them a new-born, and she contacted me after she had not eaten in days. Concentrix is not the first abysmal private company that this Government have allowed to fail in delivering sensitive public-service contracts. Since 2010, billions have been spent on the outsourcing of privately run public services. Is it not time that lessons were learned right across the board when it comes to welfare and benefits in order to mitigate any further hardship such as what we have seen in this latest shambles?

Simon Kirby: I would say three things in response. First, if the hon. Lady feels that her constituent has been wrongly treated, she should write and apply for compensation. Secondly, it is worth saying that the savings to the taxpayer are probably in excess of £200 million—not a small sum. Thirdly, yes, there are lessons to be learned—[Interruption.] I shall have to say that even more often, because it obviously gets a reaction. As a Government, we would be foolish not to learn lessons and not to make sure that the service we provide is as good and appropriate as possible. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady says from a sedentary position that this is turning into a debate, Mr Deputy Speaker. She asks whether we are going to come back and report. We shall have to wait for the independent NAO report.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The danger is that the Minister is going to keep the debate going.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that there is a great deal of amnesia on the Opposition Benches? I well remember the misery caused to my constituents when 50% of all tax credits were paid incorrectly during the course of the last Labour Government. I welcome what my hon. Friend said about Concentrix. What financial penalties will the Government impose on Concentrix for the cock-ups it has made?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend is right to highlight amnesia. It is sometimes easy to forget how things were in the past and by how much things have improved today. There are penalties in the contract. Concentrix will be penalised for not doing the job that was intended. That is right and proper—not only for the people who have suffered through Concentrix’s mistakes, but for the taxpayer as well.
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Some of my constituents have lost other monies. They have gone into rent arrears and have bank charges to pay, for example. Will the Minister undertake to make sure that either Concentrix or HMRC compensates those people for their actual losses—caused, it must be remembered, when they were accused of having an undeclared partner who was dead or a previous tenant they had never known. This has nothing to do with my constituents and has everything to do with rank maladministration.

I hope that the Minister will stand up today and confirm that these people will be compensated by Concentrix or HMRC.

Simon Kirby: The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that HMRC does run a compensation scheme. If her constituents—or her as her MP—would like to write, I am sure they will have some success.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the key objectives must be that the rules laid down by this House for the payment of tax credits or welfare benefits are followed accurately, and that fraudulent claims are identified and stopped? Does he further agree that these two key objectives are equally applicable whether the delivery is by the public sector or the private sector?

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those are two key objectives and it is important to get the balance right between them. Whoever delivers—whether it be the private sector or the public sector—must deliver what is most appropriate. We have been clear that in the case of Concentrix, it was not the most appropriate way to proceed. We must ensure that what is done is fair, reasonable and represents value for money.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I am sure it was inadvertent, but I do not think the Minister fully answered the point made by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) when he asked what penalties Concentrix would suffer as a result of its failure. Is it not the case that, in fact, because the Government are ending the contract early, Concentrix are the ones that are going to be compensated? Will the Minister clear that up for us right now?

Simon Kirby: The contract is still under sensitive commercial negotiation. As for the exact penalties, the contract states clearly and transparently that penalties will be imposed for a failure to fulfil elements of it. I can tell the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that HMRC will be seeking the best possible deal for taxpayers and, indeed, people who are entitled to these payments, and we fully expect to get the best possible deal.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): The Minister is in a contrite mood this morning. I wonder whether he will extend the balm of that contrition to the PCS members working in HMRC who will have to clear this mess up. Will he tell the House whether there were any formal discussions with the PCS before the contract was awarded to Concentrix?

Simon Kirby: I am not aware whether there were or not, given that I am a Minister who is relatively new to the Treasury and given that I am dealing with a subject that is not in my portfolio, but I am sure that I can write to the hon. Gentleman clarifying the position.

I pay tribute to the hard-working staff in HMRC, who have helped to resolve what was a very difficult situation. HMRC took back 181,000 cases, and the staff have done a brilliant job, extending the helpline hours and specifically helping MPs. We should all be grateful for that.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): It is no wonder that the Chancellor is not here today to respond to the urgent question. We have heard an announcement of no change in policy: in other words, “Do not adjust your mind, reality is at fault.” Apart from the structural weaknesses of this and so many other contracts, time and again we are seeing Ministers and Departments failing to monitor contracts, and failing to react and respond when those failures are pointed out. Once again, we are hearing the same lame old excuse: “Lessons will be learnt.” I ask the Minister, “When will they ever learn?” For a start, will Concentrix be barred from tendering for any future contracts with the Government?

Simon Kirby: The right hon. Gentleman speaks of a failure to respond; the Government responded very quickly, which is why we are in this position, having cleared up the mess that we found. He asks when we will learn our lessons; we have learnt lessons, which is why the Concentrix contract is coming to an end. We shall all have to wait for the independent report from the National Audit Office, and there will be further lessons to be learned, but the Government have taken this matter very seriously and have acted quickly, and I think that we have done reasonably well in the circumstances.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): May I press the Minister once more on the financial issue? He talked about the HMRC compensation scheme. Will he tell us whether the payments under that scheme will be recovered from Concentrix?

Simon Kirby: What I can say is that the penalties referred to in the contract will be taken from the money paid to Concentrix and will go to HMRC, and that any compensation that is appropriate and due will come from HMRC.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Last but certainly not least, Daniel Zeichner.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I think we have got the message that the Minister wants lessons to be learned. Will he assure us that all that the minutes, recordings and transcripts relating to the process that led up to the tendering of the contract will be published?

Simon Kirby: I understand that the independent National Audit Office will be looking at all those and will report in due course—let us hope that it does so sooner rather than later—and we will learn lessons from that independent report.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. In the age of emojis, is there any way in which Hansard will be able to report the look on the Minister’s face when he responded to the question asked by the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith)? It said it all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Absolutely not.
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill

Proceedings resumed.

11.24 am

Mr Nuttall: Before the urgent question, I had just set out some of the ways in which the present Government are enforcing the national minimum wage. It appears, at least on the face of it, to be a system that would benefit those on low pay, but all is not as it seems.

Not content with the introduction of a national minimum wage, pressure groups began to press for what they termed a “living wage”, and in April this year a national living wage was actually introduced. As far as I can see, however, what it amounts to is the creation of an extra tier of the national minimum wage, payable to those aged over 25. At £7.20 an hour, it represents a 50p increase on the minimum wage.

The living wage was described as a pay rise for over a million low-paid workers across the UK, many of whom would be in low-income households. While that is true, it is worth pointing out that the belief that when a minimum wage is increased the benefit goes to all those in the lowest income groups is far from the truth. In reality, 44% of low-paid workers are in the top half of the household income distribution, because, in many cases, their spouses are earning much more. The fact that one person is on the minimum wage does not mean that the household income as a whole is very low.

Let me return to the question of definitions. Those who are defined as workers are already covered by the minimum wage legislation. That applies to everyone, whether they are working as apprentices or not. On 1 October, the minimum hourly rate paid to an apprentice was increased to £3.40. The rate for those under 18 was raised to £4, the rate for those aged between 18 and 21 was raised to £5.55, and the rate for someone over the age of 21 who was not on the national living wage was raised to £6.95.

The crucial question is this: what is the position of volunteers? They work, surely, and is an intern not a volunteer? That question goes to the heart of the dilemma that faces my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell. After all, no one forces anyone to take up a volunteer? That question goes to the heart of the dilemma that faces my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell. After all, no one forces anyone to take up a voluntary role. As always, it is relatively easy for big businesses and large employers, large and small, Companies need to be very aware of the responsibilities towards individuals who volunteer.

One important issue for a company to determine is the status of those who are providing services for them. Ultimately, it is the nature of the actual relationship between a worker and an employer that defines whether someone is a worker or not. This is the key point, and my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell skated over it when introducing the Bill. One can perfectly well envisage a situation where an individual is nominally termed an “intern” but in reality is a worker. In fact, one does not have to imagine anything, because fortunately there is case law on this point, which I will come to shortly. In such a situation a person would not need to rely on any new provisions contained in this Bill; they would simply be able to rely on the existing national minimum wage legislation, and could seek help and guidance from organisations such as ACAS. It is worth putting on record that reporting an alleged breach of the legislation is very simple. Any employee, volunteer or intern who believes that an employer is not complying with the minimum wage legislation and who wishes to report a problem with working hours or the minimum wage can do so by simply filling in a pay and workers’ rights complaint form, which is available on the Government’s website and can then be emailed to HMRC.

Let us be clear about one thing: the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 contains no reference to interns or internships. Even under the Labour Government of the day, it was clearly the intention that someone doing work experience—or, if we prefer the term, an internship—should not be entitled to the national minimum wage.

As I have said, we are fortunate that there is case law on situations where an individual is called an intern but where in reality a contractual relationship exists between them and the employer. In 2009, Nicola Vetta brought a case against a company called London Dreams Motion Pictures Ltd. It was heard at Reading employment tribunal on 20 November of that year. Nicola was engaged by the company on an expenses-only basis as an art department assistant. The position was advertised as expenses-only and as an opportunity to gain experience. In email correspondence the claimant, Nicola Vetta, was described by the claimant as “full-time and our main assistant”.

In another complimentary email from the respondents to the claimant they said:

“We are very surprised that you have dived right into the action and within weeks become a key member of the team.”

Other emails were referred to at the hearing, including one in which it was said that Ms Vetta was running things and assembling a team. After considering all the evidence, the tribunal held that, despite the respondents’ defence that Nicola was not an employee and was merely engaged on an expenses-only basis, in reality she was engaged by the company as an employee and was entitled to the minimum wage, which she was awarded £2,174.53 in unlawful deductions of wages, plus accrued holiday pay of £220.91.

This could very easily have been one of the internships my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell has been talking about this morning. There are many such cases, but I will touch on one other.
Mark Pawsey: My hon. Friend has given an interesting account of an industrial tribunal case, illustrating what we do not want to see happening. My grave concern about the Bill is that it would prevent many of our young people from getting valuable experience.

Mr Nuttall: I fear that if the Bill becomes law there is a danger that what now appears to be the settled law as laid down by these cases will be thrown into doubt and there might be a whole raft of new cases with new definitions to be challenged in the courts. As I will say later, although this Bill refers to “employment practice”—a new term to me, which I will come on to—there is no clear definition, as far as I can see, of what is meant by that, and I anticipate it will have to be tested in the courts and in industrial tribunals.

Let me turn to the case of Hudson against TPG Web Publishing Ltd in 2011. It was also held in this case that the claimant was a worker. Keri Hudson worked eight hours a day between 10 am and 6 pm for a publishing company and supervised a team on a website. The employer had considered paying her but decided not to. The tribunal concluded that she was a worker with a contractual relationship existing between herself and the employer and was therefore entitled to be paid the minimum wage. The reneging on the payment was a key factor because it demonstrated that the respondent recognised that the position at least could be a paid position.

At that time the National Union of Journalists said of the judgment:

“This sends a clear message to media companies that if they treat interns like cheap labour, the NUJ will take you through the courts.”

It is clear from this case that the issue of interns who are actually carrying out work has been tested in industrial tribunals, which have found that if someone is working, they are liable to be paid. Unions have, to be fair to them, taken up this cause and are alert to the problem, and in appropriate instances take cases to a tribunal.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and this draws into comments I made, as do his opening comments about the legalities around national minimum wage law. I said at the opening of my speech that we still have people not being paid when they should be. Does my hon. Friend feel that people have the courage to go forward, even with union backing, or should be. Does my hon. Friend feel that people have the satisfaction of the tribunal that they were on the right side of that? They might be concerned about their position within the industry, and I wonder whether that is what my hon. Friend is driving at. But I imagine the industry would respect the judgments of tribunals and accept that an individual who had the confidence to challenge an employer on the interpretation of an Act of Parliament and was able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the tribunal that they were on the right side of that would be someone employers should be looking to engage, because it would be someone who had the confidence, willingness and ability to take on a larger employer. If they manage to win that case, I would have thought that would only enhance their opportunity of being given a job.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend is entitled to his view, but as a former employer myself that is the view I would take—although others might come to a different view.

In the Hudson case, as in the Yetta case, the tribunal determined that essentially this was not an internship, but was a job for which Ms Hudson should be paid, and it awarded her unpaid wages and holiday pay. I submit that on the basis of the findings in those cases the Bill offers nothing new to protect workers. If someone is actually working despite the fact that they might be called an intern, they are covered.

We should consider how many people would be covered by this Bill, even if it were to be of any value and brought into law. A written parliamentary question of 24 June this year by the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) asked the Business Secretary whether there were plans to gather data on the prevalence of paid and unpaid internships. At that time the then Skills Minister was my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), and I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say we sincerely hope he is soon able to rejoin us in the House.

He replied:

“The Government has no current plans to quantify the number of paid and unpaid internships. There is no legal definition of an intern, but all those who qualify as ‘workers’ are entitled to the National Minimum Wage and National Living Wage.”

Let us reflect for a moment on why the Government were unable to provide a more specific answer to that relatively straightforward question. I submit that it would entail reporting by businesses, small and large, on the details of the thousands of interns who are employed in offices, shops and factories right across this country. Some companies would have hundreds in the course of a year and, given the nature of internships, which can often be for short periods of time—sometimes for a week or two weeks—can the House imagine the practical difficulties in trying to ascertain an accurate number?

In 2010, a briefing note on interns and the national minimum wage was sent to the then employment relations Minister, Ed Davey, and the then universities Minister, David Willetts. Sadly, that briefing note has been heavily redacted. I wish it had not been, because it would have been very interesting to read the whole document. Perhaps we could speculate about why it was so heavily redacted; the House will be pleased to know that I will not so speculate. The briefing note, which was released on 15 July 2010 following a freedom of information request, said:

“No single data source can provide an accurate estimate of the number of paid or unpaid internships. Unpaid workers are particularly hard to capture in national surveys as they are not on the PAYE system. Given the paucity of data, we have had to construct an estimate for the total number of interns based heavily on reports from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), combined with a number of other assumptions. This estimate is 50-70,000 internships, of which 10-15,000 are unpaid, but due to data limitations any figures should be treated as purely indicative.”

The Sutton Trust estimated in November 2014 that 31% of graduate interns in this country had reported working for no pay. Those data were based on the Higher Education Statistics Agency’s leavers survey of
2012-13. More recently, the Low Pay Commission said in spring this year regarding non-payment of the national minimum wage:

“This year we received fewer responses from stakeholders on this issue. While this in itself could be interpreted as evidence of an improving situation, the feedback we have received from stakeholders who have responded indicated that the issue remains live.”

To be fair, the report also referred to discussions with unions and expressed concerns about non-payment of the minimum wage in the arts and entertainment industry in particular. Clearly, however, there are real difficulties in quantifying the size of the problem. Although we do not know whether it is getting better or worse, if fewer stakeholders are contacting the Low Pay Commission about concerns over unpaid internships, maybe it is not such a critical concern to people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell posted on his website a call for evidence from the people of Yorkshire who had had experiences of unpaid internships. In his brief opening remarks, he was unable to expand on the sort of response he had to that call for evidence. I commend him for doing his research, but it seems to me that it would have been better to ask for the evidence first and then try to look for a solution only if a problem could be identified. I am not convinced that the problem is exactly what my hon. Friend thinks it is. Even if there is a problem, I am absolutely certain that this Bill will not solve it. In my view, it will create more problems.

Alec Shelbrooke: To put my hon. Friend’s mind at rest, the problem was identified many years ago, and some of the examples that I received were used in my speech today.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s report of that. I have been completely consistent in my approach to the proposed legislation. I voted against the previous Bill when it was put to a Division a couple of years ago, so he and I have both been consistent.

As it happens, I was an employer when the national minimum wage legislation was introduced. At the time, I suspect I was employing about 30 or 40 people, so I know from first-hand experience about the impact that it had, not just on me but on many of my clients, which were small businesses. It undoubtedly took up some staff time; it was new legislation and we had to look at how to comply with it. To be fair, although rogue employers will do all they can to break the rules—that will always be the case—the truth is that most businesses and most small employers bend over backwards to try to comply with laws that emanate from this place. Although some extra administration was involved, I do not want to over-egg the pudding; it did not take up a huge amount of time or dominate our practice, but we did have to deal with it.

The biggest problem was not so much the administration but the economic costs of the minimum wage. I refer not so much to those who were not covered by the legislation—in our small practice, perhaps only one or two employees felt any benefit initially from the imposition of the minimum wage—but to the knock-on effect that it had on wage differentials. That was the economic problem for small businesses. If, for example, the salary of the lowest-paid worker—say, the office junior—is increased to the same level as, say, the junior typists, they can legitimately and understandably claim that in order to restore the pay differential, they should have a pay increase. That has a knock-on effect on the next grade up, and so on. The ripple effect of increasing the wages at one level can soon be felt much higher up the pay grade.

Turning to the engagement of additional staff, the fact is that if an employer has work that needs doing, they will engage a new member of staff. That may be part-time, of course—there might not be enough work to fill a full-time role, but the employer will engage either a part-time or full-time staff member. I accept that there might be unscrupulous employers who, seeing a short-term amount of work that needs doing, might seek to engage an unpaid intern to do that work. As I demonstrated earlier, however, my view—which, to be fair, is backed up by cases—is that that situation would already be covered if the person involved could demonstrate that they were carrying out work and were entitled to be paid the national minimum wage. So who would be covered by my hon. Friend’s Bill? People who are doing work are already covered, so the only other people who could be covered are those who are not working: the ones who are watching. Is my hon. Friend really suggesting that the national minimum wage should be paid to people who are simply watching someone else work?

I shall let hon. Members into a little secret. What goes on in this Chamber might be considered a spectator sport, and quite rightly, but I take the view that running a small business is not. When I was running a small business, I could not afford to pay people to come and watch me work. I did not mind paying them if they were carrying out work, but I could not afford to pay them simply to come and watch. I did not mind them coming to do work experience, and I got lots of requests—I still do, as a Member of Parliament—from people asking to come and spend time with me. I said, “Of course, there’s no problem. I will chat to you and I will give you advice.” But I could not pay them to do that. The reality is that an employer, and particularly a small business, cannot afford to pay people who want to sit and watch and then simply walk away having added no value whatever to the business.

Let us ask ourselves what determines a wage on the open market. It is an essential truth that work should be compensated according to productivity. A wage is the price at which a worker is prepared to sell his or her labour; the wage is the balance between what the employer is prepared to pay and at what level the labourer is prepared to sell. The employer will of course take into account the productivity of the labourer, and the labourer will consider how much they value themselves working for that employer. They will also take into account the experience of working there and the working environment. Someone who is prepared to spend time going on work experience—or an unpaid internship, if that is what we want to call it—is demonstrating that they value the experience of just being there and the contacts that they will make while they are there. In their eyes, those considerations cancel out the need for any monetary compensation. I believe that it is absolutely right that an individual should be free to decide for themselves the value of their own labour.

So what would happen if that basic arrangement were interfered with? What would happen if the law said—as I believe would be the case if the Bill became
The official Government website, gov.uk, states:

At the moment, the word “intern” has no legal definition.

Kingdom for—
undertakes regular work or provides regular services in the United
employment practice in which a person (“the intern”)—

The first problem revolves around the definition in

difficult to exploit them and far more likely that that

because they will then expect a return on their payment.

I want to look in detail at the problems in the Bill. The first problem revolves around the definition in clause 1, which states:

“For the purposes of this Act, a workplace internship is an employment practice in which a person (“the intern”)—
undertakes regular work or provides regular services in the United Kingdom for—

(i) another person;
(ii) a company;
(iii) a limited liability partnership; or
(iv) a public authority; and”.

At the moment, the word “intern” has no legal definition. The official Government website, gov.uk, states:

“Internships are sometimes understood to be positions requiring a higher level of qualification than other forms of work experience, and are associated with gaining experience for a professional career.”

The key term in clause 1 is “employment practice”. Those two words are central to what I would call the obfuscation at the heart of the Bill. What is an employment practice? I venture to suggest that it is actually an employment contract. In other words, this clause is attempting to cover every employment contract in just about every conceivable working environment. Perhaps my hon. Friend would agree, and say that that is exactly what he is trying to do. Perhaps he is trying to make this so watertight and all-encompassing that absolutely no one could escape from it, but let us consider for a moment the problems that could arise from that.

Let us take the example of someone who is setting up a gardening business and regularly volunteering their time to maintain the garden of, say, an elderly neighbour. For the gardener, who wants to work, this is an opportunity to develop, as happens in any market where the price of a product or commodity is set at an artificially high level, higher than the genuine market level. If someone wants to do a few weeks’ work experience—whether it is called an internship or not—without being paid, the law should not prevent that from happening.

Let me deal briefly with the claim that unscrupulous employers are somehow exploiting a loophole. It seems to me that there is much more likelihood of an unscrupulous employer exploiting an individual who is being paid, because they will then expect a return on their payment. If someone is not being paid at all, it is surely far more difficult to exploit them and far more likely that that intern doing work experience would simply walk away.

Nowhere in the Bill is there a definition of regular work or regular services, a point made earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) in an earlier intervention, not only for further references being necessary in order for an industrial tribunal to clarify the situation, but for terms to be widely construed. If someone is called in to do some filing in an office every Tuesday, is that regular? If a volunteer assists with a monthly live event, is that regular? It clearly means that something happens more than once, but there is no clear guidance.

I suspect that what would happen with the Bill is that the term “internship”, which has been adopted and is widely used and which this Bill seeks to outlaw, will be rapidly replaced by another term. People will try to get around the legislation by using another term—perhaps “work shadowing”. It may be that work shadowing is already covered by the Bill—we would have to see—but if someone has not been promised future work, that situation could be caught by the Bill. I would therefore submit that the Bill’s scope is too wide.

Clause 3 attempts to narrow that scope by setting out some exclusions. It excludes students who are required to do work experience as part of their course. In other words, the Bill recognises that work experience, when part of a wider course of study, does not have to be paid. To be fair, my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell touched on that in his remarks, but I did not intervene because he made it clear that he was not going to take any more interventions. However, the Bill’s true effect will be to discriminate against precisely those who have been told this morning that it seeks to help. If someone is lucky enough to go to college or university, the Bill says that it is fine for them to go on a placement or have 12 months’ work experience. If someone is not that lucky and just wants the opportunity to see what workplace life is like, the Bill states that an employer must pay them. That cannot be right. I am unsure whether that has been thought through by the Bill’s promoter, but it seems that that is exactly what would happen if the Bill became law.

The Bill also excludes those “of compulsory school age”, who are excluded from the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 anyway; those who are doing apprenticeships; and those otherwise excluded under devolved powers. However, I now want to comment on clause 3(1)(d). Clause 3 states:

“For the purposes of this Act, section 2 shall not apply if the person is—

(a) a student at a higher or further education institution…
(b) of compulsory school age;
(c) undertaking an approved English apprenticeship…
(d) meets the terms of a definition set out in regulations made by the Secretary of State or, as the case may be, the relevant Scottish, Welsh or Northern Ireland Ministers.”

Taken together, those words state that “section 2 shall not apply if the person is—

meets the terms of a definition”. I gently suggest to my hon. Friend that there must be some words missing from clause 3(1)(d)—probably “someone who”. I think it should say that section 2
The clause also runs the risk of different regulations being made in different parts of this United Kingdom. I hope that my hon. Friend will say that I have missed something and that that is not the case, but the clause seems to suggest that if regulations are made by the Secretary of State in this place or by relevant Ministers in the devolved Administrations, different classes of people would be excluded in different parts of the United Kingdom. Is that the case? Perhaps my hon. Friend will reflect on that and comment on it when he winds up.

I am conscious of the fact that many other Members wish to speak, but I want to talk about the many other people who have looked into this problem. In 2011, the policy group Perspective produced a paper called “Arguing for the introduction of paid internships”, detailing international comparisons of the action taken on this issue. It referred to the 2010 report from the International Labour Office “Global Employment Trends for Youth”, which looked at international comparisons. I do not know whether my hon. Friend, in drawing up the Bill, has examined the situation in other countries and whether the problem he has identified has been solved anywhere else in the world—it may well have been. Some countries, such as Canada and South Korea, have committed to funding internships in key sectors, which may be one way of doing this; we could simply throw Government money at it and say, “We will pay for people who need work experience.” South Korea extended its state-supported youth internship programme and introduced wage subsidies for small and medium-sized enterprises that engaged interns on regular contracts at the conclusion of their internship. I would not want to go down that road, but it has happened in other countries.

More interestingly, the Institute of Economic Affairs, perhaps spurred into action by the publication of my hon. Friend’s Bill, published a discussion paper in August entitled “And how much do you earn?”. One of its conclusions was that the current minimum wage legislation “should be simplified”, and I strongly support that. If this Bill were to be amended in Committee and to go down that road, there would be a lot of merit in that approach. The authors of that paper, Ryan Bourne and J. R. Shackleton, acknowledged that the national minimum wage has “broad public support”, but they said that “the introduction of the National Living Wage threatens to lead to a populist arms race in terms of statutory minimum pay rates.” The paper made a number of suggestions, including reducing the number of bands to just two, one for people 18 and over and the other for people 25 and over. It also suggested that the Government should:

“re-emphasise the independence of the Low Pay Commission, allowing it to continue to recommend changes to both rates in the new system according to the best evidence available on the pay-employment trade-off. This is particularly important given the pressure there will be to continue increasing wage rates even in economic recessions.”

In conclusion, the website Simple Politics calls this Bill “The ‘pay interns’ Bill”. I would argue that on closer inspection it is not that, but “The making work experience unaffordable Bill”. Even worse, it could be called “The denying young people opportunities Bill”. The growth in the number of unpaid internships has arisen as a consequence of the minimum wage legislation. I said earlier that I had not previously come across the term “internship”; it has arisen only since the arrival on the scene of the minimum wage, and with it has come the problem of elevating people who are doing work experience to the status of workers.

It was never the intention—the Minister actually said this, in terms—that businesses would have to pay wages to people who were not actually working, but simply experiencing the workplace. The most likely result, if the Bill became law, would be a reduction in the number of opportunities available to young people. Why? Perhaps because the law recognises that work placements do not have the same status as actual work. If an intern is actually working, it is already illegal not to pay them the national minimum wage; that is in the national minimum wage legislation, which Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is enforcing. The Bill is simply unnecessary.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am interested in what my hon. Friend says. Will he talk a bit about the status of voluntary work? Some people want to volunteer, and lots of charities have business arms; there are charity shops and so on, which have a mix of employee and volunteer help.

Mr Nuttall: rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We do not want to hear too much on that, because the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) is coming to the conclusion of his speech. Do not worry: five other Members wish to speak. I want other Members to take part in the debate. I would not want to close the debate down too quickly.

Mr Nuttall: I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I shall deal with the intervention fairly briefly. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) raises an important point, and I apologise for not going into as much detail on it as I perhaps should have. I said in an intervention that the Bill nowhere refers to volunteers. It is silent on the issue of volunteers. When I pressed my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell on that, he rather bizarrely started talking about the exclusions—the people to whom the Bill does not apply—but it does not say “a volunteer” anywhere in the list of exclusions. I think that volunteers are included in the Bill by definition, unless they are covered by the catch-all, get-out-of-jail-free card in clause 3(1)(d), to which I referred earlier. It sets out that a person is excluded under the Bill if they meet “the terms of a definition set out in regulations”.

It may be that, for some reason unknown to me, my hon. Friend thought, “I’ll leave this problem to the Minister to solve”—and there is a real problem in the Bill: what do we do with volunteers? I will not attempt to go down that path and sort out the thicket of problems that arise from the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset. There is a genuine problem with those who do a mix of things—who sometimes volunteer, and sometimes work in a shop, or a charity’s commercial arm. That point is not clear. It is quite likely that those sorts of issues will finish up in the courts and before the industrial tribunals. It will be a bun fight, and a money-making scheme for lawyers.
Philip Davies: I am delighted to hear that the ballot is not a fix, but I never thought it was.

We all support the ambition of my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell to see greater social mobility, and I know that that is what lies behind the Bill. That is the motivation that brings his hon. Friend to this place. The problem that I have, that some of my hon. Friends and some Opposition Members have—

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is only one Opposition Member in the Chamber at present, but others do exist. I know that they agree with the principle of social mobility and giving people more opportunities. The problem is that many of us think the Bill will not achieve that and will make the situation worse. I shall expand on that argument and point to what I think might be a better avenue for my hon. Friend to go down, which would genuinely create better opportunities for young people to make sure that we have more social mobility.

I yield to nobody in my demand that we have more working-class people in some of the professions. I made a speech earlier this week in Westminster Hall in which I argued for more working-class people to be in Parliament and made the point that gender diversity does not deliver social mobility, as my hon. Friend wants. I pointed out that replacing Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with Jemima in Kensington and Chelsea does not do a great deal for social mobility or diversity in this House, and that we should consider how to open up more opportunities for people from different class backgrounds. I agree with the sentiment behind the Bill, but I think it will be counterproductive.

Since I entered the House 11 years ago I have taken on so many people for work experience, as interns or whatever people want to call them or call themselves, that I could not begin to say how many have spent time in my office doing one form of work experience or another. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North, I refer to it as work experience because, as far as I am concerned, that is exactly what they are getting. Whatever we call it, and whatever we call those roles, these people, from what they have said, have all had a great experience and seen the workings of Parliament first hand. They have used that experience to go on and get fantastic jobs or to help them with their studies. If this Bill had been in place, and I had had to pay some or all of those people the minimum wage, I can state quite clearly that they would not have had that opportunity. That is not because I have any objection to paying people—that is not the case at all—but because we have a budget for staffing in the House. The budget is perfectly adequate, and I make no complaint about it, but there is not a great deal spare at the end of each year. So if my hon. Friend wants these people to be paid out of that budget, the only way of doing that is to reduce the salaries of the people who already work for me, and I am not sure that that would be entirely fair on them.

Alec Shelbrooke: Would my hon. Friend just help me with the opinions I am forming? Will he describe how long, on average, people have come to work with him for?

Philip Davies: I will come to that in a bit more detail, but just so that I do not look like I am dodging my hon. Friend’s question, let me say that it has varied wildly: some people come for a day, some come for a few days...
and some—I would imagine it is the majority—come for a week. However, some have come for months—five or six months in a couple of cases—and I will refer to them later, because part of their experience was part of what I see as the problem with the Bill.

The issue is what will be lost, and the definition in the Bill spells out what could be lost, not just in Parliament but when people are looking for jobs elsewhere. Clause 1(b) says the national minimum wage would apply where “the purpose of the employment practice is...that the intern meets learning objectives or gains experience of working for the employer listed in section 1(a); and...to provide practical experience in an occupation or profession.”

That seems to be good old-fashioned, traditional work experience, but my hon. Friend seems to want to cover it through the minimum wage, and that would not be sensible. Learning and gaining practical experience are what is at stake. People doing work experience do it for the invaluable opportunity to gain that experience, and that is often something money cannot buy.

For many people thinking about going down a particular career route, spending even a small amount of time just seeing what happens and what the role actually means, rather than how it is portrayed in the media, is invaluable. They might actually think, “This job isn’t for me. I thought it was, because of what I thought about it, but after spending just a week here, I’ve seen what it’s really like, and it’s not for me.” The money someone can save by not pursuing a career that is not good for them is actually far more than they could ever earn by being paid the minimum wage for doing these things.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Do we not also have to have confidence in people and in the fact that they can make decisions for themselves? If they decide that they loathe the internship after a week, they are not paid and they are not contractually obliged, so they can leave and take on another internship or paid employment.

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—as he invariably is, I might add.

Under the heading “What is work experience?”, the Government’s own guidance on their website about the minimum wage, work experience and internships says:

“The term ‘work experience’ generally refers to a specified period of time that an individual spends with a business—during which they have an opportunity to learn directly about working life and the working environment.”

I should say at this point that work experience has actually proven quite an essential part of the Government’s welfare reforms—reforms that Conservative Members, including, I am sure, my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell, are very proud of. I am sure we all recall when the Government had to introduce emergency legislation because they lost the Caut Reilly case in the courts over the work experience she was asked to do as part of her benefits regime. The Government introduced emergency legislation, the Jobseekers (Back to Work Schemes) Act 2013, which made it clear in law that people on benefits should have to do work experience in certain circumstances. Labour Members agreed to help the Government rush through that legislation because they too saw the importance of those people having to do work experience. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), the shadow Minister at the time, gave Labour’s support to it. The legislation was about people doing unpaid work experience in the workplace because the Government believed, and everybody agreed, that that was one of the best ways to help them get into work. I think the Government said—I am happy for people to correct me if I am wrong—that about 50% of people on benefits who did the work experience got a job at the end of it. I would even be prepared to wager that my hon. Friend supported the Government in passing that legislation, because I am sure he appreciated how important that unpaid work experience was in people getting a job.

Alec Shelbrooke: Perhaps controversially, I have always felt that being given benefits from the state provides an income that can be used to help to get work experience and move forward. This Bill seeks to help people who have absolutely no means of supporting themselves through the benefits system or an income outside it. That is a subtle but distinct difference.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but in making that helpful clarification he highlights one of the flaws in his Bill, because it does not make the exception that he has offered up with regard to who should be exempted from the terms of paid work experience. If he is saying that he wishes at a later date to add to his Bill another list of people who should not be part of it, then I welcome that. It is also the case that the Department of Work and Pensions introduced work experience as part of the youth contract, and that was probably one of the most popular parts of it.

I took on board my hon. Friend’s point—he made it very well—about some employers who might use internships for a purpose that some of us would not. I was struck by his example of Vivienne Westwood. However, we would be in danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater if we went down the route in this Bill.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Clearly, an employer who wishes to pay an intern could and should do so, if they have the money, but if they have to pay for internships, that comes off the bottom line and is a cost to the business, so undoubtedly there will then be fewer internships.

Philip Davies: That is absolutely right. This is the flaw in my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell’s logic. He says that he wants to even up the playing field to make sure that poorer people get the same opportunities that richer people get and take for granted. That is a laudable aim, and nobody disagrees with it. My fear is that he will succeed in evening up the playing field, but by making sure that nobody gets the chance to do work experience and internships. That is not my idea of success.

Alec Shelbrooke: Let me refer back to a couple of points I made in my speech. Two thirds of internships are already paid, so this Bill would not affect them. For me, the figure we must consider carefully is that 40% of people who are offered an internship cannot take it. People talk about reducing opportunities, but we are getting close to half of people being unable to take the opportunity in the first place.
Philip Davies: I will come on to that a bit later, because I have what I would like to think is a better solution.

It is a socialist outlook on life that says, “I would rather nobody had an opportunity than only some people had an opportunity”, it is certainly not one that any self-respecting Conservative could have.

Alex Shelbrooke: rose—

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): There is a self-respecting Conservative.

Alec Shelbrooke: Quite right—I agree with the hon. Gentleman on the Opposition Front Bench, who speaks from a sedentary position.

I gently say to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Shipley that he quite rightly points out that my interest is social mobility, but rather than trying to bring it down to a common denominator I am trying to bring it up to a common denominator, so that people can access opportunities for social mobility. I understand his concerns, but there is a large difference between trying to push everybody down and being under the control of one socialist fist, and trying to make sure that everybody can go as high as they possibly can.

Philip Davies: Yes, I absolutely agree. However, my view is that the outcome of my hon. Friend’s Bill would be to take away opportunities from people and not to add extra opportunities for them. I will make a suggestion a bit later—if I ever get the opportunity to do so, Mr Deputy Speaker—to suggest what my hon. Friend says, which is not to take away opportunities that exist but to make sure that there are more opportunities for other people.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Will my hon. Friend examine the figures just given by our hon. Friend? Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke)? He said that 40% of people do not take up internships because they cannot afford to, but 66% of internships are paid. That does not seem quite to work. It must mean that people cannot afford to, but 66% of internships are paid. That does not seem quite to work. It must mean that people cannot afford to work.

Philip Davies: Of course my hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is a point that I, too, have considered during this debate, because my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell made a point about how expensive it is to live in London and to take accommodation in London, which is absolutely right. Many opportunities for internships and work experience are in London, so I have to say to him that paying under-18s £4 an hour—the current rate of the minimum wage for under-18s—will not give them the opportunity to come and take up a work experience place in London; they would still have to rely on parental support, other family support, or other means.

The Bill will not make a blind bit of difference to the people my hon. Friend is targeting. They still will not be able to afford to take up opportunities in London, which will still be the preserve of more affluent people. Again, that is why the Bill will not achieve what he sets out to achieve and why I think I have a better solution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) was right; many people doing work experience are already entitled to the national minimum wage. We should make that point clear. I made it earlier in an intervention, but I see a difference between people who are—[Interruption.] I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) does not agree with me here; he is a bit more hard-core than I am.

Mark Pawsey: First time ever.

Philip Davies: As a well-known softie, I take a slightly different view. There is a difference between companies and organisations that are actively seeking a member of staff to come in and do some work for them, are advertising for that and in effect are trying to get somebody to do that job for nothing, and other companies. These are personal things, I guess; I think that situation is different.

I have never advertised for an unpaid intern. I have never said that I want somebody to come and work for me unpaid for x period of time. I do not think that that is right. Whether it should be illegal is a different issue, but I do not think that it is right; it is not to my taste.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend is a thoroughly decent man, in stark contrast to the example I gave earlier of a certain millionaire fashionista.

Philip Davies: We do not hear that very often in this Chamber; I welcome that kind of intervention.

Mark Pawsey: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Philip Davies: If my hon. Friend is going to intervene in a similar way—

Mark Pawsey: I was going to make a distinction. It is known that MPs provide internships, so there would often be no need for my hon. Friend to advertise his own internship. However, if other businesses were minded to take on a young person and provide them with experience in that way, they would need to provide some mechanism to do so, and placing an advertisement would seem to me the obvious thing to do.

Philip Davies: That is a perfectly reasonable argument to make and I do not necessarily disagree with it. As I say, the questions that we decide in this place are whether things should be legal or illegal. I am merely saying that I do not personally think it is right to advertise for a job and expect someone to work unpaid; that is not to my taste. There is a world of difference between that and someone saying, “Can I come and do some work experience with or volunteer for you? I really want to do something. Will you accommodate me?” The problem is that the Bill does not distinguish between those two approaches, which is unfortunate, because there is a massive distinction between them.

Labour Members criticised the Government’s work experience scheme for people on benefits, saying that it allowed companies such as Tesco to exploit workers and get cheap labour. However, the Government said, quite rightly, that taking somebody on work experience is not cheap labour, because, usually, the employer has to invest an awful lot of time and effort into accommodating that person. I have no complaint about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North is very happy to give up his time to give people career advice and help
I am interested in that because when I was growing up, my ambition was to be a journalist. I am delighted that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), is in her place, because I did a week’s work experience at the local paper in Stourbridge to see what it was like and to try to fulfil my ambition to become a journalist.

There is no reason on earth why I should have been paid by the local paper in Stourbridge for what I did. As it happens, I had the opportunity to write a couple of stories and visit the local court to see some cases and report on them. I clearly was not doing the job to a standard that deserved any payment. It would have been outrageous if I had been paid for my efforts, which obviously needed rewriting on many occasions before they were fit to appear in the local paper. However, it was great experience for me just to see what went on in a local newspaper office. It was also fantastic when I applied for a National Council for the Training of Journalists and it won multiple national and regional awards. We are offering a unique internship in a dynamic working environment, based in North Devon.”

I am delighted to see that my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) is in the Chamber. It goes on:

“Additionally over 70% of our internships have resulted in an offer of permanent employment.”

That takes us back to the point, which was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby, that if the company did not advertise it, nobody would know that such an opportunity was available. It is great—surely we should celebrate this—that 70% of the people doing an internship get an offer of permanent employment at the end of it. It seems to me that we should celebrate that in this House, not make a mess of it.

CDP is offering the following:

“The internship will be at CDP’s London office and the successful candidate will have the opportunity to be involved in a range of activities within the Cities team. It will be a valuable experience for anyone seeking a career in the area of climate change, sustainability and the urban environment. The internship will run across key stages of the project, including defining the scope and structure of the outreach, communications planning, engagement and technical support”.

Again, I am sure that a lot of people who believe in the cause of climate change and want to do something about it would find such experience invaluable, either to see whether they want to pursue a career in that area or so that they can campaign on that issue in their spare time. We should welcome such opportunities, not decry them.

I am trying to go through a few points at speed, because I know that some of my colleagues wish to speak. When my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell proposed his ten-minute rule Bill in 2014, he said:

“Just last year, the National Council for the Training of Journalists found in its 2013 report that 82% of new entrants to journalism had done an internship, of which 92% were unpaid.” —[Official Report, 13 May 2014; Vol. 580, c. 593]
by the newspaper for that work experience; it was actually for my benefit. It certainly was not for the benefit of the newspaper, which I suspect had to invest a great deal of time and effort in looking after me for the week, and the work certainly did not justify paying me anything.

Alec Shelbrooke: How old was my hon. Friend at the time?

Philip Davies: It was a long time ago, but I think I was 18 at the time. If anyone still at the newspaper can remember, I stand to be corrected.

Mr Nuttall: The journalists weren’t still using quills, were they? I assume from what my hon. Friend has said that he went in every day for “regular work” and that he received “practical experience”, so it seems to me that he would have been covered by clause 1 of the Bill. The local paper may not have been so keen on having him if it had had to pay him.

Philip Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend; that is the danger. Whether I was covered by the Bill might be open to interpretation, but my suspicion is that this would have a chilling effect on employers. Rather than getting in to some argy-bargy over whether someone needs to be paid, employers would prefer not to go into it. They would rather sit it out. There is nothing in it for them—and, to be perfectly honest, there was nothing in it at all for the employers in my case as it was all done for my benefit. That is my worry. It is great that newspapers take people on to let them see the ropes and find out what working for a newspaper is all about. As it turned out, to finish the story, I realised after doing my course that earlier at the Sheffield college that journalism was not for me. Perhaps I should have done a bit more work experience before I got to that stage, so that I could have learned that earlier.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell looks at this issue from one end of a telescope, but I look at it from the other end. If people doing unpaid internships get the chance to get a job in their chosen field as a result, it seems to me that not being paid for their work experience is a small price to pay. That, I am sure, is what the people who offer to do these internships think themselves. Some 75% of the workforce in this field could be without this vital experience if unpaid internships were banned, and 75% of the people who undertook an unpaid internship have successfully entered the industry in which they wanted to work. I think we should celebrate that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell quoted Alan Milburn at length, but I am not sure that that is a particularly persuasive thing to do in order to win me round. Perhaps I was not his target audience. I am sure that we were all supposed to drop our objections the moment the name of Alan Milburn was mentioned, but it did not work for me. However, the report my hon. Friend mentioned, which was conducted by Alan Milburn, was I think, published in 2009—[Interruption.] I have been corrected, it was 2012. It used research conducted in 2004 by the University of Manchester, which found that about 80% of employers had employed former interns. Again, I think that is a cause for celebration today—that these internships are leading to jobs.
...agree with the overall purpose of the Bill, but it will not hit the target. I am against exploitation and I am for fairness and social mobility, but I am also in favour of young people getting the experience that they need to enter the workplace. We need a balance.”—[Official Report, 13 May 2014; Vol. 580, c. 595-6.]

I could not agree more with everything that the hon. Gentleman said. The House divided on the Bill, and I was a Teller alongside the hon. Member for Huddersfield. I opposed it then, and I still oppose it today.

Another issue that will not, I suspect, be addressed by the Bill is nepotism. My hon. Friend speaks of ordinary kids with modest backgrounds finding it difficult to access top jobs. It seems to me, however, that the problem is not that they are not paid for the jobs, but that, in many cases, they do not get a look in to start with. I think I am right in saying—and I should make clear that I do not decry anyone to whom this applies—that about one in 12 MPs is related to another MP, either current or former. I am not entirely sure that the Bill will make any difference to that—perhaps it should not make any difference—

Mr Nuttall: There are one or two of those in the Chamber. [Laughter.]

Philip Davies: It was not for me to pinpoint anyone in particular, and I should say for the record that the ones who are in the Chamber are among the ablest and most effective. I would not have wanted to do anything that prevented them from being here. That is not my point. My point is that, in all circumstances, people will use whatever opportunities they have to further their aims and ambitions, and we should not criticise them for that. The notion that if we pass the Bill we will end up with a system that provides equal opportunities for everyone is for the birds. That is just not going to happen. I do not think that my hon. Friend would make many inroads with this measure even if it were successful.

It is commonplace in business, and in other spheres, for people to seek opportunities such as internships and placements on the basis of who they know rather than what they know. I would like to think that the fact that we in this place are able to offer unpaid internships, work experience or whatever we want to call it to all our constituents if they ask—I certainly would never refuse a constituent, and indeed I try to accommodate as many people as I can who are not constituents—means that everyone, not just people we know, is being given an opportunity. I think that unpaid internships are extending the opportunities to more people, and I do not think that it is simply a question of giving the opportunity to someone we know or to a relative. That is why I think that my hon. Friend is attacking the problem from the wrong end.

Alec Shelbrooke: The Clerks advised me against having a 28-day limit, but would that satisfy many of my hon. Friend’s concerns? I would be interested to hear him expand on that.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being prepared to be flexible with his Bill. We should commend him for that. I think there are areas where my hon. Friend can make the Bill better, but just making it better does not make it better than the status quo, so I cannot promise that if he were to amend it in that way it would all of a sudden command my support. I would say, however, that the Bill can be better than currently drafted, and my hon. Friend might want to explore that avenue. I am not entirely sure the Bill can be amended to make it into a good Bill, but it could be amended to make it a better Bill.

We should be clear about the rates of the minimum wage. It varies depending on people’s age. That is because we want to make sure that younger people get a fair crack of the whip; they would potentially be overlooked for someone older and more experienced if the minimum wage was the same across the board. So the Labour Government introduced a minimum wage, which has been maintained, which varies depending on age: it is £7.20 for those aged 25 and over, falling to £4 for those under 18, with different scales in between. In this context, I want my hon. Friend to bear in mind a further unintended consequence of introducing his Bill: there would clearly be an inbuilt advantage to take on younger people as interns if they have to be paid, because if they are being paid the minimum wage, they will be paid less than the cost of taking on somebody older. In this case, therefore, for the business concerned it would be a case of the younger the better. Schoolchildren would be exempt, as would students in full-time employment if it was part of their course. So this means anyone of that age could be taken on as an intern—schoolchildren could be taken on as interns for free—but for those aged 25 or over, the sum would be £7.20 an hour right away.

Somebody of 25 or over might, however, be in the greatest need of work experience, because they have clearly been finding it pretty difficult to get themselves a paid job, and they are having to do more to make themselves employable. It would be unfortunate if people in that position, who are striving to get a job and are prepared to do whatever it takes, are turned away because they have to be paid £7.20 an hour, which an employer either could not afford or was not prepared to pay. They might take on someone younger who does not have the same needs. One of the flaws of the Bill is that it is not needs-based; it does not look at who most needs these internships. Its strategy is too simple and is therefore flawed. Older people will lose out first even though they are most in need. That would need to be amended.

There is also no exemption in this Bill for participants in Government schemes or programmes to provide training, work experience or temporary work. I do not know whether that would conflict with other Government legislation. I imagine there would be another charter for making lawyers richer—as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North feared—in establishing which legislation had precedence. I am not a lawyer, and those with a legal background would be better placed than me to comment, but my understanding is that usually the latest legislation trumps previous legislation.

Mr Rees-Mogg rose—

Philip Davies: I knew my hon. Friend would want to correct me, and I will of course allow him to do so.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I, too, am not a lawyer, but according to implied repeal, a later Act trumps a former Act—except, I am sorry to say, with the European Communities Act 1972, which has been deemed constitutional statute.
Philip Davies: I do not want to get into that, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] Well, I do want to get into that, but not today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. On the contrary, the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) has raised a point that is relevant to the Bill we are discussing, and the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) would not be out of order if he continued the dialogue with him on that point.

Philip Davies: I am grateful for that guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I fear that if I got sidetracked into talking about the latest decision by the High Court, we could be here for quite some time. I want to return to the issue but not today; I will save myself for another day, when I will tell the House what I really think of those judges and their ruling.

What I take from the intervention by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) is that, like me, he suspects that the Bill would in effect supersede previous legislation about work experience from Government schemes. We would therefore get ourselves in a bit of muddle. We all agree—both sides of the House agree—that people on benefits doing work experience is a good thing that should be expected of them, unpaid. It helps them to get a job and we do not want to interfere with a system that works very well for lots of people who are looking for jobs. The Bill would need amending on that basis.

My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell mentioned volunteers. If he gets the chance to wind up the debate, I hope he will deal with that issue because we have not had clarity on it. It is referred to in the explanatory notes, but they do not say a fat lot more than the Bill says, if I am honest.

The Bill is about enforcing the national minimum wage, and when the National Minimum Wage Bill was going through Parliament in 1998, the issue of volunteers was dealt with at length. The Minister at the time, Ian McCartney, said:

“I am pleased to say that the entire approach to the clause has been marked by a consensus both on our aims and on the means of achieving them. We want to ensure, first, that genuine volunteers—who give their time to good causes—are not caught up in the Bill’s provisions.”—[Official Report, 9 March 1998, Vol. 308, c. 23.]

The Labour Government at the time were clearly concerned about that issue, which was raised in the Bill Committee. I was not here at the time, but it appears that the Labour Government made changes as a result of concerns raised in Committee, which are the same as those raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset, and they had discussions with people who were concerned.

During the debate, the then Minister said:

“We are conscious, however, that there is a grey area. The definition of ‘worker’ in clause 52 of that Bill “is quite wide, although no wider than the definition used for the purposes of provisions on unauthorised deductions in the Employment Rights Act 1996.”—[Official Report, 9 March 1998, Vol. 308, c. 24.]

It is an area of concern, and I am not entirely sure that the Bill does a great deal to clear up any confusion about that issue. It seems that the original National Minimum Wage Bill was determined to try to exclude real, genuine volunteers who were volunteering because they believed in a cause, so it would be strange if volunteer interns were now caught up in legislation that they were never really intended to be caught up in in the first place.

I might just say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that Mr Speaker spoke in the debate in 1998. I mention that not because I wish to draw him into the debate now—I do not—but because I agree with the point that he made. He said:

“There are not instances in which a person works in a charity shop, not for an honorarium but for a modest but regular payment that is below the national minimum wage, and in which, if the shop were obliged to pay that person the national minimum wage, it would have to cease to employ that person? Would not that be a most undesirable state of affairs?”—[Official Report, 9 March 1998, Vol. 308, c. 29.]

Alec Shelbrooke: Following advice on drafting the Bill, clause 1 tries implicitly to make the point that it does not apply to the charity sector, by not listing that sector among the areas that the provisions apply to. We can get into the legal ups and downs, but that is the advice that I was given on exempting the charity sector, to address the specific point that my hon. Friend has just raised.

Philip Davies: I can understand the point my hon. Friend makes. The Bill makes it clear what a workplace is, but clause 3 deals with exclusions, and there is no mention of the charity sector in that clause. I absolutely understand what he is saying, but I am not sure that it is abundantly clear that that sector is excluded. A stated exclusion would have been helpful to clarify this point once and for all.

Mr Nuttall: My hon. Friend has drawn the attention of the House to the problem of volunteers. We have already established the fact that anyone who is doing work, whether or not they are called an intern, is covered by the national minimum wage legislation. If we are prepared to accept that volunteers will be excluded from the Bill, even though that is not explicitly stated, are we not left with a situation in which the only people who will be covered are the people who are doing nothing and who are simply turning up to watch?

Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Bill’s attempt to expand opportunities seems to be all stick and no carrot. I have been looking at what happens in other parts of the world. My hon. Friend has touched on some examples of this as well. In a submission from Perspective in 2013 in favour of paid internships, Robina Longworth cited other practices from around the world. However, as far as I can see, none of the countries listed pays the minimum wage to interns. China and Hong Kong, for example, have subsidised internship programmes for university graduates and hiring companies are eligible for tax breaks and loans. Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell might like to consider giving tax breaks to companies who take people on. That might be a better carrot to offer.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend will have noted my proposal to add some carrot by exempting national insurance contributions in the same way as is done with apprenticeships.
Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. It is inconceivable to me that the Bill would not result in fewer internships being offered. There would undoubtedly be fewer internships and work experience places. Nobody could say that the Bill would result in more such opportunities for people; there would be fewer. My point is that we should encourage businesses to offer more opportunities, particularly for those who do not get a fair crack of the whip. I know that he and I, and many other Members across the House, would like to see that happening, and perhaps tax breaks would be the answer. Rather than telling companies that they had to pay extra for offering these opportunities, perhaps we should consider giving them a financial incentive to do so. That seems to be a much more sensible and conservative way forward. I welcome what my hon. Friend said about national insurance contributions, but perhaps he should also consider tax breaks.

In Poland, there is financial support for engaging young people on internships. In Korea, there are wage subsidies for small businesses that hire interns on regular contracts. Those subsidies are offered at the conclusion of the internship, so the business is given a carrot to take the person on after they have been given a go to see whether they are good enough. And that is not just about the company seeing whether the intern is good enough; it also offers the intern an opportunity to see whether they want to work in that company or industry. That system appears to work for both sides.

I have had an idea for another thing that would be far better, and I hope that my hon. Friend will take this on board because I feel strongly about it. I have wondered about extending student loans to young people who do not want to go to university but want the opportunity to do something else. We give student loans to people, and I am sure that my hon. Friend. Friend would say from a social mobility point of view that they often go to people who are already affluent. In effect, the state gives them a subsidised loan at a preferential rate to enable them to live while at university and get a degree, which will then in all likelihood lead to them getting a higher-paid job than if they did not have a degree. It could be argued that it is like throwing apples into full orchards and that we are subsidising the people who are best off.

However, people who do not go to university are often the poorest in the country and they get nothing. They do not get a subsidised loan to pursue their career ambitions. Why not offer something like a student loan to, for example, someone from a poor working-class background in Yorkshire—

Mr Nuttall: Or Lancashire.

Philip Davies: Certainly not Lancashire.

That person may want to pursue a career in which they have a great interest, and such a loan, at a preferential rate, could give them the opportunity to come down to London to do the relevant work experience. They could then pay the loan back, just as university graduate does, when they are in a job that pays a certain amount of money. That would extend opportunities to people who currently do not get them. I have never quite understood why the only young people who get subsidised loans from the Government are those who go to university. What about all the other people who want to do something different?

Alec Shelbrooke: Specifically on those points, it will not have escaped my hon. Friend’s notice that the Bill contains an exemption for people on accredited degree courses. We were willing to put that in because many accredited degree courses contain a period of internship and—this was my reason—have access to student finance. He makes a valid point about granting that access to other people on the same terms, but—this is where I would blend my Bill in—there is a question about how to sort out the time limits on such a scheme. I am listening carefully to his comments. The Bill probably will not move into Committee, which is a great pity because many important things have been said in this debate that would help to develop it.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He is being typically constructive, which goes to show that his dedication is not to a piece of legislation but to getting the best possible outcome for the people he wants to help. We all recognise his passion for this, and I am happy to work with him to help deliver it.

Let us take someone who wants to work in the fashion industry or the music industry, for example. The fashion industry was mentioned earlier, so let us say the music industry. It may be that doing a degree would not help them get a foot on the ladder in the music industry; it may or may not—I do not know the industry particularly well. It may well be, however, that spending six months at a record label in London after leaving school would represent a massive head start in getting a career in the industry. It would be good if the Government offered some kind of loan to enable someone to get that opportunity. They could then pay it back when they got a decent job in the industry. That would be a way to extend opportunities to more people, whereas the Bill would restrict opportunities.

Bob Stewart: That is a tremendous idea, to which I am hugely attracted. Small and medium-sized enterprises might also be hugely attracted to using such people in their companies.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is a red-letter day when my hon. Friend supports me.

Bob Stewart: Red rose.

Philip Davies: Certainly not a red rose. A red letter is far better than a red rose any day of the week.

As for Members of Parliament, an FOI request of IPSA asked about the number of interns and paid interns working for MPs over the past three years. It seems that about one in four MPs took on a paid intern, but I am pretty sure that virtually every MP takes on people to do work experience of some sort or another and that everybody who does so gets something out of it. Given the number of people we take on to give that opportunity to them, if we had to pay them all the minimum wage, that would take up a sizeable part of our budget. It would mean either that we could not afford to take them on or that we would have to give our existing staff a pay cut. Neither of those would be a palatable option, but they would be the only options available to us.

Strangely, the Bill does not seem to recognise that people have short-term and long-term internships. My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell mentioned that issue, so I will not go into it further as he would
wish to look at it. I have spent longer than I expected speaking to the Bill—[Interruption]—because of the number of interventions I have taken. In concluding, I just wish to mention a couple of people who have spent time with me. Before I go into that, I should just say that the Bill will mean we will probably end up with more people on zero-hours contracts. I know that quite a lot of Labour MPs employ people on those contracts, even though they are against them politically. [Interruption.] Does that mean zero-hours contracts are a good thing?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am conscious that my hon. Friend is drawing his remarks to a close, but what I have drawn from his comments is that he agrees with me that there must be a mechanism by which people can do these roles and be able to live, survive and do something. He has come up with interesting suggestions, but I think that he recognises the premise that we reduce social mobility if someone simply cannot afford to take up the post.

Philip Davies: Yes; as I said at the start, we all want to achieve the same thing, which is to expand the number of opportunities for people, particularly those who do not always get them at the moment. I do not know anyone in the House who would not share that ambition—I certainly do. The Bill would take us in the opposite direction, which is why the suggestions I have made would be better in trying to deal with the position my hon. Friend has set out.

In conclusion, I wish to talk about a couple of people who have spent time with me. One of my previous researchers, Grainne, initially started working at my office on an “unpaid internship”, as it would be described; it would fall within the scope of the Bill without any shadow of a doubt. She had left university and was struggling to get a job. If I had had to pay her, I would not have taken her on, not only because I could not have afforded to, but because I knew nothing about her. I did not know anything about her credentials, but she wanted to come to have a go and I was happy to facilitate that. This is what she said about the value of her internship when she went to speak at a school about her experience of getting a job in politics:

“Having tried unsuccessfully for months to get a paid job, the feedback I kept hearing again and again was that ‘you don’t have enough experience’. But how do you get experience if no one will give you a job? So I decided to apply for an unpaid internship with Philip Davies MP—in the hope this would lead to something more… I was made to feel like a fully integrated part of the team and given a wealth of opportunities that I would otherwise not have achieved… Without my unpaid internship I am convinced I would not have been given such an excellent opportunity.”

When a job became available in my office, I gave it to her because she had proved herself and done such a good job in that time. She went on to say:

“From Parliament I moved to a Comms agency, before working in the Public Affairs team for a large corporate. I then became a Special Adviser and am now back in House working for a FTSE 125 company as their Director of Corporate Affairs.”

She is about 30 years old. She continued:

“I would not have been able to achieve any of this without my unpaid internship.”

Another intern, George, who completed a five-month unpaid placement in my constituency and is now working for my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Mr Chope), said:

“Without the internship I very much doubt I would be working where I am today. Being able to have that first hand experience on my CV was invaluable to getting the job I have today, and I have been able to apply the experience gained to other areas in my role now”.

I employed my current researcher, who has done a marvellous job helping me on the Bill, after she completed a two-week work experience placement while at university. She did that not as part of her university course, but in the holidays, because it was something that she wanted to do. I am not sure whether that would be covered by the Bill, but I suspect that she would have had to be paid. She said that without doing those couple of weeks in the office, she would not have had the opportunity to show herself capable of the job when it arose, and that is absolutely true.

I want to see more opportunities for work experience and internships, and the Bill will inevitably lead to fewer such opportunities. I admire my hon. Friend’s passion on social mobility, but I hope that he will reflect on the ideas that I have set out today. In future, perhaps a Bill that covered some of the points made today will go some way to achieving the ambition that we both share.
He waxed lyrical about the boost it had given both his CV and his broader outlook, and he was an absolute life-saver for me when it came to getting myself set up and finding my feet here.

However, the Bill deals with the other side of the coin: unpaid internships, through which employers take advantage of young people who are desperate to break into highly competitive sectors, or simply trying to improve their prospects. The system is rigged in favour of those who can afford it—or perhaps it would be better to say whose parents can afford it. Young people from my constituency, and indeed most young people across the country, cannot afford to work for nothing. Careers in law, medicine, the media, fashion, finance and the arts are all beyond the reach of some of our brightest and our best. Those careers are monopolised by the children of the wealthy, who can support them through months of unpaid work, while those from more modest backgrounds are shut out. It is not just social mobility that suffers; by denying opportunities to so many young people, businesses are missing out on hiring real talent, simply because of that talent’s background.

There is, of course, also the simple moral imperative to ensure that someone doing a fair day’s work receives a fair day’s wage.

Mark Pawsey: What would the hon. Lady say to Opposition Members who say that if the Bill went through, there would be fewer internships?

Gill Furniss: I would have to have a quiet word with them about that.

I appreciate that the hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell has linked this Bill to the minimum wage, rather than the so-called living wage. We have to strike a balance between providing fair pay for younger people and making internships too expensive for employers to run. By ending the exploitation of young people through internships, this Bill goes a long way towards levelling the playing field.

I have been brief because I realise that the hon. Gentleman is passionate about the subject of his Bill and I do not want to contribute to its being spoken out.

1.25 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): It seems appropriate that in a debate about working practices I should be multi-tasking, speaking as I am from the Parliamentary Private Secretary’s Bench. I ask that the aides to the Minister resist the temptation to send any notes to the Minister while I am on my feet.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), but it is a particular pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), whose reputation for scrutinising Bills on a Friday precedes him, as does the reputation of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall). My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley made several references in his speech to my legal and familial antecedents, and as he was speaking I was reminded of the comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) about the need to be thick-skinned on these Benches.

The comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley contributed to the debate to this extent: my experience of seeing my father work in this place meant that I understood how much good can be done here. Is that not the point of internships and work experience? It is about opening minds and giving young people and older people the chance to see work environments and job opportunities of which they may have no personal experience, and to see the opportunities available to them.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell for bringing this debate and for bringing to life an area of law—employment law—which can be pretty dry at times. In his speech my hon. Friend has shown the real impact that it can have on people’s lives when they are trying to start out on their career. His speech and his Bill show just how important that is. For us to create a society that works for everyone, we must ensure that access to fulfilling or well-paid careers is not limited to the privileged few. Talent and hard work, not where one went to school or the size of one’s parents’ bank account, should determine one’s success.

I part from my hon. Friend, however, on the means by which we achieve this aim. The provision to pay interns already exists in legislation. Guidance, combined with steps to encourage employers to adopt best practice in their workplaces, is the best way to tackle the issue. I am pleased that it has been raised in the House, as work experience and properly constituted internships are an invaluable way of helping young people decide which career path they would like to take.

In September I held the first Louth and Horncastle jobs and apprenticeships fair. There are many successful local businesses in my constituency and many talented people looking for work, as well as students who are at the beginning of their careers and would like ideas about what they should do for the rest of their lives. I wanted to bring them all together. I am happy to say that at the jobs fair more than 200 people attended, with both local and national businesses showing at the fair, including Luxus, Polypipe, BAE Systems, Butlins, National Grid and Walnut Care. We had pretty much every opportunity one can think of covered by the employers on hand.

I hope that work experience and internships may help some of my constituents start fulfilling careers. Later this afternoon I am welcoming students from Somercotes Academy, who have come to this place to see democracy and debate in action for themselves.

Work experience can be an invaluable learning experience and allow young people to meet potential employers and colleagues, and it can even help someone realise that a particular career is not for them. I remember a couple of days of work experience I did, although I will not name the profession for fear of offending many people looking for work, as well as students who are at the beginning of their careers and would like ideas about what they should do for the rest of their lives. I wanted to bring them all together. I am happy to say that at the jobs fair more than 200 people attended, with both local and national businesses showing at the fair, including Luxus, Polypipe, BAE Systems, Butlins, National Grid and Walnut Care. We had pretty much every opportunity one can think of covered by the employers on hand.

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Work experience can be an invaluable learning experience and allow young people to meet potential employers and colleagues, and it can even help someone realise that a particular career is not for them. I remember a couple of days of work experience I did, although I will not name the profession for fear of offending many people in my constituency. I walked into the office and realised within moments that this was not the career for me—I suspect the profession involved dodging a bullet when I made that decision. Internships can be just as valuable in showing people where their paths do not lie as where they do.

I concur with my hon. Friend’s laudable aim to encourage fair access to the opportunities created by work experience and internships. We must do all we can to ensure these opportunities are made available to talented young people from all backgrounds, because this is not
just about the fundamental unfairness of refusing to pay someone for the work they have done; it is also about the impact on social mobility. Those from wealthy backgrounds have far greater resources on which to draw, in terms not just of income but of contacts.

My hon. Friend spoke at length about the experiences of students in the fashion world and the art world, and those anecdotes showed clearly the troubles we face. He also said that 40% of internships were turned down by people who felt that they could not do them. As he said, that cannot be the right way to go with this issue.

Another important point is that ensuring there is equal access to these opportunities makes good business sense; it widens the pool of talent to which businesses have access, making it far more likely that they will employ the best person for their organisation.

Now I turn to where I part company from my hon. Friend. The Bill states:

“An intern who enters into a workplace internship shall be remunerated by his employer in respect of his work at a rate which is not less than the national minimum wage”.

Under the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, interns who are genuine volunteers, who are under no obligation to perform work or provide services, will not fall within the definition of worker and will not be eligible for the national minimum wage. However, if an organisation treats an intern as though he were worker, a contractual relationship may arise, and the person is then entitled to be paid the national minimum wage. Consequently, provision to pay interns already exists.

Mr Nuttall: Given my hon. Friend’s profession, is she aware of the case of Edmonds v. Lawson in 1999? Miss Edmonds was a pupil barrister, and she successfully claimed that, while she was on her pupillage, she was not paid. As he said, that cannot be the right way to go with this issue.

Victoria Atkins: Indeed, as I mentioned, when I did my pupillage, which was just before that case was decided, pupillages did not have to be paid, so I spent the first six months of my pupillage not being paid while I was very clearly working. Happily, as I said, the Bar—I remind my hon. Friend that it is constituted of self-employed people, not companies—has now made it mandatory for pupillages to be funded. I forget the level at which they are funded, but it is well above the national minimum wage.

Bob Stewart: Has the fact that it is a requirement that people be paid led to a reduction in pupillages?

Victoria Atkins: Certainly it did for the years following the introduction of payments for pupillages. However, it was felt that, in the longer term, the pupillages would be of a higher quality, because a chambers would be very much focusing on making sure it got the right calibre and quality of candidate to suit its business, rather than being a bit of a factory of pupillages and encouraging people who, sadly, did not then later find better, longer-term employment.

I am glad that this debate has been brought to the House, as it is important to raise awareness of when an intern is due the national minimum wage so that the 1998 Act is followed. In our current legislation, the term “intern” is not defined explicitly, and it can be ambiguous as to whether a person performing an internship also falls under the definition of “worker”. Work experience can be called a placement or an internship, and volunteering schemes that do not involve working activities are also often referred to as internships. As this is a complicated area where the line between what should be an unpaid internship and a contractual working relationship is often blurred, and can indeed be crossed without either party meaning to do so, it is most effective for the Government to offer guidance to assist employers to adopt best practice.

The Minister may well take away from this debate the point made by my hon. Friend the Members for Elmet and Rothwell and for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) about the maximum of 28 days in any calendar year. That would be a good starting place for working out whether a person is an intern or somebody on work experience, or whether they have entered into a more contractual relationship with the person offering the experience.

It is vital that employers as well as employees are aware of the statutory provisions that are available, because some of these roles do not require the minimum wage to be paid. There is no doubt, however, that there are situations where what is referred to as an internship describes work activities, and those participating in the scheme should be paid. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell for drawing attention to that ambiguity.

While I welcome the information provided by the Government through their website, gov.uk, and ACAS, I urge them to continue to review the effectiveness of the guidance they are offering in this area. I encourage all businesses to make provision to allow young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds such opportunities.

Henry Smith ( Crawley) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that internships and work experience can give opportunities to young people. Many charities and small businesses could not necessarily afford to pay for internships. It is therefore important to have greater clarity on what is appropriate, and I congratulate her on asking the Government to keep this matter under review.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. I also welcome the work done by the Government to promote fair and open access to paid internships through the graduate talent pool, the social mobility business compact, and the common best practice code for high-quality internships, which ask employers to ensure that any internships they offer are paid fairly.

Alongside offering guidance, we must continue to crack down on employers who are not treating employees fairly. I welcome the fact that this year the Government have increased HMRC’s enforcement budget by £7 million, improving its ability to crack down on employers who exploit interns and fail to pay staff properly. I declare an interest in that I used to prosecute criminals for HMRC. I wish it well in its endeavours. Employers who pay workers less than the minimum wage not only have to pay back arrears of wages at current minimum wage.
rates, but face financial penalties of up to £20,000 per worker. I hope that the message leaves this Chamber today that it is not worth employers trying to get round the rules, and that they must treat their employees and interns fairly.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend is summing up very well a lot of what has been said. She was in the Chamber when I spoke and will have heard my comments about the model contract from the Institute of Directors, and the voluntary internships with Vivienne Westwood being advertised from 1 January 2017 based on those hours. Does my hon. Friend agree that something has to be done to tidy up this area so that all these things sit properly within the law?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this Bill to the House. I thank him for his long-standing campaign to speak up for social mobility. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work placement schemes are a vital part of achieving that.

I will address the issue of internships more broadly, before addressing some of my concerns about my hon. Friend’s Bill.

Internships are incredibly important in the longer term, securing professional employment for younger people, and sometimes not-so-young people. Statistics show that internships are a vital route for many people into employment. Reports that I have found show that 30% of graduates completed internships with their employer before getting their job, and in some sectors the figure rises to 50%. In many professions, completing at least one internship within the industry is essential.

My background, like that of some other colleagues who have spoken, is as a journalist. It is almost impossible for someone to get professional employment as a journalist unless they can provide on their CV that they have already had some journalistic experience, usually in the form of work experience or an internship. That is just one example of how internships are vital for entry to many professions.

The Government have estimated that there are currently about 70,000 interns in the UK, of whom 15,000 are unpaid. However, I think those figures mask the true scale of what is happening. There are a great many informal—for want of a better word—internship arrangements across many professions, which I suspect are probably going unmeasured in those statistics.

Internships are valuable to individuals. They help them to understand the reality of the career area in which they want to work. They then develop skills that become valuable throughout life—not just in their particular profession or chosen career path, but in the wider world. Ultimately, an internship helps people to reach an informed decision about whether they do, in fact, want to spend their life, or a particular part of it, in their chosen career.

Importantly, internships are also extremely beneficial to the employer. They give them an insight into an individual’s skills and character to a far greater extent than any interview, application form or CV. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley mentioned the benefits to the employer of finding out an individual’s skills set, because that may help both of them to come to a decision about future employment. That is important.

For young people today, internships are an essential element of searching for a job and, consequently, getting on generally in life. I and my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell want to ensure that internships are available as widely as possible and that those from less privileged backgrounds are able to access them. That is so important and I will come on to address that challenge. At the moment, there seems to be a large element of “It’s not what you know, but who you know”, in enabling people not only to get on in many careers, but simply to get a foot in the door with many internship programmes.
Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for addressing those points. May I urge him to focus on the statistic that shows that 40% of people who are offered an internship have to turn it down because they cannot afford to do it? On opportunities and choice, we are getting close to a situation where half of those offered an internship cannot afford to do it. As my hon. Friend has said, internships are becoming a massive means of getting into the professional job market, so I urge him to keep that statistic in mind when he moves on to address opportunity.

Peter Heaton-Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point and I will seek to address it later in my remarks.

On social mobility, unpaid internships can be extraordinarily expensive for many of those wishing to go into the professional services, which are often located in the bigger cities and, in many cases, far away from rural constituencies such as mine. If young people in North Devon wish to undertake an internship in one of the larger cities, that will mean paying travel expenses and finding accommodation. For many—this goes to the heart of the point that my hon. Friend has just made—that is simply prohibitive. I do understand that that is a problem. If internships are accessible only to those with financial means, we will entrench a system where the professions are disproportionately dominated by those from families with higher incomes.

Henry Smith: As my hon. Friend has said, internships are often available only in large cities, with London being the predominant area. Does he agree that that places even more responsibility on large employers, which have the resources properly to support interns and those seeking work experience with them, to pay high costs such as those for accommodation and travel?

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is a good argument, but the difficulty is that I am not sure that the Bill addresses it. That is my problem and my challenge to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell has mentioned, there are two categories in the existing national minimum wage legislation: workers and apprentices. Workers provide a trade or service in return for remuneration and have an obligation to provide this work—I must sound as though I was an hon. and learned Member, which I assuredly am not—while apprentices receive a lower rate of pay, because although to a degree they provide the same services as workers, they receive on-the-job training. Consequently, the pay level for apprentices recognises that the employer invests time and resources in them, and they do not have to be paid as workers. In my view, interns are closer to the category of an apprentice, rather than that of a worker.

Internships provide individuals with experience and training, which helps them to deliver and gain employment. The Bill states that “the intern meets learning objectives or gains experience of working for the employer”, and that the internship provides “practical experience in an occupation or profession.” In my view, that is largely what an apprenticeship achieves. Workers, who receive the national minimum wage, do not set out to meet learning objectives or gain experience of working for the employer. That is almost ancillary to their role, which is to provide a service in return for their remuneration. Interns do not provide for the employer the same value as a worker, if I may put it that way, so their pay should not be the same. If I may say so to my hon. Friend, that is one of the flaws in his proposed Bill.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend will have heard the examples I have given of major multinational, multimillion-pound corporations, such as KPMG, making it very clear that everybody working in their organisation is contributing to it. It is unfair to say that interns in a business do not contribute in the same way as others, as in the case of somebody working for Vivienne Westwood.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I must apologise to my hon. Friend. I did not mean that interns do not add value; I think they add incredible value. Interns in my office have added incredible value. I was merely seeking to draw a distinction in law about the difference in status, as it were, between workers and interns or apprenticeships. Interns absolutely do add value, but I was seeking to make the point that if an intern’s circumstances mirror those of a worker, they will be covered by current employment law.

Another issue in relation to social mobility, which in my view is so important, is whether internships should exist at all. This is the heart of what I am seeking to say in this speech. My fear—fundamentally, if simplistically—is that increasing the cost of interns will inevitably mean that fewer internships are available. That is especially the case in constituencies such as mine of North Devon, where the vast majority of employers contributing to the local economy are small and medium-sized enterprises.
If those SMEs are forced to pay interns the national minimum wage, my fear is that many businesses in North Devon will simply not be able to afford to set aside that sum of money to offer internship opportunities. It is important not to choke off the opportunities available to our young people—and indeed others—and I fear that an unintended consequence of the Bill might be to do just that in areas such as North Devon where SMEs make up the vast bulk of employers and thus provide the vast bulk of opportunities for possible internships.

Alec Shelbrooke: For the purposes of clarification, may I assume that my hon. Friend nevertheless supports the National Minimum Wage Act 1998?

Peter Heaton-Jones: Yes, but in the context of my hon. Friend’s Bill we are discussing whether or not the national minimum wage should be applied to internships. My argument is that, if it is, there will suddenly be a contraction—a fairly major contraction—in the number of internships offered by SMEs, which make up the bulk of employers in my constituency and in many others. My point is specifically about employers’ ability to offer internships and the opportunities that will be available. We do not want to choke off opportunities. Yes, some internships are offered by big corporations and big employers who can afford the cost, but many more internships are short term—perhaps for only a few weeks or even a few days—and in small and medium-sized businesses. That will absolutely be the case in my constituency. These small businesses take on interns almost out of a sense of duty to their local community. I fear that if we mandate the extension of the national minimum wage to internships, the number of opportunities available to young people and the work experience opportunities offered to my constituents will sadly and inevitably decrease. As I say, that is an unintended consequence of the Bill.

In my view, allowance should also be made for a short internship that does not mandate any remuneration. Long-term internships are good, and there are many professions in which they happen. Short internships, though, sometimes literally of a few days, are far more numerous and are more often offered by small businesses. That is the case in my North Devon constituency, where the overwhelming majority of internships will be very short—only a few days or perhaps a couple of weeks. Very few SMEs in North Devon will have the capacity to offer a longer internship, and they would be further prevented from doing so if they were mandated to pay the national minimum wage.

Many people, particularly young people, in my constituency are offered internships because of the employer’s desire to help the individual to get on rather than to use their labour. As I say, it is almost a community scheme, and in a place such as North Devon it operates in a way that is very healthy for society and for that sort of community where we sometimes feel that we are a long way from everywhere else—albeit that we in North Devon are, I like to think, our very own small economic powerhouse.

This contrasts starkly with longer-term internships that are often found in many professions that are prevalent in big cities. Of course, if someone in my constituency wants to take up one of these internships, it will come at a greater cost, not least because of the travelling costs from North Devon to one of the big cities. I fear that the Bill does not distinguish between the short-term internships offered by small companies and the longer-term internships in large cities, where the costs for the individual will be higher, but the large corporation will be better able to pay the national minimum wage. I fear that an effect of the Bill might mean many of the short-term internships currently offered by small businesses in my constituency will not be offered in future, thus reducing the available opportunities to my constituents. That is not something I want to see, and I am sure it is not something that my hon. Friend wants to see either, but I fear that, should the Bill proceed, it might be one of the unintended consequences.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend is making a case that many others have made today. It is unfortunate that, when I was drafting the Bill, the advice I was given was that the 28-day provision was unenforceable. However, if my hon. Friend were minded, by some miracle, to allow the Bill a Committee stage, I am sure he would like to join that Committee, and perhaps table amendments to meet those needs.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is a very kind offer, and one that is almost impossible to resist. It is possible that I shall not need to “RSVP” in about 29 minutes, but we shall see.

My hon. Friend and others have expressed a fear that there is currently some exploitation: that businesses are taking advantage of those who should be valuable work-experience interns, and using them to do as much work as many of their other employees while getting away with not paying them. It is certainly not acceptable for an employer to use an unpaid intern as just another worker carrying out the same task as others while not being paid, but I fear that my hon. Friend’s Bill will not solve that problem.

The Government have done some work in this regard. This year, for instance, they increased HMRC’s enforcement budget by £7 million. It is important for staff to be paid the appropriate amount for the work that they do, and for that payment to be properly declared. We must ensure that internships are not used as a way of circumventing national minimum wage legislation.

Reference has been made to the position of charities and voluntary organisations. Because I have a copy of the House of Commons Library’s excellent briefing, I am aware that the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 already

“provides an exception…which enables a limit range of organisations (e.g. charities) to enter contractual relations with volunteers without necessitating payment”

of the national minimum wage. That is to be applauded, because many charities and voluntary organisations in the third sector rely on the good will of volunteers to come and do the work that is so necessary in that sector. It would be entirely wrong for those excellent organisations to be mandated to pay the national minimum wage to volunteers. That could have a serious impact on their important work.

According to the House of Commons Library briefing—I think that this is a masterful example of understatement—

“This area of the law is notoriously complex.”
I fear that, sadly, the Bill may do nothing to ease that notorious complexity. I think that we need to look carefully at other ways of closing some of these loopholes if we wish to extend some of the very noble efforts that my hon. Friend has been making so far.

I applaud my hon. Friend, for the aims of his Bill are noble, but I do not think that making the national minimum wage mandatory for workplace internships is appropriate. I fear that it will have the unintended consequence that I have described: that it will have an impact on the availability of internships and the capacity of small and medium-sized enterprises such as mine in North Devon to offer opportunities to young people. It is important that they are able to offer those opportunities, and that young people are able to take them up, so that we can ensure that our Government’s priority and ambition to deliver a country that works for everyone is fulfilled.

First, let me make a few remarks about internships in the broader context and share a few points from my constituency experience. I have changed the names of the people I shall mention. The first of them is Susan. She was educated at a well-known public school. Her father was chairman of a public company and a donor to one of our two major political parties. He effected an introduction to the party chairman which resulted in a six-month unpaid internship for Susan at the party’s headquarters, and from the contacts she made there she was able to secure a second unpaid internship for a Member of Parliament.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): And then a safe seat.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman takes my example a little too far, but one can only imagine such an outcome as being highly likely.

Now, let me introduce Jack. Jack’s father works for a landscape-gardening company and just about makes average earnings, and his wife works part-time as a carer. As a family, they are just about getting by and they think Jack will get on fine because he is a bright boy. But Jack is already disadvantaged by some of the choices he made at GCSE which ruled out the sort of A-levels the Russell Group universities favour. He has no contacts in London and his family cannot afford to support him through an unpaid internship. Unlike Susan I think Jack would probably be one of the 40% of young people my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell indicates would reject an internship if offered on an unpaid basis. Those case studies illustrate to me that my hon. Friend is really on to something in challenging the concept of unpaid internships under the conditions set out in his Bill.

However, I believe that good, worthwhile, genuine internships certainly have a part to play, alongside other routes such as work experience, apprenticeships, work placements and work shadowing, all of which we have heard a great deal about in our debate. I believe we all recognise that young people learning about the workplace, developing skills and getting training can produce networking opportunities in and of themselves. Employers can also benefit from fresh thinking and from finding potentially great new permanent employees to join their team in future.

There are many different types of internship. The Gateways to the Professions Collaborative Forum, for example, represents about 60 professional bodies. We have heard about the excellent programme of paid internships that is run from the Speaker’s quarters in this House. In the attempt to define high-quality apprenticeships as an arrangement whereby individuals work and can gain some compensation, there is also the prospect that they will develop professional skills and an understanding of a profession. Those are all good experiences and we would not want obstacles to their fulfilment to be created unnecessarily from any unintended consequences of legislation.

There are many excellent resources, such as the Government-backed graduate talent pool, which is an initiative designed to help new and recent graduates to gain real work experience across Government. It advertises quality internships with a range of desirable employers in numerous competitive sectors. Most significantly,
There is an increasing wealth of information out there, for employers as much as anyone else, about what placements anonymously on the site and often find
general work experience, and it showed that over 80% of others.
more than 500 people registered with the pool found in
order to improve their long-term prospects and gain
placement anonymously on the site and often find
talents are for paid positions. A 2011 survey of
UK are entitled to fair wages for fair work.
are bad examples of work
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do something worth while. It would be a strange state of
have to be written and the value provided to the person
contract with their employer under which they perform
work experience if they were doing genuine work that
worker has a “day one” right to be at least paid
appropriate national minimum wage or the national living wage if he or she is over 25. When a
court looks at a person’s employment status, it will
consider the reality of their working arrangements
and not just how those are described. Simply labelling
someone as an intern is not enough to exempt them
from the rights associated with being a worker.
A genuine worker has a “day one” right to be at least paid
the appropriate national minimum wage or the
national living wage if he or she is over 25. When a
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always consider the reality of their working arrangements
and not just how those are described. Simply labelling
someone as an intern is not enough to exempt them
from the rights associated with being a worker.

However, there is no universally agreed or accepted
definition of the term “intern”, despite many attempts
to define it today. I sensed considerable sympathy for
the view expressed by my hon. Friend, Philip Davies: If we complicate this too much, is there not a danger that employers trying to avoid having
someone classified as a worker would simply get people
in to do menial things such as making the tea, rather
than doing a proper job? Most people who do work
experience really appreciate being able to muck in and
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Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for his apposite intervention. I agree that it would be most deleterious if
employers were to downgrade the work experience that
they offered, to get round the law. I must point out, however, that the alternative might be that employers
would start to compensate the person undergoing the work experience if they were doing genuine work that
added value to the firm or organisation in question.

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and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) about the days when she was a prosecution barrister for HMRC. As she will know, HMRC follows up every complaint it receives.

I recognise that some people, interns in particular, will be worried about employment prospects if they make a complaint, but I want to make everybody aware that anyone who contacts the ACAS helpline will be treated with strict confidentiality. Anyone whose complaint is referred to HMRC directly will also be treated with absolute confidence. People can choose how much information about themselves to disclose. It is even possible for someone to raise a complaint to be followed up by HMRC without even disclosing their identity. Safeguards are in place, and I urge all MPs to make employers, employees and interns in their constituency aware of their rights and the ease with which they can raise complaints without jeopardising their employment prospects.

Alec Shelbrooke: What advice could my hon. Friend give to someone who is the only employee in a business?

Margot James: My hon. Friend points to a good exception to what I have been saying. If someone is the only employee in a business, it would be a microbusiness. I would imagine that most people who become an employer’s only employee are family or friends. I accept that such a case could exist and what I said would not apply in those circumstances, but I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that such circumstances are exceptional. I can accept that there will be circumstances in which people will fear being exposed even if their confidentiality is maintained, so I accept my hon. Friend’s wider point.

If the Bill does proceed to Committee, I ask my hon. Friend to assure the House that it will not have a negative impact on the excellent support offered to disadvantaged young people by organisations and groups such as the Social Mobility Foundation. Short-term work placements, which may go beyond the 28 days mentioned earlier, offer risky and ultimately untenable situations for employers, establishing legal obligations towards participants that none of the parties involved either intended or wished for. I fear that my hon. Friend could not offer that guarantee, as indeed the Government could not offer in those circumstances, but I am sure that my hon. Friend has identified for us to act in this area, a minefield for employers.

We have heard that unpaid internships are disproportionately filled by people from affluent backgrounds, and I do not dismiss that concern in any way. Indeed, the examples I gave the House earlier about Susan and Jack underline that if we seek to legislate too readily and expand the scope of existing protections too freely, we may end up legislating some existing opportunities out of existence, because employers will not want the risk or nuisance of offering them and putting themselves into an exposed position that their conduct does not really deserve. If there are fewer internship placements as a result of the Bill, will we really have addressed the social mobility problem that lies behind it? I do not think so, and I sense that a number of my colleagues, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, would agree with me.

A better approach will be to take the opportunity afforded to us by the recently announced Taylor review to look carefully at modern employment practices and to gather evidence to see how we might best direct our efforts to improve fairness of opportunities and consideration for all entrants to the labour market, regardless of their background and whether they have the means to support themselves through unpaid work of any description. As a result of the Bill, I intend to ask Matthew Taylor to look at these questions with respect to interns, and I hope to persuade my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell to lend his considerable experience and credibility to any discussions he may be invited to have by Mr Taylor and the panel members who will assist him in this valuable work, the fruits of which I look forward to seeing.

As the Prime Minister has said on numerous occasions, the Government firmly believe in creating an economy that works for all. We support enterprise but not at the expense of employment rights, wages or job security when job security is desired. Where interns are genuinely workers, they are entitled to all the same rights and protections as any other worker, including, importantly, being eligible for the national minimum wage if they are under 25 and the national living wage if they are over 25.

I take my hon. Friend’s point that, even though the law is clear on that matter, it is governing a great range of grey areas in terms of the nature of the work that people who are starting out on their careers are performing and whether or not they are work shadowing, gaining work experience or undertaking an internship, paid or otherwise. Those are not just grey areas; I would go so far as to call them a minefield for employers.

I wish to protect the vast majority of employers who have a good disposition. I have been one myself, and I know that several contributors to this debate are former business managers who employed people. Indeed, we are all employers in this House, and we are not—even your good self, Madam Deputy Speaker? I hope that I may compliment you by saying that, knowing some of your staff as I do, I know that you are an exemplary employer. Those standards go for the vast majority of Members across this House, and the vast majority of employers outside it are very good employers. Unfortunately, a minority are not, and we have heard some scandalous examples today of employers who are using the internships system to get free labour.

Appalling situations have been cited by a number of colleagues from across the House. Those examples are most regrettable and they underline the need that my hon. Friend has identified for us to act in this area, which is what I hope the Matthew Taylor inquiry will do. It will examine this minefield and clarify the conditions, so that we can ensure that interns, and employers’ good intentions, are protected and that all young people can get good experience without their employers falling foul of the law.

2.30 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 24 February.
Sri Lanka: Human Rights

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

2.31 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Speaker for selecting this topic for debate, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) for being in her place. It is a particular pleasure to see the Minister for Europe and the Americas, who has successfully returned to the Front Bench. I look forward to his particularly provocative personality helping to shake up the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s handling of this matter.

Amnesty International, presenting to the UN Human Rights Council on 15 September, said:

“When Sri Lanka co-sponsored UN Human Rights Council Resolution 30/1 in October 2015, among the commitments made were initiatives to account for enforced disappearances.”

It went on to say that the UN’s Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances “has transmitted more than 12,000 complaints to Sri Lanka. Although the second highest in the world, these represent only the ‘tip of the iceberg.’ In May, the Sri Lankan government acknowledged receiving at least 65,000 complaints of enforced disappearances since 1995.”

That is 65,000 people who have disappeared in 30 years. The majority of them, though not all, are Tamil. All 65,000 had families and loved ones who are grieving, who have no closure and who, certainly at the moment, have little hope of any justice.

I am pleased to say that I have a significant number of Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Muslim constituents, as well as the highest number of Tamil constituents of any MP in the UK. Some of the disappeared have relatives living in my constituency. It is their anger and demand for justice that I bring once again to this great House.

The Foreign Office has fought for the disappeared and their relatives with all the energy of a wet dishcloth. Little obvious effort goes into holding the Sri Lankan Government’s feet to the fire, so that they deliver meaningful reform and prevent further human rights abuses, never mind beginning to put right previous abuses. From time to time, it is true that new commitments are made, or a new Government come in, or there are new Sri Lankan Ministers promising to work with the international community to improve human rights. Very occasionally, the odd case gets resolved, but on the ground in Sri Lanka, the story is one of continuing impunity for human rights abusers. Ministers here, I gently suggest, have simply not done enough in recent times to challenge that culture. There is a sense that the Foreign Office either does not want to rock the boat in Sri Lanka, or does not want to put in the diplomatic effort to keep the new Sri Lankan Government under pressure to deliver.

I have visited Sri Lanka twice. The first time was as a Back-Bench MP in October 2001, if I remember rightly, when a ceasefire was in place, and there were serious negotiations under way between the Government and the Tamil Tigers about what a peace settlement might look like. I went again as a Minister in July 2005 after the terrible tsunami, but by then the conflict was under way again, with targeted assassinations by paramilitaries taking place and the language of confrontation beginning to ratchet up. Since that time, as a Minister when
Labour was in government and since we have been in opposition, I have continued to raise a series of human rights abuses, both through constituency correspondence and by taking part in debates in this House.

I am told that the situation on the ground in the north and east is basically calm. Tamils from other countries can visit and are not routinely stopped any longer by the military or the police. That does not mean, however, that we should forget the terrible events that have taken place in Sri Lanka in recent times. The Sri Lankan military conflict ended in May 2009 after almost a quarter of a century of conflict, with an estimated 100,000 people losing their lives. In the final months few independent observers—certainly, no one from the international media—were able to get close to the fighting, allowing terrible abuses to take place, according to the witness testimony collected by highly credible international human rights organisations.

Murder, disappearances, sexual violence, the use of child soldiers, the use of civilians as human shields and the bombing of hospitals have all been chronicled by witnesses. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) has previously noted, many at the very top of Sri Lankan society, then Ministers, military leaders, figures in the judiciary and civil society, are suspected of being complicit in some of the atrocities that took place.

Inevitably, the Rajapaksa Government were always unlikely to offer a truth and justice process or one that encouraged reconciliation between the different communities of the island of Sri Lanka. So when the Rajapaksa Government were defeated by President Sirisena and his Administration, it seemed like a genuine moment for optimism about Sri Lanka's future. Particularly encouraging was the new Sri Lankan Government's willingness to co-sponsor a resolution to the UN Human Rights Council in October last year, alongside the UK, the US and other countries.

The resolution—a significant step away from the international community's previous support for a full independent inquiry into allegations of war crimes at the end of the conflict and other allegations of human rights abuses levelled at both sides—nevertheless called for measures to advance accountability, reconciliation, human rights and the rule of law. Crucially, it called for international involvement in the prosecution of alleged war crimes and the establishment of a special court “integrating international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators” with an independent Sri Lankan investigative and prosecuting body.

Twelve months on since that resolution was passed, with strong UK Government support and with that key and fundamental element contained in it, it is worth considering where the process stands today. There were, it is true, other elements to the resolution, which I will come back to. On the involvement of international judges and the establishment of a special court, there has been absolutely no progress to date. There have been a series of worrying public statements from the President and the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, stating that the judicial process will have no international involvement at all.

What, then, has been Britain's reaction? I look forward to hearing from the Minister on this point in particular. Has Britain offered any judges to a special court that might be created in Sri Lanka? My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) received a very interesting answer to his written question to the then Home Secretary, now the Prime Minister, on 6 June. The then Home Secretary made it clear that she—and by implication her officials—had made no representations on or offers of help and so on with involving international judges and prosecutors in prosecutions for war crimes in Sri Lanka. In September this year the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, visited Sri Lanka and reiterated his support for international judicial participation in the special court. I ask the Minister gently why Britain has not done more to encourage delivery of that special court with that international judicial co-operation.

The resolution passed 12 months ago also approved the creation of a truth commission and of offices on reparations and missing persons. In May, to be fair to the Sri Lankan Government, an Office of Missing Persons was created, and in August the necessary law was passed by the Sri Lankan Parliament. It would be helpful to hear the Minister's assessment of the creation and personnel of this new office, and of whether it has the political support necessary to really make a difference.

The Sri Lankan Government have also allowed visits by the UN's working group on enforced or voluntary disappearances, the special rapporteur on torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman, degrading treatment or punishment, and the special rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers. The UN human rights commissioner acknowledged the access given to the aforementioned UN organisations, but went on to note with concern the lack of transparency in negotiations over a truth and reconciliation commission and a special court. Again, perhaps the Minister could explain what he thinks is going on. Will there be a truth and reconciliation commission, and when might that body begins work?

When, too, might we expect the catch-all Prevention of Terrorism Act, or PTA, to be lifted? I understand that the Sri Lankan Government have agreed to that, but, again, they have given no time commitment. Human Rights Watch described the PTA as the legislation used to facilitate thousands of human rights abuses over the years, including torture, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial executions. It goes on to argue that the law has been used since 2009 to detain and torture people suspected of links to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, including forcibly returned asylum seekers. Indeed, I have had complaints from residents in my constituency of visits to Sri Lanka resulting in arrest and, on at least one occasion, torture.

Human Rights Watch notes that many instances of torture, sexual violence and other ill-treatment occurred in the Criminal Investigation Department and Terrorist Investigation Division offices in Colombo, while others occurred in unofficial places of detention. In addition, evidence in court has confirmed that the navy operated secret detention camps in Colombo and Trincomalee, where detainees were allegedly tortured and killed.

Even now, it is not clear exactly how many are held, or where, under the PTA. It is true that, 12 months ago, the Government announced a plan to deal with the Tamil detainees held under the PTA, with some released.
on bail, others sent for supposed rehabilitation, and the rest set to be charged. Can the Minister tell us today or in writing whether he has had discussions about the timing of any replacement for the PTA, whether he is confident that a full list of the Tamils detained under the PTA has been made public, and whether family members have been informed?

The remarkable people in Sri Lanka who champion human rights—for example, in the organisation Right To Life—continue to report harassment, police and military surveillance, and, on occasion, anonymous death threats. However, it is the impunity for previous human rights abuses that stands out as the single most telling indication that change in Sri Lanka is not happening anything like fast enough. Cases include the January 2006 extrajudicial execution of five students in Trincomalee by security personnel; the killing of 17 aid workers with the French organisation Action Contre La Faim in Muttur in August of the same year; the January 2009 murder of Sri Lanka’s most famous newspaper editor at the time, the Sinhalese Lasantha Wickrematunge; and the disappearances of political activists Lalith Weeraraj and Kugan Muruganandan in Jaffna in 2011. Those cases are noteworthy for the profile they had at the time and since, and for the lack of progress in the investigations.

Lastly, let me turn to the presence of the military in the north and the east of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Government agreed in the Human Rights Council resolution last year that it would accelerate the return of land to its rightful owners. The organisation Freedom House has suggested that the military still occupied 44,000 acres of Tamil-owned land in 2015. The Sri Lankan Centre for Policy Alternatives reported in March that 13,000 acres of land in the Northern Province alone continue to be occupied. Other reports suggest that the military has returned some, but far from all, the land it seized. It is far from clear from public statements whether all the land will be returned to its rightful owners. Again, it would be helpful to hear the Minister’s assessment. The military’s presence in the north and east is all-pervasive, with many ordinary businesses such as tourist resorts, and even shops selling basic goods, controlled by the armed forces. Economic development, particularly Tamil-owned economic development, lags far behind that in other areas of the country.

Sri Lanka is one of the most beautiful islands in the world—a point often made to me when I attend cross-community events in my constituency—but it has one of the ugliest of recent histories. Those who continue to be victims of human rights abuses in Sri Lanka have few people to turn to. Britain has a particularly heavy responsibility to take, given our previous history with Sri Lanka and our commitment to international human rights. In the end, there will not be the type of peace that offers real long-term security, and the chance for all communities to live together, unless there is a sustained truth and reconciliation process, and human rights abuses begin to be properly dealt with. I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

2.45 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) for securing this debate. I commend his long-standing commitment to development, including seven years as a Minister in the Department of International Development—indeed, as my predecessor as Minister of State. He is probably one of the few Labour Ministers who did not need to leave a note for his successor saying, “There’s no money left.” As a Member representing a very large Tamil community, he has rightly been concerned by the human rights situation in Sri Lanka for many years. I also highlight the important work on human rights in Sri Lanka of the other members of the all-party parliamentary group on Tamils.

I do not think we need to replay the heart-wrenching history of Sri Lanka’s bloody civil war in detail today. We all understand that that decades-long conflict was a painful and traumatic period for people across the island. Many tens of thousands died. We understand too that although the civil war may have ended in 2009, the reconciliation process never ends. You will be familiar, Madam Deputy Speaker, with some of the concerns set out in this House on previous occasions, including about the continued military presence in the north and east of Sri Lanka, the credibility and independence of future judicial processes, and the need for international involvement to support the Sri Lankan Government in fulfilling their commitments. The Government recognise that the Sri Lankan Government face very significant challenges in order to address the legacy of the conflict, and that doing so will require strong leadership from all parties. We will give support where we can. We should also, however, recognise the progress that has already been achieved, particularly under the current Sri Lankan Government.

The Government of Sri Lanka co-sponsored Human Rights Council resolution 30/01 in October last year. This was a historic moment, because it set the country on an ambitious course to promote reconciliation, accountability, and human rights, and to address the legacy of its civil war. At the Human Rights Council in June this year, High Commissioner Zeid recognised the progress that Sri Lanka has made against resolution 30/01. That progress includes increased engagement with the UN, legislation on an office of missing persons, ratification of the convention on enforced disappearances, the start of a process of constitutional reform, and an improved environment for civil society and human rights defenders. I acknowledge the hon. Gentleman’s strength of feeling on the question of disappearances. Specifically on that point, which I sense was his most important, the Sri Lankan Government have enacted legislation on missing persons and ratified the convention on enforced disappearances. That is progress but the key now is implementation, which is not just about passing the law.

We continue to make those points to Government of Sri Lanka and the legislation to establish the Office of Missing Persons has just been passed. Therefore, we are still making an assessment of the office’s finances and personnel. High Commissioner Zeid also noted that more needed to be done and he called for a comprehensive strategy to deliver further progress. The Government share this assessment.

We do not underestimate the challenges of dealing with the legacy of a 30-year conflict. Actually, we welcome the determination of the Government of Sri Lanka to face up to these challenges and we will continue to encourage and support them to implement resolution 30/01 in full.
[Sir Alan Duncan]

The Minister of State in the Foreign Office, my right hon. and noble Friend the Baroness Anelay of St. Johns, will visit Sri Lanka next week. She will go to Colombo and Jaffna, and she will discuss these issues and many others with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, as well as the leader of the Tamil National Alliance and other members of the Government, opposition and civil society. I undertake to ensure that she possesses a copy of the speech that the hon. Gentleman has delivered today, so that all the issues that he has raised in the House will be fully familiar to her on the occasion of her visit. Moreover, I am pleased to confirm that she will also meet recent returnees to land that has been cleared of mines by the HALO Trust, thanks to UK Government funding.

There are several areas where more action is required if the Government of Sri Lanka are to fulfil all the commitments that they have made. The particular priorities that I will highlight, as the hon. Gentleman has already done today, are constitutional reform, land returns and security issues.

The devolution of political authority, through constitutional reform that protects the rights of all Sri Lankans, is an essential foundation for future prosperity and stability. I am encouraged by the inclusive consultation process that has been undertaken and I urge all parties to work together to deliver a revised constitution that lays the foundations for inclusive and fair governance.

More land returns are also essential, both to build trust and to allow those who have been displaced to return to their land. It is encouraging that land is being released, including an area in Jaffna last month. I hope the Government of Sri Lanka will return all private land that is still in military hands to its civilian owners.

Land releases on their own are not enough; they must be accompanied by adequate housing and other support for resettled communities. That is why the UK continues to support de-mining, housing and resettlement programmes through bilateral and multilateral funding. The Government of Sri Lanka should also tackle the issue of military involvement in civilian activity, which is constraining employment opportunities, especially in the north and east of the country.

We continue to encourage security sector reform in Sri Lanka. We urge the Government to repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act and to replace it with counter-terrorism laws that comply with international human rights standards. We also urge them to expedite the cases of those detained without charge under that act.

Sexual and gender-based violence and torture must also be addressed. We raise any credible reports of abuses with the Government of Sri Lanka and encourage them to investigate such reports fully. We also fund training programmes for the Sri Lankan police, and other measures to combat and eliminate torture.

Mr Thomas: May I ask the Minister, in the remaining minutes of his interesting response to my speech, to comment on the establishment—or not—of the special court, which was one of the key elements of resolution 30/0? In particular, can he say whether international judges might, in the end, still be participants in that court?

Sir Alan Duncan: I can answer that question straight away by saying that we have not yet offered any UK judges to the special court, because it has not yet been set up. We will consider UK support in due course and we will continue to press the Sri Lankans to do that as quickly as possible.

We have also renewed defence engagement with Sri Lanka, in recognition of the important role that the armed forces have to play in addressing the crucial issues of reconciliation, accountability and human rights.

As well as addressing these human rights issues, Sri Lanka also faces difficult economic pressure. An improving economy would also help the process of peace. Financial and economic stability will help secure investment, development and prosperity for all provinces and all ethnicities. The UK will continue to work with the Government of Sri Lanka to improve the business environment, in particular by strengthening anti-corruption bodies.

We also strongly encourage the Government to address all issues identified by the EU as prerequisites to the reinstatement of the generalised scheme of preference plus. That reinstatement would provide a welcome economic boost by removing duties on exports to the EU.

We welcome the steps taken so far by the Sri Lankan Government to meet their human rights commitments. Progress on that agenda, and in other areas, will be vital to ensuring lasting reconciliation. That will require courageous and determined leadership, not only from the Government, but from political actors and civil society right across the country and, indeed, the diaspora.

The UK continues to encourage and support Sri Lanka to implement its human rights commitments in full. I am very proud of the United Kingdom’s role. We will continue to support Sri Lanka as it takes further steps towards securing peace, reconciliation and prosperity for all Sri Lankans. Once again, may I commend the hon. Gentleman for ensuring that those important issues are heard in this House?

Question put and agreed to.

2.57 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 7 November 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[M R Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

New Writ

Ordered.

That the Speaker do issue his Warrant to the Clerk of the Crown to make out a new Writ for the electing of a Member to serve in this present Parliament for the County Constituency of Seaford and North Hykeham in the room of Stephen James Phillips, who since his election for the said County Constituency, has been appointed to the Office of Steward and Bailiff of Her Majesty’s Manor of Northstead in the County of York.—(Gavin Williamson.)

Mr Speaker: Before we get under way with proceedings, I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in offering our warmest congratulations to Andy Murray on becoming the men’s singles world No. 1—the first British man to do so since the inception of the ATP rankings in 1973. It is a tribute to his talent, to his big-match temperament and to his tireless endeavour over many years.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Procurement Programmes: Supply Chain

1. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that SMEs are included in the supply chain for defence procurement programmes. [907088]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): May I add my congratulations to Andy Murray? Having said those remarks, I am sure that Mr Speaker will be able to watch many more matches played by the world’s No. 1 tennis player. It is absolutely fantastic news.

Small businesses are vital for growth and innovation, whether they work directly with the Ministry of Defence or through our prime contractors. We have committed to increase our direct and indirect procurement spending with small and medium-sized enterprises from 19% to 25% by 2020.

Mark Pawsey: It is good to hear from the Minister that our armed forces can benefit from the innovation and entrepreneurship of small businesses. However, one such business in my constituency tells me that dealing with the Department can sometimes be overly bureaucratic, including the need to apply to remain on a list of approved suppliers. Can the Minister take any steps to simplify the process and encourage even more small businesses to come forward?

Harriett Baldwin: We recognise that processes are overly bureaucratic. We have got rid of the idea of an approved suppliers list, and we are working hard to reduce red tape. We are introducing a shorter contract and a network of supply chain advocates. May I suggest that any businesses in my hon. Friend’s constituency or any other contact the relevant supply chain advocate? I look forward to sending my hon. Friend those details later today.

Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to help British businesses? In that context, will she tell us why the Department decided to procure combat garments for the Army from a Spanish company rather than a Scottish one?

Harriett Baldwin: We welcome competition in procurement for all our contracts. We also recognise that our £178 billion equipment budget is being spent with more than 5,000 businesses here in the UK.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): SMEs make up a large part of the helicopter manufacturing industry in my constituency and they are worried that the potential local closure of GKN foreshadows an erosion of that. What support can my hon. Friend provide to keep a full helicopter manufacturing capability in the Yeovil area?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend’s fantastic work representing his constituents in Yeovil and the magnificent work that they do. We took delivery of the most recent Wildcat helicopter just in the last month. We look forward to working with Leonardo in Yeovil as part of a major strategic partnership agreement. It is important that my hon. Friend puts such issues about helicopter manufacturing forward as part of the industrial Green Paper that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will produce later this year.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Last week’s announcement on the Type 26 frigate was good news for Scotland. What steps have been put in place to ensure that UK SMEs and larger companies, for example those based in the north-east of England, will gain work from this contract?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this fantastic news for companies up and down the country, including our shipbuilders on the Clyde. We have already announced contracts worth some £1.9 billion which are related to this programme. Importantly, we will be publishing, alongside our prime contractor, the opportunities for the British steel industry to bid into this manufacturing opportunity.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): One reason we have bureaucracy, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), is to ensure that SMEs stay in business during the whole course of a contract. The biggest enemy of any SME is a poor cash flow. What is the Department doing to ensure that SMEs are paid promptly?
**Harriett Baldwin:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight that this is an important issue, which is why the Ministry of Defence is so committed to being able to pay our invoices promptly. We give that guidance to our prime contractors, and I would certainly like to hear of any examples from Members of where prime contractors are not passing on that prompt payment from the MOD to their suppliers.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Minister will be aware of the fabulous job being done by SMEs and large companies to deliver the Royal Navy carriers at Rosyth, both of which are on time and on budget. How does she plan to reward Rosyth and its highly skilled workforce after the carriers are gone? What good news has she got for Rosyth today?

**Harriett Baldwin:** I would have thought the hon. Gentleman might have started by welcoming Friday’s announcement about the shipbuilding jobs on the Clyde, but he is absolutely right that it is a wonderful national moment as we complete these two fantastic carriers at Rosyth. I am sure he and I are both looking forward to seeing the Queen Elizabeth sail down the Forth some time next year. Given the ambitious shipbuilding strategy that we have and the national shipbuilding strategy that will be announced nearer to the autumn statement, I am sure that there will be great news for shipbuilding across Scotland and the whole of the UK.

**Iraq and Syria: RAF Campaign**

2. **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the RAF’s campaign in Iraq and Syria.

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):** The RAF’s significant contribution to the fight against Daesh is second only to that of the Americans. To date, we have conducted 1,048 airstrikes in Iraq and 67 in Syria. In Iraq, the RAF has helped Iraqi security forces to halt and push back Daesh, with about three quarters of the current strikes now supporting operations to halt and push back Daesh, with about three quarters of the current strikes now supporting operations to retake Mosul. I am sure he and I are both looking forward to seeing the Queen Elizabeth sail down the Forth some time next year. Given the ambitious shipbuilding strategy that we have and the national shipbuilding strategy that will be announced nearer to the autumn statement, I am sure that there will be great news for shipbuilding across Scotland and the whole of the UK.

**Mr Cunningham:** What further support is the Secretary of State going to give to the Iraqi Kurdish forces in recapturing Mosul? He has outlined an up-to-date version of events, but what further support can he give them?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** We are supporting the Mosul operation through airstrikes, through surveillance and reconnaissance from the air and, above all, through the training that we have supplied to Iraqi and Kurdish forces. I can tell the House that British troops have now trained more than 30,000 Iraqi soldiers, including Kurdish.

**Mr James Gray** (North Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State will recall that the decision to launch airstrikes, both in Iraq and latterly in Syria, was taken not under the royal prerogative, but by resolution of this House. Does he agree that that precedent might well be useful in discussions in the months ahead?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** My hon. Friend tempts me into a discussion in the months ahead?

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): In the run-up to Remembrance Day, we think of all those who have served our country as well as those who are currently serving it around the world, and we remember the immense sacrifices that have been made to defend our freedoms.

We support the RAF’s involvement in the campaign to liberate Raqqa. Daesh has used the city as its headquarters to plot attacks against British citizens, and it is vital that that evil organisation is routed for good. Before launching the operation to free Mosul, the Iraqi Government made careful plans about exactly which groups would be allowed to enter the city to avoid the real risk of sectarian violence. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether similar plans have been made in Raqqa?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. Let me formally welcome her and her team to Defence questions, and echo the tributes that she paid—and that we will all be paying over the next few days—to the work of our armed forces here and around the globe.

The hon. Lady is right that a lot of work went into the preparation of the Mosul campaign to ensure that there was sufficient reassurance for its predominantly Sunni population that the way that it was to be isolated, encircled and eventually liberated would not further exacerbate the tensions in that already complex city. Raqqa is predominantly an Arab city, and it is the coalition’s view that its encirclement and liberation should be accomplished by a predominantly Arab force.

**Nia Griffith:** We are also all deeply concerned about Russia’s corrosive role in the Syrian conflict. Its planes have hit schools and aid convoys and now, as we understand it, the signs are that it is preparing for a devastating
assault on Aleppo. I am sure that the Secretary of State agrees that what the people of Aleppo want is an immediate cessation of hostilities. What is the Government’s strategy for achieving a meaningful ceasefire agreement?

Sir Michael Fallon: I think there is agreement across the House that Russia’s actions speak far louder than its words. The key is to stop the violence and return to the cessation of hostilities as originally agreed. There have been a number of these ceasefires and, in each case, they have been broken by the Assad regime and its Russian supporters. It really is time now that Russia called a halt to the slaughter and got engaged with us in finding a political settlement so that Syria can finally live in peace.

Mosul: Reconstruction and Governance

3. Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): What plans have the Government to help support the reconstruction and governance of Mosul once Daesh has been removed from that city.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): We encourage the Iraqi Government’s efforts to protect civilians, minimise the humanitarian impact, and support political reconciliation. A successful military operation must be followed by sustained stabilisation and reconstruction. The UK is providing £15 million to help secure liberated areas, clear explosives and support the renovation of power networks, clinics and schools. This year, we are also providing £90 million of humanitarian assistance to help people across Iraq, including those affected by the military operations in and around Mosul.

Natalie McGarry: The Government spent £320 million on bombing Libya and only £25 million on its reconstruction when the campaign ended. Libya is now fragmented and lawless. In Mosul governorate, towns have been destroyed and people such as my Yazidi friend Elias Qirani have been displaced to camps in Sinjar, freezing and without adequate food this winter. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that the lessons of Sinjar and Libya have been learned and that this Government have planned for peace and reconstruction in Mosul and Raqqaa?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, I think it is fair to say that we learn the lessons from each of these successive campaigns. This is a campaign being helped by the international coalition and led by Iraqi forces, but yes, we have made our contribution to the United Nations effort to ensure that there are sufficient tents, food aid and medical supplies for those towns that are liberated. I hope the hon. Lady supports the overall aim of the campaign, which is to allow the Yazidi people to return to their homes and to live in peace.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Given the complex ethnic make-up of Mosul and the split between Sunnis and Shi’as, what plans are there for some kind of international observer force to be on the ground in the city once it is liberated?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is for the Iraqi Government in the first instance to determine the future local government of Mosul. It is, as my hon. Friend says, a very complex city and not entirely a Sunni city, and it is important that the administration there after liberation can command the confidence of all groups represented in that city. We have made our views on this known to the Government and military commanders of the operation.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): We welcome the progress in the operation to liberate Mosul and we fully support this important offensive. I recently met the Iraqi ambassador, who reiterated the need to defend the border between Iraq and Syria to ensure that Daesh cannot return to re-establish itself in Mosul or anywhere else. What role will the UK play in securing the border and defending the territorial integrity of Iraq?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is not for us in the west to question the territorial integrity of Iraq. In the end it is for the Iraqi people to decide their borders. One of the aims of the counter-Daesh coalition, which I shall be chairing at its next meeting next month in London, is to focus on the period after the liberation of Mosul and after the final mopping-up operations along the Tigris and in the Euphrates river valley, to see what more can be done by the coalition countries to help Iraq to reinforce its border and ensure that Daesh does not come back through it.

4. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent support the armed forces have provided to the military campaign of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Dr Whitford: The UK continues to supply arms to Saudi Arabia, despite repeated bombing of civilian targets and non-governmental organisation hospitals in Yemen. The most conservative figures from the United Nations Human Rights Council demonstrate that there have been at least 10,000 casualties and 4,000 confirmed dead in a country facing humanitarian disaster. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State heed the previous call by the Business, Innovation and Skills and the International Development Committees to end export licences for these arms, or are these casualties just considered a fair price to pay?

Harriett Baldwin: We will be responding to those reports imminently, but I want to put on record that we have one of the most robust arms export control regimes in the world. We are aware of the alleged violations that the hon. Lady mentions and we take alleged violations in this conflict extremely seriously.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I am sure the Minister will agree that in this situation we have to be careful what we wish for, given the alternatives. Will she outline what support the UK Government are giving to the parties involved to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law?
Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is right to say that in this situation the UK particularly supports a political solution. We believe that this is the best way to bring long-term stability to Yemen and to end the conflict. With respect to ongoing support, the UK backed UN resolution 2216, as my hon. Friend knows, and we have an ongoing defence engagement relationship with the Saudi Arabian Government.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Last Monday, the Security Council discussed Yemen for the first time in six months. I observed the proceedings. There was unanimous support for an immediate ceasefire and the four-point plan put forward by Matthew Rycroft, our ambassador. Will the Minister speak to the Foreign Secretary in person or through the Defence Secretary to ensure that a new resolution is tabled as soon as possible so that it can be discussed and passed, and the humanitarian and military crisis can be dealt with?

Harriett Baldwin: The right hon. Gentleman, who pays such close interest to this subject, will be aware that the UK continues strongly to support the work of the UN special envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, and we strongly support a political solution. I will certainly pass on the sentiments he has just expressed to colleagues in the Foreign Office.

**Armed Forces Covenant**

5. Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to ensure that the provisions of the armed forces covenant are being implemented effectively in the UK.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The implementation of the covenant is overseen by the covenant reference group, chaired by the Cabinet Office. Next month’s annual report will detail the fact that considerable progress has been made across Government and with the wider public, private and third sectors, including on key areas of education, healthcare, accommodation and access to commercial services.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the Minister for that answer. The head of the forces charity SSAFA has warned that the armed forces covenant “provides excellent guidance but there is no guarantee of enforcement.” Forces families often find themselves in real difficulty when seeking housing or school places. In this week, when our thoughts are with those forces families who have made the ultimate sacrifice, what are the Government doing to make it clear to service providers that the guarantees contained in the covenant are legal duties, not just optional extras?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Lady is right to raise that, because it was this Government who enshrined the covenant in law. We have made substantial progress in recent years, not least through the £22.5 million that has now been spent on the service pupil premium or the £20 million that has been invested in veterans’ accommodation. However, I do recognise that more needs to be done, and I feel that I have a duty to ensure that local authorities across the country are doing their bit to enforce the covenant.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the recent report published by the Royal United Services Institute on the corporate covenant is a really important step in highlighting where the Government need to do much more to reach out to a much wider group of companies to get them to support those who are leaving the service and those families who need support.

Mark Lancaster: Of course we recognise that the covenant is very much a partnership between Government, the third sector and the corporate world, which is why I was delighted to see that we recently passed 1,200 signatures on the corporate covenant.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to see the armed forces covenant enforced in Northern Ireland? What steps has his Department taken in the interim to work with veterans’ services in Northern Ireland until the scheme is fully implemented?

Mark Lancaster: Of course, we have unique challenges in Northern Ireland, but I am pleased to report that we estimate that 93% of covenant issues are being enforced in Northern Ireland. Clearly, we need to do better, and that is going to be my focus for the year.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): While there are many examples of good practice across the United Kingdom, it is clear that not everyone in the forces community is experiencing the benefits of the covenant. A recent report by the Local Government Association found that nearly 40% of those who served in the armed forces felt that their service left them disadvantaged. What are the Government doing to ensure that the covenant becomes a reality for every serviceman and woman across the country?

Mark Lancaster: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his post, and I encourage him to look at the last four covenant reports, which detail the progress we have made over the last four years. However, his point is well made, and it is precisely why, earlier this year, I commissioned the Forces in Minds Trust to do a review so that we can ensure that best practice from the various local authorities across the United Kingdom is shared.

**Mental Health Services: Veterans**

6. Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health on the provision of mental health services for veterans.

13. Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health on the provision of mental health services for veterans.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): I will meet the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), shortly. I had several such meetings with his predecessor at which we discussed mental health.
Andy Slaughter: Part of the problem is that only about 50% of veterans who have mental health issues come forward with them because of culture, stigma, or whatever. What are the Government doing to reach out to those who do not seek treatment to ensure that they also do so?

Mark Lancaster: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point. The problem is not specific to veterans; for some time, we have had problems in society whereby mental health has been a stigma and people are reluctant to come forward. We are working closely with the Department of Health, because ultimately this is its responsibility, but we also have a number of programmes within the Ministry of Defence, not least the veterans and reserves mental health programme, which ensures that veterans are contacted one year after they leave the service to be encouraged to seek support if they need it.

Karl Turner: Servicemen and women are able to access defence mental health services for up to six months after they leave the military, but poor mental health can kick in at any time. Given that the NHS is frankly on its knees in relation to mental health services, will the Minister consider extending the access period to allow veterans proper priority in mental health services? That would also take the pressures off the NHS.

Mark Lancaster: This is an interesting area. Ultimately, the national health service is responsible for our veterans because, as a society, we do not have a specialist veterans department; I think that is the right approach. Nevertheless, we have invested over £13 million of LIBOR money in this specialist area. We do indeed allow people access for up to six months, and I am happy to look at the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion to see how we can perhaps do more.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The provision of a psychologist specialising in trauma services would be of huge benefit to the many veterans in Devon, particularly in East Devon, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Will my hon. Friend commit to having an early discussion with the Secretary of State for Health to make such a provision available to my constituents and others?

Mark Lancaster: As I mentioned in my original answer, I have a regular meeting with my counterpart at the Department of Health, and I am happy to add my hon. Friend’s suggestion to the agenda.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Analysis by Combat Stress has found that reservists who have served in recent military campaigns were more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder than regular service members. What are the Minister and the Government doing specifically to ensure that those who volunteer for the reserves will have the necessary mental health treatment and support options once they have returned to civilian life?

Mark Lancaster: I should declare my interest as a serving reservist. From my own experience of being mobilised on three occasions over recent years, I can say that it has been interesting to see the extra support I have had on returning from mobilised service latterly compared with when I first did it in 1999 to 2007. Progress is definitely being made. As I said, we have the veterans and reserves mental health programme, which ensures that extra support is given to reservists. I fully recognise that when reservists are demobilised they do not always have the same support as those returning to a regular unit.

Mark Lancaster: In certain circumstances, veterans should have priority treatment. That is precisely why, on 13 July, I announced the new integrated high dependency care system, which is a partnership between the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Health to ensure that those who need specialist support can continue to get it from Defence Medical Services.

Defence Spending

7. Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): What estimate he has made of the increase in defence spending over the course of this Parliament.

Harriett Baldwin: This Government put our security first. The spending review confirmed that the Ministry of Defence’s budget will rise by 0.5% above inflation in every year to 2020. We will spend 2% of GDP on defence each year, and the defence budget will rise to almost £40 billion by the end of the decade.

Karl McCartney: Sentinel aircraft based at RAF Waddington in my constituency play a vital role in the fight against Daesh, so may I welcome the Department’s announcement of £130 million support contract funding from our growing defence budget? Will the Minister confirm how many jobs that will sustain?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the important role played by Sentinel aircraft based in his constituency. The contract is good news for the UK defence industry and it will sustain about 120 jobs at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, and about 40 jobs at Hawarden airfield in Broughton in north Wales.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The pound has dropped nearly 20% in value and the price of vital military kit that we buy abroad is set to sky-rocket,
so will the Minister confirm that we have enough contingency to pay for the F-35 fighters planned for the new aircraft carriers?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman will know that there is a double lock in terms of the budget and that it is based not just on 2% of our economy, which I am pleased to say grew again in the third quarter. There is also a lock in terms of a rise of 0.5% above inflation every year to 2020.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that this issue arose from the first review for about 30 years to result in an increase, rather than a reduction, in the size of the armed forces? Does she agree that, as the world gets more dangerous, it is all the more important that we get more bang for the buck from every pound spent?

Harriett Baldwin: May I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his efforts during his time at the Department? They resulted in the settlement in the 2015 autumn statement, which I mentioned earlier. He is absolutely right to say that defence spending is going up every year, and that is so that we can invest in the new Type 26 frigates, aircraft carriers, attack helicopters, fast jets, armoured vehicles and, as we heard last week, our cyber-defences.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): May I begin by sending my condolences to the family and friends of Lance Corporal Joe Spencer, who was tragically killed at RAF Tain last week?

On Friday, I warmly welcomed the announcement that steel would be cut on the Type 26 frigates in summer 2017. However, I repeat my point that the contract remains unsigned, so will the Secretary of State get a move on and sign it? The defence procurement Minister said last year that Type 23s would be replaced by Type 26s on a like-for-like basis. Is that still the case?

Harriett Baldwin: I think I detected in that question a sliver of a welcome for the fact that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced on Friday two decades’ worth of shipbuilding work on Type 26 frigates in Scotland. I remind the hon. Gentleman that none of that shipbuilding would have happened if he had achieved his desired outcome in the Scottish referendum.

Brendan O’Hara: Is it not the case that only the original order for 13 Type 26s would have kept the yards working until 2035? Now that there are only eight and there is no confirmation of the general purpose frigates, how can an order for just eight Type 26s secure two decades’ worth of work on the Clyde?

Harriett Baldwin: Did you, Mr Speaker, detect any mention there of the five offshore patrol vessels that are also being built on the River Clyde? The hon. Gentleman’s comments are absolutely extraordinary. I am reminded of the P.G. Wodehouse phrase—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is bad enough for the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) to ask a question that is too long, but for him to rant for too long and then, when the Minister gets up to reply, to continue ranting is not statesmanlike behaviour by the hon. Gentleman, for whom I previously had high hopes.

Harriett Baldwin: As P.G. Wodehouse said: “It is never difficult to distinguish between a Scotsman with a grievance and a ray of sunshine.”

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): As the former Minister responsible for Type 26s, may I warmly welcome the order for them, although I and the nation could well do with more? I also welcome the decision to maintain defence expenditure at 2%, but may I remind my hon. Friend that last year that was done only by viring £1.2 billion of expenditure from the Department for Work and Pensions to the Minister of Defence? Why is it that I am hearing from senior officers that their budgets are being cut this year and that they are having to find in-year savings? Where is the extra cash?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his enormous contribution. He has always made the case for a growing defence budget. I am sure that he, too, will welcome not only the announcement we made last week about the Type 26 frigates, but the announcement made at last year’s strategic defence and security review that we would develop a general purpose frigate and commit to at least five of those.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is right that the Government are sticking to our NATO commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, but as the Select Committee on Defence has noted, the Government are doing so only by including areas that were not previously counted. Can the Minister tell us what defence expenditure would be as a percentage of GDP if we used the accounting rules that were used in 2010?

Harriett Baldwin: We use exactly the methodology that NATO approves, and everything is consistent with NATO’s definition. I would like to take this opportunity to clarify whether the Labour party will also commit to spending 2% of the country’s GDP on defence.

Armed Forces

8. Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): What assessment has he made of the effectiveness of the armed forces’ contribution to the range of operations in which they are involved?

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): British Forces are involved in 28 operations in more than 25 countries, protecting the United Kingdom and its interests from a range of threats and promoting security in key regions of the world. The Royal Navy deploys some 29 ships and submarines across the globe, supported by more than 8,000 sailors and Marines.

Mrs Drummond: Women have served alongside men with distinction aboard Royal Navy ships in combat service for many years. Does the Secretary of State agree that opening up front-line roles to women in the Royal Marines, the Army and the RAF will enhance their effectiveness in operations?

Sir Michael Fallon: The Royal Navy has been ahead, as one might expect of the senior service, in demonstrating how women serving in front-line roles improve the capability of our armed forces. Five Royal Navy vessels and one shore establishment are currently commanded
by women, and some 9% of the Royal Navy is now female. Opening ground close combat roles to women will provide further opportunities to attract and retain talented women from the breadth of society. Doing so is fundamental to the successful delivery of operations now and in the future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I press the Secretary of State on the co-operation that we need to be effective? Is he happy with the level of co-operation we get across NATO, where many of our NATO friends are not spending sufficient amounts of money on their defence? Is he worried that if the presidential election in the United States went one way tomorrow, we would be hard put to be an effective force against Putin?

Sir Michael Fallon: A number of NATO members have much more to do. Some of them still spend less than 1.5%, and a few of them even spend less than 1%. But in the deployments that are being agreed on the eastern border of NATO we are seeing more co-operation, with countries such as France and Denmark coming alongside the battalion that we will lead in Estonia next year.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State, in the context of the operational effectiveness of our forces, emphasise that such things are normally done in partnership with other countries? Does he therefore agree that it is vital that members of the US Administration and other NATO partners recognise that they are strengthened by the contribution that the US Administration and other NATO partners recognise that they are strengthened by the contribution that NATO countries collectively make to the defence of the United States?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is probably the wrong day to comment on the position of the United States. Yes, NATO is a collective defence organisation, and we all, in that respect, rely on each other. I note, for example, that when Britain leaves the European Union, three of the four battalions on the eastern border of NATO will be led by non-EU countries.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Speaking as a ray of sunshine, may I ask whether the Ministry of Defence has made any assessment of how the Army’s new Ajax fighting vehicle would fare against Russia’s equally new T-14 main battle tank?

Sir Michael Fallon: I do not think it is right to compare one particular armoured vehicle with a completely different type of armoured vehicle. What is important is to look at our armoured vehicles and our combat systems as a whole across the range that we have deployed and are going to deploy, including the new Ajax armoured vehicle.

Military Campaign against Daesh

10. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of progress in the military campaign against Daesh.

16. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What progress has been made in the military campaign against Daesh.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): In Iraq, operations to liberate Mosul are continuing to make good progress, with Iraqi forces reaching the outskirts of the city. In Syria, the Manbij pocket has been closed, restricting Daesh’s access to the Turkish border, through which they were bringing in fighters, and in September they were expelled from the culturally significant town of Dabiq.

Andrew Stephenson: The military success against Daesh in Iraq is to be welcomed. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that after the eventual liberation of Mosul we will continue to support Iraqi forces in their fight to defeat Daesh?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. The Iraqi security forces, including the peshmerga, are playing the primary role in the fight against Daesh in Iraq, but the support and training provided by the global coalition, including the United Kingdom, has been a key contributor to their success. This fight will not end with the liberation of Mosul, nor will United Kingdom support.

Neil Gray: What discussions has the Defence Secretary had with his counterpart in Turkey to ensure that the Turkish military and Turkish-backed militia are not working against the overall aims of the international coalition during the recapture of Mosul and, above all, that they are ensuring the protection of civilians and the provision of humanitarian aid?

Sir Michael Fallon: I last met my Turkish counterpart a couple of weeks ago at the NATO Defence Ministerial. Key to the success of this campaign is that all the various parties involved in what is a complex situation in northern Iraq respect the sensitivities of the very complex make-up of the individual towns and villages. That applies to the encirclement and the liberation, but it will also of course apply to what we call the “day after”—the day after liberation—when we have to restore local administration and essential services.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State say what progress is being made in destroying and degrading Daesh’s capability to recruit and, indeed, to infect the minds of young people in this country? What success have we had on that front in recent months?

Sir Michael Fallon: We have seen a reduction in the flow of foreign fighters from this country to Syria and Iraq. We have intensified the work we have been doing with other countries in strategic communications to lessen the appeal of Daesh by interdicting some of their material—taking down material from their websites and reducing the appeal they have through social media—and we will continue to work at that. Meanwhile, there are perhaps 200 to 300 British citizens still involved with Daesh in Iraq and Syria. We will have to make sure that they no longer pose a threat to this country and, indeed, are held to account for any criminal acts they may have committed.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I am sure the whole House is in agreement in hoping that Mosul can be decisively liberated from Daesh as quickly as possible. A devastating consequence
of this ongoing conflict is the effect it is having on the city’s children. It has been estimated that about half of the civilians fleeing Mosul are children, while recent reports have found that Daesh are kidnapping boys as young as nine to use them as soldiers. What are the UK armed forces doing specifically to aid the children in this city?

Sir Michael Fallon: Our armed forces are not involved in combat on the ground in and around Mosul. We have been supplying close air support, intelligence and training. It is important to remember that those children were suffering before the operation began—they would have been suffering in Mosul anyway—and I think we can best help by making sure, as these areas are progressively liberated, including the suburbs of Mosul, that UN agencies are ready to go in and provide the necessities of life and get those children out if they can.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Mosul has suffered deeply from cultural destruction. As we look forward to the ratification of The Hague convention, what will the armed forces do to limit further damage to the cultural heritage of Mosul and support the good work of Lieutenant Colonel Tim Purbrick’s cultural property protection working group, more catchily known as the monuments men?

Sir Michael Fallon: We have consulted international partners on best practice and have tasked the Army with establishing a cultural property protection unit, which will help to ensure that cultural property is protected from damage and looting, will provide advice, training and support to operational planning processes, and can investigate, record and report cultural property issues from any area of operations. I know that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming our intention to ratify the convention, through legislation before the House, early next year.

15. [907107] Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State reassure me of the UK’s commitment to supporting the Kurdish peshmerga in the fight to defeat Daesh in Iraq? Will he join me in paying particular tribute to the brave Kurdish women of the peshmerga, who are playing such an important role on the frontline in defeating the death cult Daesh?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. The United Kingdom is absolutely committed to supporting the Kurdish peshmerga in their efforts to defeat Daesh. I visited them while they were training recently. Our commitment is demonstrated by our participation in the building partner capacity programme. Among the peshmerga are the Kurdish women whose bravery and resolve have had such a tremendous impact on the campaign. I am sure the whole House will wish to join my hon. Friend and me in paying tribute to the female peshmerga for the contribution they are making.

Departmental Funding

11. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of funding for his Department.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): The Ministry of Defence meets the Treasury regularly as part of its routine business. The spending review set out the Ministry of Defence’s spending plans for the rest of this Parliament. The defence budget is growing at 0.5% above inflation each year until 2020. We also have access to the new joint security fund. These commitments mean that the defence budget will rise to almost £40 billion by the end of the decade.

Chris Elmore: I thank the Minister for her answer. I listened carefully to the answer she gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on the cost of the pound and the purchasing power of the Ministry of Defence. The Royal United Services Institute has suggested that the purchasing power of the UK’s defence budget could be cut by 2% as a result of the fall in sterling. What plans do the Government have to offset that?

Harriett Baldwin: Again, I put on the record the fact that defence spending will go up regardless of currency fluctuations because of the double lock on the defence budget. As part of ongoing management of the budgets at the Ministry of Defence, we pay and have paid regard to the currency risk in terms of our procurement programme.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): When Ministers meet the Chancellor of the Exchequer will they remind him that although the defence budget is going up in absolute terms it is nevertheless at a lower proportion of GDP than ever before? We really ought to be looking at something approaching the 3% mark, bearing in mind the fact that the level of threat we face today is similar to that of the 1980s, when we regularly spent between 4.5% and 5% of GDP on defence.

Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend was calling for 5% the other day—“Go for five and stay alive” was the catchphrase he came up with, I think. He is right that it is important that we continue to keep the Ministry of Defence’s budget under review, and we were very pleased that last year the spending review committed to a rise of 0.5% above inflation every year during this Parliament. Another spending review will have to look at the budget again in due course.

Topical Questions

T1. [907080] Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): My priorities remain the fight against Daesh and implementing our strategic defence review. I am delighted to confirm to the House today that the United Kingdom has been chosen by the United States to become a global hub for maintenance and support services for the F-35 programme. The initial contracts will generate hundreds of millions of pounds of revenue and support thousands of highly skilled jobs. It is excellent news for the UK economy, and for Wales in particular, where the hub will be based.
Dr Lewis: May I welcome the fact that steel cutting will belatedly begin on the Type 26 frigates in the summer of 2017? However, the fact remains that, for the total of 19 frigates and destroyers to be maintained, each frigate will have to be replaced at the rate of one a year. Will the Secretary of State confirm that if the steel cutting begins in 2017, the first ship will be ready to enter service at the same time as HMS Argyll, the first of the Type 23 frigates, is due to leave service in 2023?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, I can confirm that it is our intention to replace the anti-submarine frigates within the Type 23 force with eight new Type 26 anti-submarine frigates.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): What assurances has the Secretary of State given to our NATO ally Estonia after a recent report by the US army-linked RAND Corporation showed that the current mismatch of forces in the Baltic region could result in Estonia being overrun by Russian troops within 36 hours in the event of an invasion?

Sir Michael Fallon: I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman comes new to these matters, but he may have heard me announce three weeks ago that we are sending 800 British troops to Estonia next year, backed up by French and Danish companies. There will be similar battalions in each of the Baltic states from next year, along with a battalion in Poland, which is all part of NATO’s measures to assure and help to deter any possible aggression.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): There is a still a large number of British nationals in Syria and Iraq fighting against Daesh on the side of the Kurdish, yet there seems to be no Government line on whether it is a criminal offence to do so under the Terrorism Act 2000, leaving a number of people, including my constituent Aidan Aslin of Newark, in legal limbo upon their return. Will the Secretary of State look into the matter and get a policy to help those British citizens on their return?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am very happy to undertake to look into that particular matter, but our emphasis, as I am sure my hon. Friend would agree, must be on the 200 or 300 British citizens who have gone to Iraq and Syria to fight for Daesh and pose a potential threat to this country, and who may well have committed criminal acts in fighting alongside Daesh. They are the people who need to be investigated first.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have a little more quiet in the Chamber, please.

T3. [907082] Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies) and I have been campaigning to bring opportunities to air cadets in Wales to experience gliding in Wales. We were promised at a meeting in the Ministry of Defence last week that a decision was pending. Is it good news or bad news?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is good news. The hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) have been absolute champions when it comes to pursuing the opportunity for cadets in Wales to glide in Wales, so I am pleased to announce that I will facilitate summer gliding camps at St Athan on a trial basis next summer, with a view to continuing them in future.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We have heard a lot this afternoon about the Type 26 frigate, but I would like to ask about our minesweeping capability. What progress and innovation in minesweeping technology has been made for the Navy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): I was delighted recently to announce, along with our French partners, an unmanned maritime minesweeping capability. We are building the demonstration phase, which will be an innovative and interesting investment in minesweeping technology.

T4. [907083] Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Shortly after the EU referendum, the Defence Secretary said that Britain could continue even after Brexit to take part in EU defence missions, such as the ongoing operations to tackle smuggling, people smuggling and piracy. We are now just months away from Britain triggering article 50 and our forces and our allies need certainty about what Britain’s continued participation might look like. Will the Minister or the Defence Secretary provide us with that certainty today?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes, and I provided that certainty at the recent meeting of the EU Defence Ministers in Bratislava. I made it very clear that while we remain members of the European Union, we will be full members of it. We will continue to participate in Operation Sophia in the central Mediterranean, to which we currently contribute two ships, and in Operation Atalanta to curb piracy off the horn of Africa.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): During the passage of the Armed Forces Bill, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State undertook to review the current policy that means that not all sexual offences are referred to service police. Will he provide an update to the House?

Mark Lancaster: We have always made it clear that there is no place for sexual offending in the armed forces. However, following concerns raised in this House I have decided to bring before Parliament draft legislation to add the offences of sexual assault, voyeurism and exposure to schedule 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2006. I will write to those who have previously raised such concerns shortly.

T5. [907084] Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Following publication of the highly critical marine accident investigation report on the collision between the stern trawler Karen and a dived Royal Navy submarine, and given the report’s urgent recommendations, what progress has been made on updating the Royal Navy fishing vessel code of practice?

Harriett Baldwin: I will look into the matter the hon. Gentleman raises and write to him.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Most of us in this place would welcome the announcement, made last week, with regard to the Type 26 ships. Does my right hon. Friend share my bemusement at the carping and pettifogging from some hon. Members about this rather welcome announcement?
Sir Michael Fallon: It is extraordinary for a pledge of 20 years of work for the Clyde to be welcomed in such a grudging fashion. Let us be very clear that if Scotland was outside the United Kingdom, these frigates would not be built on the Clyde. If Scottish National party Members had been successful in defeating the renewal of Trident, we would not have needed anti-submarine frigates.

T7. [907086] Mr John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): When the Department decided to purchase the P-8A maritime patrol aircraft from the United States without competition, what arrangements did the Minister make to secure work for British companies and British workers?

Harriett Baldwin: The right hon. Gentleman is very knowledgeable about these matters, so, again, I would have thought he would welcome the fact that we are acquiring this capability, which will be based at Lossiemouth in Scotland. Discussions with Boeing are ongoing in relation to the substantial inward investment it is making in the United Kingdom.

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): The increase in Russian aggression is concerning many of our NATO allies. Can my right hon. Friend provide reassurance on what reassurance he has given to them in the face of this increased aggression?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. We have, as NATO, agreed to the deployment of four battalions in the three Baltic states and Poland from next year. In addition, I announced two weeks ago that we would be deploying RAF Typhoons for the first time to assist southern air policing, based in Romania, from next year. That will provide considerable assurance to countries such as Romania and Bulgaria in curbing any Russian aggression in the Black sea region.

T8. [907087] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When will the Government bring forward a proper reconstruction programme for Syria and parts of Iraq, so that we do not make the same mistake as we made in Iraq years ago?

Sir Michael Fallon: This country has led the way in getting money assembled for the reconstruction of Syria. First, of course, we have to get the civil war brought to an end. So far as Iraq is concerned, we have contributed to the United Nations fund. That money is now ready to go in to the reconstruction of the towns that have been liberated and to provide as quickly as possible the power and hospital and school services that the population needs.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give the House an update on progress in providing specific support and welfare provision for those of our armed forces in the Iraq Historic Allegations Team system to support their families and themselves through this traumatic period?

Mark Lancaster: I am pleased to say we are making progress in this area. We expect the number of claims to go down quite substantially. We hope to report to the House shortly.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week I felt really powerful as an MP, given that the Secretary of State flew up to Glasgow to make an announcement just because I had a question on the Order Paper. I thank him for that. Instead of trading insults back at us, will he give a straightforward commitment that the five general purpose vehicles will be built on the Clyde as well?

Sir Michael Fallon: Just on Friday, I announced that the first eight Type 26 anti-submarine frigates would be built on the Clyde. It is too early to say how the new general purpose frigate, which is still to be designed, will be manufactured and assembled, but of course BAE Systems on the Clyde will be in pole position.
Article 50

3.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the process for invoking article 50. The Government’s priority at every stage following the European Union referendum has been to respect the outcome of that referendum and to ensure it is delivered on. To leave the European Union was the decision of the British people. It was taken after a 6:1 vote in this House to put that decision in their hands. As the Government told voters:

“This is your decision. The government will implement what you decide”—no ifs, no buts. So there can be no going back; the point of no return was passed on 23 June.

Implementing the decision to leave the EU means following the right processes. We must leave in the way agreed in law by the UK and other member states, which means following the process set out in article 50 of the treaty on European Union. We have been clear about the timing. There was a good reason why the Government did not take the advice of some in this House on 24 June and trigger article 50 immediately. Instead, the Prime Minister was clear that she would not invoke article 50 before the end of this year. That gives us time to develop a detailed negotiating position, but we have also said that the process should not drag on and that we intend to trigger article 50 by the end of March next year.

Let me now turn to the issues at hand this week. Legal action was taken to challenge the Government on the proper process for triggering article 50. We have always been of the clear view that this is a matter for the Government, and that it is constitutionally proper and lawful to give effect to the referendum result by the use of prerogative powers. As I have said, the basis on which the referendum was held was that the Government would give effect to the result of that referendum. That was the basis on which people were asked to vote.

Our argument in the High Court was that decisions on the making and withdrawal from treaties are clear examples of the use of the royal prerogative, and that Parliament, while having a role in the process, which I will come on to, has not constrained the use of the prerogative to withdraw from the EU. Our position in the case was that the Government were therefore entitled to invoke the procedure set out in article 50. The Court has, however, come to a different view. It held that the Government do not have the prerogative power to give notice under article 50 without legislation authorising them to do so.

The Court said that the starting point was that the Crown does not have power to vary the law of the land using its prerogative powers unless Parliament legislated to the contrary. It held that the European Communities Act 1972 brought rights arising under EU law into the law of the United Kingdom, and that the Crown has no prerogative power to withdraw from the EU because the effect of withdrawal would be to take away those rights.

Let me be clear about this; we believe in and value the independence of our judiciary, the foundation upon which our rule of law is built—[ Interruption. ] I have to say to the Opposition that I have a little more background in protecting that independence than they have, in view of the previous Government. We also value the freedom of our press. Both those things underpin our democracy.

The Government disagree with the Court’s judgment. The country voted to leave the European Union in a referendum approved by an Act of Parliament. Our position remains that the only means of leaving is through the procedure set out in article 50, and that triggering article 50 is properly a matter for the Government using their prerogative powers. As a result, we will appeal the High Court’s judgment at the Supreme Court.

Given our appeal, it would not be appropriate to comment further on the details of the legal arguments—I am sure that the House understands this—but let me say a brief word about the process of the appeal. We have taken two necessary procedural steps. First, the Government have been granted a certificate to bypass the Court of Appeal and leapfrog the case to the Supreme Court. This will ensure that, when we lodge our appeal, it will be heard directly in the Supreme Court without further delay. Secondly, we will this week apply for substantive permission to appeal to the Supreme Court. It is likely that any hearing will be scheduled in the Supreme Court in early December. We would hope that the judgment would be provided soon after. This timetable remains consistent with our aim to trigger article 50 by the end of March next year.

We are now preparing our submissions to the Supreme Court in the usual way. As I have said, it would not be proper to go into those in great detail here today, but the core of our argument will remain that we believe that it is proper and lawful for the Government to trigger article 50 by the use of prerogative powers.

Of course, litigation is also under way in Northern Ireland. It is considering a number of specific issues linked to Northern Ireland’s constitutional arrangements. The High Court in Belfast found in the Government’s favour on these points. A hearing is being held in Belfast tomorrow to consider whether an appeal by the claimants in that case should also leapfrog to the Supreme Court, and whether the issues that overlap with the English courts should remain stayed pending the outcome of the hearing in the Supreme Court. Again, it would not be appropriate for me to say more at this stage, except that in the event of any appeal in the Northern Ireland litigation, the Government will robustly defend their position. For the avoidance of doubt, our view is that the legal timetable in relation to this case in the event of an appeal should also be consistent with our commitment to notifying under article 50 by the end of March next year.

I have said that because of our appeal, I will not go into detail on the points that were raised in the High Court’s judgment, but let me set out some fundamental principles for how we move ahead. First, our plan remains to invoke article 50 by the end of March. We believe that the legal timetable will allow for that. Secondly, the referendum result must be respected and delivered. The country voted to leave the European Union in a referendum provided for by an Act of Parliament. There must be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it through the back door and no second referendum. The country voted to leave the European Union and it is the duty of the Government to make sure that we do just that. Parliament had its say in legislating for the referendum, which it did in both
Mr David Davis  

Houses, with an overwhelming majority in this House and cross-party support. The people have spoken and we intend to act on their decision.

Thirdly, irrespective of the ongoing court process, there is an important role for Parliament. Parliament will have a central role in ensuring that we find the best way forward, and we have been clear that we will be as transparent and open as possible. There have already been a number of debates and parliamentary statements on Brexit, and the Prime Minister has pledged that that process will continue before article 50 is invoked. I informed the House in October that there would be a series of debates on Brexit in Government time—the first will take place today—and that is on top of a number of other debates and opportunities for scrutiny. The new Exiting the European Union Committee has been established, and it provides another place for parliamentary scrutiny of our withdrawal from the EU. If I remember correctly, its members will be visiting my Department tomorrow.

The Government will introduce legislation in the next Session that, when enacted, will repeal the European Communities Act on the day we leave the EU. This great repeal Bill will end the authority of EU law and return power to the United Kingdom. We have made it clear that European Union law will be transposed into UK law at the time we leave, providing certainty for workers, businesses and consumers. We intend that this Act of Parliament will be in place before the end of the article 50 process.

It is important to remember that article 50 is the beginning of the process, not the end. As the Prime Minister has made clear, there will be many opportunities for Parliament to continue to engage with the Government once article 50 has been invoked. When negotiations have concluded, we will observe in full all relevant legal and constitutional obligations that apply. However, there is a balance to be struck between parliamentary scrutiny and preserving our negotiating position, which was why the House unanimously concluded last month that the process should be undertaken in a way that respects the decision of the people of the United Kingdom when they voted to leave the EU on 23 June, and does not undermine the negotiating position of the Government as negotiations are entered into. We will give no quarter to anyone who, while going through the motions of respecting the outcome of the referendum, in fact seeks to thwart the decision of the British people.

We are disappointed by the Court's judgment in this case and we will appeal against it in the Supreme Court. None of this in any way diminishes our determination to respect and deliver the outcome of the referendum, and to notify under article 50 by the end of March next year. We are going to get on with delivering on the mandate to leave the European Union in the best way possible for the UK's national interest—best for jobs, best for growth, and best for investment.

3.44 pm  

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. This is the third statement that he has made to the House in just a few months. Nobody could accuse him of not being willing to turn up to the Dispatch Box; it is just that each time he does so, we leave none the wiser about the Government's basic approach to the negotiation. Today was no different; he has not even made clear what will happen if the Government lose their appeal. I was going to say it is all process and no substance, but I realised I said that last time and that I am in danger of repeating myself—there are only so many times I can say, "Is that it?"

What we do know is that last week was not a good week for the Government. On Thursday, the High Court ruled the Prime Minister is acting unlawfully in seeking to use prerogative powers to invoke article 50. The Court had to remind the Prime Minister that only Parliament can make and repeal laws, and it is because the Prime Minister is seeking to use prerogative powers to change the European Communities Act that the judgment went against her. Only Parliament can do that. As the Court had to make clear to the Prime Minister, when it comes to legislation, Parliament is sovereign. That sovereignty matters.

The Government have approached their task in the wrong way and their approach is now unravelling, and I am afraid to say it is unravelling in the most divisive and ugly way. In the aftermath of the High Court judgment, we saw a series of appalling personal attacks on the judges, including the suggestion that they are "enemies of the people". Some of us have worked in countries where judges do as the Executive tell them, and believe you me it is highly corrosive of democracy. Robust comment on, and criticism of, court judgments is right in a country that respects free speech, but we all have a duty to stand up for the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The Lord Chancellor has a special duty to do so because, by convention, judges do not engage in public debate and are thus unable to defend themselves. Yet the Lord Chancellor has been too slow and too reluctant to do her duty. It was disappointing that the Secretary of State did not take this opportunity to put on record the Government's clear and unambiguous condemnation of personal attacks on our judges, and I ask him to do so now.

Turning to the approach that the Secretary of State has set out, it is clear that the Government intend to appeal last week's ruling. Clearly, legally, they are entitled to do so, but would it not be better for the Government to stand back and ask whether it is right to continue with the approach they are taking? No one expects the Government to reveal the detail of their negotiating hand, but there are big headline issues that matter to everyone in every part of the UK. What relationship with the single market are the Government aiming for? What is the opening stance on the customs union? How do the Government envisage our future co-operation with EU partners in combating terrorism and serious crime? Do the Government have a plan for transitional arrangements in March 2019? These basic questions require clear answers.

Labour has repeatedly made it clear that we accept and respect the outcome of the referendum—[Interruption.] I have said that every time I have stood at this Dispatch Box. There is a mandate to leave. We will not frustrate the process by voting down article 50, but we cannot have a debate in a vacuum. The future relationship of the UK with our EU partners is at stake. The future relationship of the UK in the world is at stake. The Prime
Mr Davis: The hon. and learned Gentleman finishes by calling me “furtive”, having started his contribution by commending me for the number of times I have appeared at the Dispatch Box—an interesting idea. I thank him for his reply none the less. I shall respond to his points in a moment, but let me first say that I am determined to work constructively with Opposition Members who want to make a success of Brexit. I have said that the Government will be as open and transparent as we approach these vital negotiations—this must be the 20th time I have said that—and that Parliament will be closely and repeatedly engaged in the process of exit.

The hon. and learned Gentleman suggests that his party respects the referendum result and is not seeking to undermine the decision of the British people, but I have to say that the approach being taken by certain Opposition Members rather gives the game away. The shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), has declared that what the referendum result—the biggest democratic mandate for a course of action achieved by any Government—needs is an “injection of democracy”. The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has suggested that Labour would amend any article 50 Bill to bring about a second referendum.

The right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), the former Deputy Prime Minister, who is in the Chamber, suggested after last week’s result that his party would seek to amend any legislation on triggering article 50 to allow for a second referendum on our new relationship with the EU. He did not like the first answer given by the voters, so he is seeking to put the question all over again in the hope of getting a different one. These are not constructive proposals to enable Britain to make a success of Brexit. I am sorry to say that they look increasingly like attempts to thwart and reverse the decision that was taken on 23 June—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Bacon, I always regard you as a cerebral denizen of the House, not the sort of person who would point across the Chamber. That is profoundly discourteous and very un-Bacon-like, if I may say so.

Mr Davis: As we are speaking of cerebral issues, Mr Speaker, I shall return to the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), I read in the Financial Times that he recently attended a private event in Parliament at which he was hailed as “the man who’ll make sure we stay in the EU”. Apparently he winced at that because he “does not want expectations to get out of hand.”

We have had a weekend of Labour confusion. The Leader of the Opposition suggested he might seek to block the triggering of article 50 if various conditions were not met. A few hours later, the deputy leader said that that was not right. I heard the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) on the radio this morning and he now appears to be suggesting a different approach. He says that triggering article 50 should be conditional on our going into this negotiation with all our cards face up for everyone on the other side of the table to see.

I have said repeatedly that we will be as open as we possibly can be. Indeed, we have set out our strategic aims for the negotiation again and again. I have told the House before—I do so again today—that they are: to bring back control of our laws to Parliament; to bring back control of decisions over immigration to the United Kingdom; to maintain the strong security co-operation we have with the EU; and to establish the freest possible market in goods and services with the EU and the rest of the world. But there are none so deaf as those who will not hear.

We will not achieve a good outcome, however, if the negotiation is being run by 650 people in the House of Commons and nearly 900 in the other place. No negotiation in our history has been run in that way. Indeed, if Parliament insists on setting out a detailed minimum negotiating position, that will quickly become the maximum possible offer from our negotiating partners, and the talk of a second referendum from some Opposition Members will simply encourage the EU27 to impose impossibly difficult conditions in the hope that the British people will change their minds. In other words, their whole approach is designed to wreck the negotiations.

So, Parliamentary scrutiny—yes. Telling the Prime Minister which cards to play and forcing her to disclose her hand to those she will be negotiating with—no. That will not be the approach taken by our EU counterparts. The European Commission states in a public document on how its negotiations are conducted:

“The negotiations and their texts are not themselves public...A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy”.

I will consider any suggestions that the shadow Secretary of State constructively has to make. We have said that we want as broad a consensus as possible, but we will not do anything to compromise Britain’s negotiating position or give grounds to those who want to thwart the result of the referendum.

The shadow Secretary of State did raise another point that I do not want to let pass. He accused the Lord Chancellor of failing to defend the judiciary. I do not accept that. I have the quote in front of me and the Lord Chancellor said:

“The independence of the judiciary is the foundation upon which our rule of law is built and our judiciary is rightly respected the world over for its independence and impartiality.”

I have been in this House for a little while. Over the past decade or so—since about 2004—there have been a number of occasions when I was sitting on the Opposition Benches that the Labour Home Secretary of the day criticised by name and in terms individual judges. I never did that. I did not attack him because I thought he was doing something he believed in—even if he was wrong. Nevertheless, I certainly never ever undermined the judges when I was in that position. A little later in that decade, Mr Peter Hain was threatened with prosecution
for criticising judges, and I led the campaign to stop that prosecution, so I will take no lessons from Labour on this subject.

Mr Speaker: As usual, I want to accommodate the enormous interest of the House in this important statement and will strive to do so, but I must say to the House that questions and answers must be brief from now on.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the European Union Referendum Act 2015 and the Lisbon treaty Act of 2008 are both constitutional Acts—sovereign Acts—of the first order? Does he also agree that not only did the 2015 Act expressly and clearly give the voters the absolute right to leave the EU, but the 2008 Act also clearly intended that the Government would give notice to leave under article 50, and that the Government stated that both before and after the referendum?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and that was the subject of our case.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): The Government have at various times in the past few months said that they wanted to unify the country, heal our divisions and build a national consensus, and all of us in each part of this House—leave and remain—should want to see that. But how is it remotely possible to build that national consensus unless the Government are far more transparent with the country and this House of Commons about their plan for the Brexit negotiations?

Mr Davis: It is not possible by trying to thwart the will of the people by all sorts of parliamentary games, but what I will say to the right hon. Gentleman is this: I agree that we want to unify the people of Britain about a common position, but in truth there are very few differences across this divide. When I looked at what the Leader of the Opposition said on Sunday, I thought I could agree with at least two thirds of it. I do not think the divide is quite as wide as the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) thinks.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government remind the Supreme Court that prerogative powers have regularly been used by Ministers over the past 44 years to introduce and change British law by accepting European decisions and regulations, without any referendum cover? Will they also give all the abundant evidence that this was not an advisory referendum to that same Court?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is inviting me to comment on the case in detail. I will not do that, but I will agree with him in one respect: prerogative power has been used for the past 40 years to increase the burden of European legislation but it seems not to be to reduce it.

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Is the Secretary of State aware that the Governments of the day, of different political persuasions, published White Papers on their negotiating priorities ahead of the Amsterdam treaty, the Nice treaty, the constitutional treaty and the Lisbon treaty, and that Maastricht treaty negotiations were preceded by two whole days of debate under John Major’s Government and a vote in this House? Can the Secretary of State explain to the House why an approach involving Parliament’s prerogatives of scrutiny is appropriate as the very first thing the new Prime Minister did was visit the First Minister of Scotland to discuss exactly the issue we are talking about today. This week, we are having the second Joint Ministerial Committee meeting, at which Scotland’s Government will be represented.
for amendments to EU treaties but not appropriate to the much larger endeavour of pulling the UK out of the EU altogether?

Mr Davis: What the right hon. Gentleman forgets of course is that we have announced already, right at the beginning of this process, that we will introduce the great repeal Bill, which will lead to an enormous length of debate in this House on exactly what powers will be kept and what powers will remain—most will remain. After that, there will be other Bills, I should think, that will also deal with the individual elements of the negotiation, which will inform the House, with the House having the right to both amend and vote on them. So I do not see what he is complaining about.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Our country is deeply divided. In my county of Nottinghamshire, hate crime is 18% higher today than it was a year ago. Is it not important that, in everything that we say and do in the years and months ahead of us, we watch the language and make sure it is temperate, and that we involve everybody? Seventeen million people voted to leave the EU and 16 million of us voted for us not to leave the EU, and most of us have accepted that we are now going to leave the EU. In that spirit of bringing our nation together, in the interests of everybody, will my right hon. Friend now take this opportunity unequivocally to condemn the language and the vilification of our judges, including the homophobic abuse of one of our judges? Will he now please set the tone for us to work together?

Mr Davis: I wholeheartedly deplore the threats and the violent language used against the individual who I think launched this judicial case—that is utterly to be deplored. The point of division when one defends free speech is the point at which it encourages violence. In that respect, I absolutely agree. Hate crime is despicable, and those sorts of assaults are despicable.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State indicated last Thursday that, in all probability, legislation would be required to trigger the article 50 process if the judgment is upheld. Is that still his view? If so, will he give the House an assurance that, before that legislation is brought before the House, the Government will have published their negotiating objectives for the great endeavour on which the nation is about to embark. Whether people voted for or against remaining in the European Union, what all of them want to know now is: do the Government have a plan? The more he stands at the Dispatch Box and does not reveal one, the more worried people become.

Mr Davis: First, on the question of legislation, the actual outcome will depend on what the Supreme Court judges rule. What I was commenting on was the state as of the hearing or declaration last week. On the negotiation, as I have said before, we will be as open as possible subject to the overwhelming national interest of preserving our negotiating position. It is no good creating a public negotiating position, which has the simple effect of destroying our ability to negotiate—full stop.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): The independence of our judiciary is a very precious thing and it must be respected. The independence of our free press is also a very precious thing, and it must be respected. The fact that 17.4 million people—a majority of the British people—voted for national independence is a precious thing and that must be respected. Will my right hon. Friend guarantee to me that he will not allow the efforts of the right hon. Members for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) and for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) or indeed any Member of the other place to thwart the mandate that this Government have been given in order to ensure that we can take back control of our laws, our money, our trade and our sovereignty?

Mr Davis: I am happy to give my right hon. Friend that undertaking.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s words about the independence of the judiciary were welcome, but he will know that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government said last week that the High Court decision was an attempt to frustrate the will of the British people. Does he agree that that was a deeply unhelpful thing for him to say, particularly at a time when the UK Independence party is calling for democratic and political control of judges—that was this morning—and when we all have a strong responsibility to ensure that the process of Brexit strengthens democracy and the rule of law in Britain and does not undermine and subvert it?

Mr Davis: I did not hear the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government speak. I have seen—[Interruption]—Wait a minute. I have seen some of the reportage of it. I say to the right hon. Lady that we can respect the judiciary’s independence and disagree with the conclusion that it arrived at—that is perfectly proper within our country.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, like the European Parliament under article 50, this Parliament will have a vote on any prospective deal with the EU 27 at the end of the negotiations and that although it is very important that he informs his negotiating position by consulting all shades of opinion and interest in the country and in this House, our decision will be at the end of this process, not at the beginning?

Mr David Davis: My hon. Friend is right. I have said to the House on a number of occasions that we will—I have used the same formula—obey all the laws and conventions. He will know that that includes, for example, the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 and other Acts, including the European Union Act 2011. Before then, as I have said already, we will have the great repeal Act, which will be a major Act debated at length in this House, with possible consequential legislation, which may also be amendable. There is both a ratification process at the end and an amendment process along the way.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement and for the regular meetings that he is having with Members in the devolved Assemblies and Members from the devolved regions about this important matter. He can be assured that on the Ulster Bench the Government’s f xi ty of
purpose is supported. Have last week’s events been a reminder that the courtroom is not the place for Britain to conduct its politics? Does he foresee any circumstances in which this case could end up in the European courts, and is there a contingency plan to address that matter?

Mr Davis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supportive comments. Both cases in front of the courts are issues relating to the UK constitution, and the European Court has absolutely no locus in that area.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If the result had gone the other way, leavers like me would have unequivocally accepted it—[Interruption.] That is absolutely the case. Therefore the same should be expected of hon. Members who were defeated by the referendum result. Given that they all say that they would vote for article 50 in a vote in the House of Commons, why do we not hold such a vote straight away on a straightforward resolution, so that we can see whether that is sincere or whether they are as cynical as their reaction to the true statement that I made seems to suggest?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend tempts me, but the proper route for the Government to pursue is to await the outcome of the court case and then act properly under the law.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The basis of the judgment last week was that rights conferred by legislation cannot be taken away by royal prerogative. The Secretary of State said in the wake of that judgment that it was his understanding that therefore legislation would be needed to give effect to the judgment. Is that still his understanding, or does he think that the judgment can be given effect without legislation?

Mr Davis: As the judgment stands, that is my understanding. Basically, the right hon. Gentleman is right. What the court said, in effect, was, “You cannot remove rights without legislative power, and to give the Government legislative power, you have to have legislation”, but remember, we are now waiting on the Supreme Court outcome, which may be different.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Some 105 years ago it was a Liberal Government who established the supremacy of the elected over the unelected Chamber, so would it not be a scandalous state of affairs if Lib Dem peers were to use a parliamentary vote to frustrate the will of the people of this country?

Mr Davis: I am tempted to say that Lloyd George would be spinning in his grave.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): Is not the pressure on us, not on the judges? At elections the people give us sovereignty to exercise on their behalf, and at referendums we return that sovereignty to them. Woe betide us if we do not abide by that. Will the right hon. Gentleman hazard a guess as to how many remainers’ turkeys will vote for Christmas in next May’s election?

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman will not tempt me again, but he is quite right: 17.4 million people is the biggest vote—the biggest mandate—any Government have had in the history of this country, and we have to obey it.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Is there not a way to cut through the debate and to start to heal the rift between Parliament and the people? The Secretary of State has an opportunity this afternoon to say that there will be a one-line Bill authorising the triggering of article 50, which would be introduced to this House and then pass through the House of Lords. I would urge him to bring that Bill forward soon to test the will of this House and the House of Lords, which I think will approve the passing of that Bill, and we can then get on with negotiating the exit.

Mr Davis: I hear what my right hon. Friend says, and I have to say I am very tempted, but what I also have to say is that this whole issue is a matter of extreme importance, and we do have to complete the test in the courts that is necessary to establish the law.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In 2010, responding to a House of Lords constitutional affairs report, the Government Minister asserted:

“Under the UK’s constitutional arrangements Parliament must be responsible for deciding whether or not to take action in response to a referendum result.”

Can the Secretary of State explain what has happened since 2010 to change the Government’s view on that?

Mr Davis: What happened in 2015 was that the Government Minister responsible, the Foreign Secretary, said to the House of Commons that this gives the decision to the British people—full stop, no ifs, no buts. The Government then published a number of documents saying the same thing over and over again. If we betray the people by not responding to that properly, I think it will be very difficult to ever make a referendum matter again.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): I am delighted with the certainty my right hon. Friend has that we are sticking to the current timetable, but he will have noticed that those who voted to remain are putting out a false narrative that we now have a choice between soft Brexit or hard Brexit. Will he please confirm that the biggest majority in British history voted to take back control, and that means making our own laws in our own Parliament?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is exactly right. We were given a national instruction, which we will interpret in the national interest, not in terms of any fictional soft or hard, or any other sort of, Brexit. We will get the outcome that suits this country best.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The Attorney General, who is helpfully sitting next to the Secretary of State, will know that the Government failed in the European Union Referendum Bill to set out how notification under article 50 would be given in the event of a leave vote. Consequently, the courts have had to intervene. So should the Secretary of State not come to the Dispatch Box and condemn the hysterical, vicious, personal attacks on our independent judiciary and condemn some of the comments from those on his own Front Bench?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman knows from our many operations together over the years that I am a great defender of the independence of the judiciary. In respect of the Bill, the presumption is that the prerogative exists, unless it is taken away, and it exists in this case.
Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that some people have been describing this moment as some kind of constitutional crisis? I will be inviting the constitution Committee of the House of Commons to take an interest in this crisis, if it is a crisis. In the meantime, may I commend my right hon. Friend, and indeed the whole Government, for taking a cool and calm approach to this? May I invite him to pursue the appeal to the Supreme Court, because the present judgment leaves unanswered a number of questions that need to be resolved? May I also say that it is quite possible that the Supreme Court may choose to exercise its independence by reversing the decision of the High Court?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is, as ever, perspicacious about this. There are many issues to be resolved. It is not a constitutional crisis; it is simply the operation of the rule of law in the United Kingdom, which is how we like to see things done.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Government’s handling of this situation does not inspire confidence at any level: Ministers cannot convince the High Court that their actions are lawful, they are fearful that they cannot persuade Parliament that their negotiating strategy is the right one, and they cannot even agree a UK-wide strategy that involves all the devolved Parliaments. On what basis are we expected to believe that this Government can persuade our partners in the EU that we should get a good deal from Brexit?

Mr Davis: Yet again, I am astonished that Scottish National party Members are saying that we cannot agree a UK-wide strategy. We are two meetings into the process. We presumably intend to try to agree a strategy—or is it the intention of the hon. Lady’s party not to let one happen?

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): While it would be improper for Ministers to criticise judges, though not judgments, and disorderly for this House to criticise judges, except under a specific motion, is it not absolutely right that our press are free, fearless and outspoken, because there may be less happy times when judges need to be held more firmly to account?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. There are a number of pillars of our democracy. One of them is the independence of the judiciary, which we have maintained for centuries, and another is the freedom of the press, which we are still maintaining after centuries.

Mr Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): It is now more than four months since a clear majority voted to leave. In a spirit of constructive engagement, and further to what the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said, may I suggest that Secretary of State bring a motion, as opposed to a Bill, before the House ahead of the Supreme Court hearing in January, because doing so might underline where the balance of opinion lies both in this House and in the unelected place?

Mr Davis: As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), it seems to me that the proper approach of the Government is to respect the ruling of the Court and therefore wait on the final outcome in the Supreme Court.
both to the European market and to the rest of the world. We will make that judgment in due course and make it public in due course.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that nobody is above the law, not even his own Government?

Mr Davis: Yes.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): On the subject of devolved Administrations, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Welsh Labour Government’s announcement that they will now seek to join the legal challenge to the article 50 process at the Supreme Court is entirely unnecessary and opportunistic, and that, rather than seek to impede or complicate what should be an orderly exit from the European Union, the Welsh Labour Government and the Labour party in this place should spend more time talking to their own voters about why they turned out so overwhelmingly to vote for Brexit?

Mr Davis: I will leave it to the Welsh Labour party to take my right hon. Friend’s advice directly. He will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on who should or should not join the legal case.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Since the referendum result, there has been a carnival of reaction that has been in part vicious and pernicious, and that is now verging on the seditious with regard to the rule of law. The Prime Minister seems to want to just crowd surf that mood, wrapped in the royal prerogative. Would it not be better for this Chamber to move beyond yet another episode of roaming commentary and to give real consideration to the precepts and purposes that will inform negotiations? Does the Secretary of State recognise that it is not just UK constitutional interests that are at stake? Irish constitutional dimensions need to be taken care of, too.

Mr Davis: I referred to the Northern Irish case, which, the Government won, and the decision about whether to leapfrog it will be made tomorrow. I am entirely aware that this is a very wide constitutional issue that has to be resolved properly. That is one of the reasons I am resisting calls to do something before the Supreme Court rules on the issue. That is the proper place for the decision to be taken.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am glad that the Secretary of State has characterised the decision as being a judgment. The judges were asked to answer a legal point of significant importance and they did so, rightly and faithfully, in accordance with their oath. Does he, therefore, agree that it is important for our reputation after we have left the European Union that all of us speak up for the independence of the judiciary and, above all, that we do not regard freedom of expression in the press as any excuse for personal, abusive and, frankly, disgraceful innuendo being raised against individual members of Her Majesty’s judiciary? That undermines us all.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend knows full well my view on protecting the independence of the judiciary, and I have not demurred 1 millimetre from that since coming to the Front Bench.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Of course, there should be absolutely no doubt that this House complies with the rulings of the Supreme Court and that we will do whatever is required by the law to trigger article 50, but article 50 gives expression to the result of the referendum. Does the Secretary of State agree that this House would do well to remind itself that, if the referendum had been a general election, 401 of the 632 English, Welsh and Scottish constituencies would have voted to leave?

Mr Davis: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is often said that if it had been a leave party versus a remain party, the majority would have been bigger than that of the Blair Government in 1997. We would do well to pay attention to that.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): Since we clearly must respect the decision of the British people, and since it is also clear that the majority of Members of this House, including me, would vote to trigger article 50, surely the real question is the substantive one about what kind of Brexit will be pursued. Why is it that the former Government were able to set out a White Paper on their objectives ahead of the Lisbon treaty negotiations, but that this Government are saying that they will not set out a similar document in respect of these much more important negotiations?

Mr Davis: I guess I was the part-author of the White Paper ahead of the Amsterdam treaty, and our aims were put only in very broad terms. In those terms, we already have our broad aims. They are very plain: control of laws, control of borders, maintenance of our security and the maximum possible access to free markets, both in Europe and elsewhere. Those are the broad aims. In terms of detail, I have just been asked about the customs union. As I have said, when we get to the point of being sure of where we are going on that—[Interruption] I am glad that Labour Members are all very sure about that, since they do not seem to have looked at any of the numbers at all. The national interest requires that we make sure what the outcome is before we attempt to achieve it. That is a very small negotiating lesson.

I do not think that I want to commit at this point, but let me say this. I have said over and over again in this process that we will be as open as possible, consistent with maintaining our negotiating stance. I mean that. I have stood up for that principle through decades in this Parliament, and I will not stop standing up for it just because I am standing here.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): Last week’s ruling was not about overturning the referendum, but it did recognise that this issue will affect every man, woman and child in this country and that therefore their democratically elected representatives should have a role in making sure that the Government get the best deal for everybody. Without greater transparency, how can the Government provide the reassurance that they are representing not just 52% or 48%, but the whole country?
Mr Davis: The hon. Lady makes a good point, in that the aim of the Government is to carry out the national instruction, because that is what it was, in the national interest. At the risk of repeating myself, I have said that we will be as open as it is possible to be while maintaining that national interest, which means a degree of confidentiality in the early stages of negotiation. Parliament will have plenty of opportunities both to scrutinise the legislation and to amend it before it takes effect.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I was very pleased that the Secretary of State started his remarks by saying that he wanted to respect the decision. It seems to me that the confusion among many is that they think that the decision the British people took on 23 June was conditional on some kind of deal; it was not. I was on the remain side of the argument, but I accept unconditionally the decision of the British people. We are leaving. The task at hand for the Government is to negotiate with our partners for the best trade deal, the best access to the markets and the best security arrangements. I am confident that the Prime Minister will do so. Too many Opposition Members think that leaving is conditional; it is not.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is best demonstrated by the fact that the ballot paper had on it: “Leave the European Union”—nothing else, and no conditions. He has put it very well.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Gina Miller, who brought the case, has been subject to death threats. She has been attacked for being foreign-born. She has been subject to racial abuse and threats of sexual violence simply for exercising her rights as a British citizen. As has been mentioned, the judges in her case have been attacked simply for doing their job and not dancing to the tune of the Executive. Does the Secretary of State believe that whether we voted leave or remain, we can all agree that these vicious and deplorable attacks are not what our country is about or in keeping with British values? On that point, in relation to the judiciary, if our judges are intimidated and harassed and we have marches on our courts, that takes our country down a very dangerous avenue indeed.

Mr Davis: I have already commented on the judges, but let me comment on the treatment of Gina Miller. I have said that I deplore—I cannot find words strong enough, frankly, to say how much I detest—the attacks on her. I have not seen them directly, but they sound to me to be effectively criminal attacks, because incitement of violence, threats of violence and racial abuse are all crimes.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): May I press my right hon. Friend further on the idea of allowing both Houses of Parliament to vote early on a resolution calling on the Government to exercise article 50 before 31 March? Surely to do so would respect the judgment in the High Court, because that judgment made it clear that this House is sovereign; and, as a sovereign House, we should decide how to exercise that sovereignty.

Mr Davis: I refer my hon. Friend to the comment put to me earlier, which was that it is within the power of the House, if it so chooses, to pass such a resolution.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Independent judges are vital to our democracy because they keep Governments honest and ensure that they cannot overrule the rule of law. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is right that language matters. The Secretary of State talks about keeping his cards close to his chest, as though he was playing a late-night game of poker, but he must understand that people are exercised, whether they voted to leave or to stay, because they know the stakes he is playing for are their lives. The British public deserve to know whether there are any nasty surprises ahead. Will he now be honest about his Government’s red lines, so he is not left red-faced with the British public?

Mr Davis: It is not a late-night game of poker; it is a devil of a lot more important than that. The simple truth is: when you go into a negotiation of this nature and you publicise your minimum negotiating objectives, you make them your opponent’s maximum negotiating objectives and you increase the price. I am afraid a commitment to parliamentary accountability—I share such a commitment with everybody else in the House—is not an excuse for naivety in negotiation.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If the referendum was no more than advisory, it makes one wonder why some people who now claim it was only advisory campaigned so hard during the referendum campaign. Triggering article 50 is just the start of the process, so if the Supreme Court does not overturn the perverse decision of the High Court, does my right hon. Friend expect the Labour party to agree to triggering article 50 without any conditions? Given that it was made perfectly clear in the Conservative party manifesto at the last election that we would have a referendum and honour the result, does he expect the House of Lords to honour one of the conventions of this place, which is that it should not stand in the way of a manifesto promise?

Mr Davis: I am responsible for many things, but the Labour party’s stance is not one of them. Frankly, that is just as well, given that it had three of them—three different stances—over the weekend. As I understand it, the approach taken by my Labour opposite number is that conditions will be attached to the approval of triggering article 50. That does not reflect the will of the people at all—just the reverse.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not accept that the judgment given by the Supreme Court could come as late as January? Does he not accept that, nevertheless, the debate about what the Government think Brexit should look like does not have to be constrained by the court judgment, and could start tomorrow if the Government had the political will? Does he not accept that the best way of doing that would be to table a White Paper as soon as possible?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady has not listened to my responses to earlier questions. Yes, she is right in one respect: the judgment may come as late as early January. The expectation is that the case will be held in early December, and I suspect that it will take two to three weeks for the judgment to be written up. I think the proper role of the Government is to await and to respect the judgment from the Supreme Court—full stop.
Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree, despite the arguments of Labour Members and of some Conservative Members, that there will be no successful business deal has ever been done when the hands of the negotiator have been tied, and that the best way to take this forward is to allow the Prime Minister to negotiate without boxing her in?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Tying the hands of the negotiator is exactly what the Opposition are trying to do.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Following the UK Government’s decision to challenge the High Court judgment, the Welsh Government have announced that they will seek legal representation in the Supreme Court hearing, because of the impact of the use of prerogative powers on the legislative competence of the National Assembly for Wales. Surely the UK Government should now take a step back, take a deep breath and, instead of trying to steamroller through Brexit, fully engage with this Parliament and the national Parliaments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Mr Davis: Again, the hon. Gentleman has not listened to what I said to the Scottish nationalists. That is precisely what we have been doing.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): Having worked with my right hon. Friend for many years in this place, both in opposition and in government, I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever about the truth of his suggestion about the value of the independence of the judiciary. Will he accept that the referendum gave the Government permission to leave the European Union—and that is going to happen—but the referendum did not give the Government a power they do not have?

Mr Davis: As my right hon. and learned Friend will know better than almost anyone else in this House, that is precisely what is being tested in the courts right now.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I add my support to the principle of—and the urgent need to clarify and state—the independence of the judiciary, and its importance for our rule of law. I believe that it is to our shame that we are having this discussion at all, and that it is incumbent on every Member of this House, and of the media, to uphold the language and the high standard of debate that this country needs and deserves. If the Secretary of State wants the best deal for the country and the best chance of success in negotiations, does he not think that the Prime Minister will be helped by going into those negotiations with a united country, a thorough debate that is public and transparent, and the vote of support of Parliament behind her?

Mr Davis: I reiterate that the independence of the judiciary is one of the fundamental pillars of our democracy, as is a free press and a number of other freedoms that are sometimes uncomfortable for people, I am afraid. Of course it would help to have the support of the House, and there will be plenty of opportunities for that to happen. During the great repeal Bill debates there will be a great deal of opportunity for all parts of this House and the other place to vote on the measures put before them. That will provide some support for the Government.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): One of the complexities of article 50 is that there are no transitional arrangements. I know that the Secretary of State understands that there are genuinely held fears about people’s rights. Will he confirm that, notwithstanding the outcome from the Supreme Court, cases referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union either before article 50 is invoked or before the final date of the UK’s departure from the EU will be heard by that court and, more importantly, that any decision by that court, however long it takes, will remain binding in the UK?

Mr Davis: The simple truth, which may sound rather platitudinous, is that we are in until we are out. We will actually obey every aspect of European law until we leave.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): This summer, the country was failed by an embarrassing, misleading and, at times, toxic debate about the EU that all too often inflamed rather than illuminated. Legislation before article 50 is triggered could help lift us out of this quagmire, giving the issue the sort of thorough scrutiny and sensible debate it deserves. Why will the Secretary of State not commit to a Bill and a programme motion that allows each and every one of us to set out our views on the principle of triggering article 50, the terms on which it should be invoked and the process thereafter?

Mr Davis: I think the hon. Lady has just given the game away.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that invoking article 50 changes not one word of English law, but is simply the process of sending a letter formally notifying the EU of the people’s vote to leave, and that failure to do that would be a betrayal of the British people that they would not lightly forgive?

Mr Davis: I agree that of itself it does not change one word of English law. Some people see it as a point of no return; I see 23 June as the point of no return. We have to live by the instruction we were given on that day.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Further to that, the Secretary of State should take some comfort from the fact that the High Court in Belfast reaffirmed the view of the Northern Ireland Attorney General that not one comma or full stop of our devolved settlement will be amended by the triggering of article 50. Given that, and the fact that devolved arrangements are subject to the will not only of this House but of this Government and that constitutional arrangements and external relations are reserved matters, does he agree that this decision will be taken as a nation by this nation as a whole?

Mr Davis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is exactly right. That is precisely correct.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): While I understand the Government’s desire to proceed with the court case—there is a principle of law—is it not a good idea, which we have heard from both sides of the House today, urgently to put a resolution to the House that can be voted on, which would help the courts to decide Parliament’s view on article 50?
Mr Davis: I have stated my view on the proper approach for the Government. That does not constrain Parliament at all.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has referred to the timetable for article 50. Once it is triggered, we have a maximum of two years. Does he agree that, if we do not have agreement towards the end of that period, we face a ticking clock, which weakens our position? Is there merit in the suggestion in today’s Financial Times, which apparently the Prime Minister is considering, to have a transitional arrangement of several years afterwards? Is it not time that hon. Members debated that?

Mr Davis: I am afraid I do not recognise anything in today’s Financial Times.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I believe that acceptance of the High Court ruling would have offered a symbolic and inclusive hand to those of us who voted to remain. Inclusion is a part—a key ingredient—of the Prime Minister’s strategy of bringing the country back together and we all need to come along on this journey. The Government have chosen not to do that, but can we agree that the judiciary have an important role to play in our constitution and should be allowed to do so independently, with our respect? This is what grown-up sovereignty feels like.

Mr Davis: I do not recognise the first part of my hon. Friend’s comments and I do not see how the Government have refused to be inclusive. We have taken input on vast amounts of policy from large numbers of people who voted or campaigned for remain, so I do not think her description is remotely true.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State tell the House how much taxpayers’ money he is expending on the court case, the appeal and future action to stop this House having a say on the important issues of the single market, employment rights and prisoner transfer agreements, which all matter, even if we have accepted the will of the referendum, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has said?

Mr Davis: All those figures will be published in due course, but the right hon. Gentleman is wrong about one thing: I have given in terms an undertaking to the House that there will be no dilution of employment rights as a result of our leaving the European Union. He has not been paying attention.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): The High Court judgment noted:

“The Government accepts that a notice under Article 50 cannot be withdrawn once it has been given.”

Why did the Government simply accept that? If they had maintained that triggering could be reversed by Parliament, would not Parliament remain sovereign, despite the Executive taking the decision to trigger article 50?

Mr Davis: The reason was not really a point of law so much as a point of constitutional and political reality. I did not see it as possible that we could reverse the decision of the British people.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I would be the first to admit that I am no legal expert, but throughout campaigning on the EU referendum I was clear with my constituents that Parliament would very likely have a vote on these matters. Have the Government been disingenuous with the public from day one, or are they completely unsure of the existing constitutional law of the country they govern?

Mr Davis: If I remember correctly, every single one of the hon. Lady’s constituents received a document from the Government telling them that it was their decision and the Government would carry it out.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Is it not the case that, at various times and in various ways, the Government have given clear indications of their direction of travel on legal supremacy, migration policy, trade policy, reciprocal rights and regulatory continuity? To go further on what has been said and to tie the Government’s hands would be to act against the national interest.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We have in fact given a great deal of information about our direction of travel and the overarching strategy, but, as I have said, there is none so deaf as those who will not hear.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State accepts that he could publish a Bill next week and we could have it on the statute book long before the judges have done their business, so the reason for taking the decision to the next stage is not to expedite it but some other. I can only presume that it is because, somehow or other, this man—the Secretary of State—a man who has always fought for Parliament, is suddenly fighting for the prerogative rights of the Crown.

Philip Davies: For the people!

Chris Bryant: No, the Secretary of State is fighting for the prerogative rights of the Crown. Would it not be a phenomenal irony if the people who clamoured to bring back control to this country handed it from Parliament to Ministers and the Crown?

Mr Davis: This is one of those rare occasions when the heckle is right. The truth here is that the rights of Parliament rest on the sovereignty of the people—in this case, 17.4 million people.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): There are far too many Members of both this place and the other place, including my right hon. Friend’s opposite number at lunchtime today, who are taking to the airwaves to tell us that they fully respect the result of the referendum and then go on to insert that very important word “but”. Will my right hon. Friend use this occasion to explain, from the Dispatch Box, to those at this end and the other end that there are no buts on Brexit?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Indeed, I think earlier I said no ifs or buts.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Why will the Government not seek the agreement of Parliament to their basic broad objectives for Britain’s future relationship with the European Union before article 50 is triggered?
Mr Davis: I really like the right hon. Gentleman. I am a great admirer of him and what he has done in his life. I will say this to him: we have made a great deal of information available like the Supreme Court judgments and that is important when one does not like what they say.

Mr Davis: Well, actually, I think in both cases the hon. Gentleman has misquoted the individuals. I will say two things about a recommendation to march. The right to demonstrate is another of our freedoms. One of the great things about our Supreme Court—indeed, all our courts—is that it would not matter how many people marched. It would not move its judgments by one comma and we should be proud of that.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Who will be leading the Government’s case to the Supreme Court? Will it be the Secretary of State, the Attorney General or the Prime Minister? Or can we expect all three?

Mr Davis: I think the taxpayer would have really good cause to worry if I was leading it. [Laughter.] We have a very good legal team. I suspect it will be the same brilliant legal team next time.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad the Secretary of State is having a jolly time over this, but when I spoke to my constituents over the weekend, whether they voted to remain or to leave—I respect both votes—they were all deeply concerned about the sinister turn of events in the commentary in the media. Will the Secretary of State be absolutely clear on whether it is acceptable to call judges enemies of the people? Will he be equally clear that someone’s sexuality does not preclude their ability to make legal judgments or to hold the highest offices in the land?

Mr Davis: The latter point is self-evidently the case, but let me say this to the hon. Gentleman. Over the decades, I have fought battles on both the independence and rights of the judiciary and the freedom of the press. They are both important, and they are particularly important when one does not like what they say.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend has absolutely nailed the point. The country will want to know when the Prime Minister makes those comments, is he speaking for Her Majesty's Government or for the Prime Minister? On the Front Bench, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), that clearly impugned the integrity and impartiality of the High Court judges. I do not anticipate that he will do that, so will he instead condemn the comments by another politician who has urged people to march on the Supreme Court in order to intimidate it? Will he use this opportunity to ask the country not to do that?

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) suggested that the Government should abandon their appeal. Does the Secretary of State think that that would be sensible given that the Northern Irish court, albeit looking at a slightly different question, accepted the logic of the argument that article 50 does not of itself change individual rights, which was at the heart of the divisional court’s decision?

Mr Davis: My hon. and learned Friend makes an important point that lies at the heart of the argument. She is quite right. The plaintiffs in the Northern Ireland case may appeal, but that case is not the same as this one, although it does have a relationship with it. It is therefore very important that if that appeal is allowed and expedited—even if it is not expedited—the cases are heard properly and together.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) mentioned the Secretary of State’s Parliamentary Control of the Executive Bill. Does the right hon. Gentleman still agree with the content of that Bill?

Mr Davis: The primary aim of that Bill—its original author was actually Tony Benn—was to bring the right to declare war outside article 5 provisions under the control of the House. I politely say that that has happened.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): My right hon. Friend has come under quite a degree of criticism for not being more revealing and transparent about the Government’s position. In fact, he is told that he is holding his cards close to his chest. I think that this warrants greater investigation. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meeting me and cross-party group of Members in the Department for a game of poker? They can put their cards on the table; we can keep our cards to our chests—and the money can go to Southend charities!

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes his point.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Christopher voted to leave the European Union, but he told me:

“I did not vote to suspend the rule of law, nor to forgo the protection of Parliament as a bulwark against tyranny.”

Does the Secretary of State accept that people on both sides of the Brexit debate are appalled by the Government’s approach so far? Will he just get on and accept the judgment that was made last week?
Mr Davis: I do not know what the hon. Lady thinks she is talking about. First, we made our case in court. We are going to appeal, as is entirely proper in an important constitutional case such as this, and we will respect the outcome of that appeal. In what respect is that somehow suspending the rule of law?

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): The High Court’s position is very straightforward: parliamentary consent is required to invoke article 50. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our response should be equally straightforward: give that consent without haste and without any conditions that seek to fetter the Prime Minister’s negotiating position?

Mr Davis: Yes.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I accept that Labour Members’ criticism of the procedure adopted by the Government is fully justified, but given some of the comments made by Government Members, let me make it absolutely clear that although I was on the remain side in the referendum, I accept the electorate’s decision without qualification. There can be no question but that, whatever the procedure, article 50 must be invoked. The British people made the decision by a majority—it does not matter that it was a narrow majority—so we should accept it. That is democracy.

Mr Davis: I commend the hon. Gentleman for his honesty and straightforwardness. He and I have been on the same side many times in these battles and it is good that we are again.

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): The judges are not enemies of the people, but the enemies of democracy would be Members of this House who sought to frustrate the triggering, or adulterate the substance, of article 50. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that he will not allow those still oscillating among the five stages of grief to derail our leaving the EU?

Mr Davis: The Government will carry out the instruction given by the British people, and we will do so in the national interest as quickly as we can.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that we have negotiating power only prior to triggering article 50 and that, after that, the 27 remaining EU member states are free to determine our fate and to say, “Like it or lump it”? Would it not therefore be right to delay the triggering of article 50 until we have a clear idea of what that means for costs, the economy and migration, so that the British people can then judge in another referendum whether the exit package represents a fair reflection of what they voted for in principle and whether they want to leave on those terms, with a default position of staying in the EU?

Mr Davis: I will make two points to the hon. Gentleman. First, under the mechanisms of the European treaty, the only point at which negotiations can formally start is when article 50 is triggered. Secondly, the notion that a two-year timetable is somehow problematic is true only if countries are unprepared when they go into the process. Ultimately, there will be costs on both sides if we do not get a deal and, as a result, I would expect everyone to behave rationally and get that deal.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): Delivering his judgment, the Lord Chief Justice said “the court...is...dealing with a pure question of law. Nothing we say has any bearing on the question of the merits or demerits of a withdrawal by the United Kingdom from the European Union; nor does it have any bearing on government policy, because government policy is not law.” Will my right hon. Friend confirm that Government policy is indeed to trigger article 50 before the end of March, to leave the European Union and to enact the great repeal Bill, and that the commitment of the Prime Minister and the Government is undiminished, regardless of the hearing in the Supreme Court?

Mr Davis: Yes.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Why does the Secretary of State think his Conservative friend, the now resigned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham, believed that Ministers had ignored Parliament since the Brexit vote?

Mr Davis: Strictly speaking, that is a question for him, not me. He is a very good friend of mine and I will not say anything against him. I am very sorry to see him go, but beyond that, I thought he got it completely wrong.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My understanding of parliamentary sovereignty is that it is a mixture of the will of this House, the views of the other place and the Crown in Parliament as exercised by the Government. Does my right hon. Friend agree that article 50 should be triggered and implemented as intended because the instruction has been given by the ultimate holders of sovereignty in this country—the British people?

Mr Davis: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, but that must be subject to one thing: a Government who operate under the law. That is what we are going to do.

Wes Streeting ( Ilford North) (Lab): A majority of voters and a majority of constituencies voted to leave the European Union, so of course Parliament will trigger article 50, but does the Secretary of State understand the difference between revealing his hand in negotiation and telling us what his opening position would be? In the past week we have seen the resignation of a Conservative MP because of the way in which the Government are handling their position and the Chairman of the Treasury Committee urging the Secretary of State to come clean about issues such as the customs union. If the Secretary of State did read the Financial Times, perhaps he would understand that his dithering and delay, and the lack of clear direction, are costing jobs and inward investment, and affecting the pound in people’s pockets today.

Mr Davis: It is because I read rather more than the Financial Times that I know that most of that is not true.

David T. C. Davies ( Monmouth) (Con): Having had to report to the police disgraceful death threats that were made to me over the last few weeks, may I ask whether the Secretary of State agrees that we must all condemn all forms of hate crime on both sides of the political argument, and that it is utterly wrong to try to suggest that people who voted for the independence of Great Britain are in some way responsible for the unrepresentative actions of a tiny minority?
Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is, as ever, exactly right.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Three quarters of my constituents and the majority of this country have said that they want to exit. I agree that we must get on with it—unequivocally, for the benefit of the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). Why, however, are we waiting for a decision that may well go against the Government? By all means let the Secretary of State pursue the case in court if he must, but let him bring a Bill to the House and let us vote on it. Let us vote to trigger article 50 at the right time, as the Government have set out, and let us pursue exit from the European Union. Why does he not just do it?

Sir Desmond Swayne: Answer!

Mr Davis: I am going to. First, because the triggering of article 50 should be done only when the policy work is complete, and it is not yet complete. Secondly, because the judicial timetable still allows us to meet the date of 30 March, which is the date that we are going to hit.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure that the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) yells “Answer” from a sedentary position quite constitutes the sort of knighthood that we have come to expect of him.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If the courts have banged their metaphorical gavel on our prerogative powers, does my right hon. Friend share my concern that they may do so again regarding, for example, a decision to go to war?

Mr Davis: One—but not the only—reason why we are taking this to the Supreme Court is to get an absolutely specific outcome and answer.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am sure that the Secretary of State will be glad to hear that I am delighted with the outcome of the referendum—the industrial working-class of West Dunbartonshire and the entire nation of Scotland voted to remain—but my constituents share a concern already brought to the Floor of the House by me and the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) about our relationship with our closest neighbour and our border with the sovereign nation of Ireland. This concerns the Ireland Act 1949, and I have had no answer from the Secretary of State. The Government talk about the common travel area, but there is no answer to this question yet. Will the Secretary of State say now on the Floor of the House that there will be no change to the rights of Irish citizens as dictated by the Ireland Act 1949?

Mr Davis: That is a very specific question; forgive me if I have not answered it before. I will write to the hon. Gentleman, but I think the answer is that there will be no change. The aim, as I have said to him before, is that common travel area rights both ways—including the rights to vote, to work and so on—will continue, but I will write to him about the detail.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): If the Government do bring forward a Bill to trigger article 50 and any Member tries to amend it in any material way that binds the hands of the Prime Minister, does the Secretary of State agree that the British public would lose out? They would get a worse deal on our exit, so nobody who truly believes in our national interest would do that?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The whole purpose of our strategy is to get the best outcome for all people in Britain.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that people voted to leave or to remain for all sorts of reasons? When they read that question on the ballot paper, however, very few of them wanted to vote to reduce the power of the judiciary to hold the overweening power of the Executive to account. Very few of them voted to reduce parliamentary democracy and the right of Parliament to discuss Government policy. Is it not therefore right that the Government come back to this House and seek authority to trigger article 50?

Mr Davis: We have done none of those things. The simple truth is we are waiting on the judgment, and we will obey what the Court says.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it is extraordinary to see Labour Members saying that Parliament should decide on article 50 and all matters Brexit when just a few short weeks ago they piled in to defeat a Bill that I brought to this House that would have provided for exactly that? Is that not double standards and doublespeak from Labour Members, including the shadow Secretary of State on this morning’s “Today” programme? Is it any wonder that the people of Britain think that Labour Members are seeking to subvert the will of the British people and to defeat the mandate of the masses, and that they have lost touch with the hard-working classes of modern Britain?

Mr Davis: I could not have put it better myself.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the Secretary of State explain how any Prime Minister could be expected to negotiate effectively for the best outcome for this nation if the other side knows her objectives, aims, plans and goals before she sits down at the negotiating table?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Of course, any negotiator of any substance would recognise that, as indeed does the EU, which is why we are pursuing our strategy of giving the broad outline but not the details.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I presume that one of the reasons the Secretary of State used to believe in publishing a White Paper was that he wanted to ensure that business had confidence in the economy of this country. He will know that in the past week both the Japanese and Indian chambers of commerce have expressed grave concern about the current uncertainty and the situation’s impact on the confidence of international investors. Why does he not go ahead with publishing his White Paper and set out a plan so that international investors can have the confidence they need to continue investing in this country?
Mr Davis: Nissan.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): After all the questions that we have heard, I am slightly surprised that my right hon. Friend still wants to go ahead with his appeal. It must be blindingly obvious to him that a short Bill committing us to invoking article 50 would receive a huge majority on Second Reading. Will he reflect on the powerful statement that would send to our EU partners and to those in the other place, if it happened?

Mr Davis: I note that my hon. Friend adds the condition “if it happened”. There are issues here that are political, constitutional and legal, and we need to resolve all of them. The best way to do that is to take this case to its full course, and that is what we will do. The Supreme Court of the United Kingdom will make the decision.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Yesterday my party colleague Mike Russell MSP spoke of how the Scottish National party has a triple mandate to protect Scotland’s place in Europe: from our manifesto commitment at the 2016 Holyrood election; from the 62% who voted to remain; and from the Scottish Parliament’s vote to protect our place in Europe. We in the SNP are fully committed to safeguarding Scotland’s place in Europe. Does the Secretary of State accept our overwhelming mandate, or is he willing to disregard the democratic will of the people of Scotland?

Mr Davis: The decision in the referendum was taken at the United Kingdom level. If, in the Scottish independence referendum, the hon. Lady’s side had had a majority but, say, half of Scotland had voted against, would she have said that that had invalidated the referendum result? I do not think so. I do not think that any smaller group than the whole of the United Kingdom can invalidate or veto the referendum.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I echo the view expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) about the possible implications of this judgment for areas such as defence. Does the Secretary of State agree that while the independence of the judiciary is indeed a crucial pillar of our independent constitution, it is only one of a number of them? Does he also agree that for the judiciary to interfere between Parliament and the Executive would break frightening new ground?

Mr Davis: Well, no. As I have said, we are taking this case to the Supreme Court for a reason. We are a Government who operate under the law. My hon. Friend has a point in that there has been a degree of judicial activism in modern times, but I do not think that this case is susceptible to that analysis.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the interests of the people depend on the Prime Minister and her balanced Cabinet having the maximum flexibility and authority to negotiate and conclude new arrangements with the EU as soon as possible, and that a second referendum would guarantee a bad deal, lost jobs and further divisions in our society?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right. A second referendum would give those on the other side in the negotiations—the European Union—an incentive to give us the worst possible deal to try to force the British people to change their mind. That would be entirely improper.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State obviously does not challenge his speechwriter much, because nothing changes from statement to statement. The High Court has just made a judgment on something that, at one time, he was fully in agreement with. So, for the third time of asking, will he tell us why he now disagrees with the Bill that he tried to bring forward? It was not about going to war; it was about the Crown prerogative not being exercised without the assent of the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before the Secretary of State responds—which I am disinclined to facilitate him doing—I must just say that although I appreciate that repetition is a common phenomenon in politics and not in itself to be deprecated, there is a bit of a tendency on the Scottish National party’s Benches to keep asking him about matters for which he is no longer responsible. The questioning is to the Secretary of State in his capacity as Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, not in his capacity as someone who previously expressed views from the Back Benches or elsewhere in an earlier incarnation.

Mr Davis: I refer the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) to the answer I gave earlier.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The independence of the judiciary must be supported and upheld and—I do not say “but”’; I say “and”—the Court itself recognised that the case had both political and legal aspects, and that they must be assessed elsewhere, namely in this place. Will the Secretary of State therefore reassure my constituents that he will respect the will of the people and lead us out of the EU?

Mr Davis: The aim of our strategy is not only to respect the will of the people and to carry out the national instruction in the national interest, but to respect the laws of our country.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): For a moment I thought I was going to be the last contributor. Mr Speaker. May I bring us back to the fact that on 23 June we had a single vote on a single political question? People across the country made their view clear. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it was a direct decision to leave the EU? Therefore, we in this place should be doing all that we can to ensure that article 50 is triggered as soon as possible, and that the Prime Minister is able to negotiate the best possible deal for our country.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is the fact that 17.4 million people voted for us to leave the European Union that makes me confident that we can carry this through both Houses of Parliament.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): You left it a long time to put me out of my misery, Mr Speaker. I am struggling somewhat, because we hear from Opposition Members and some in the country that, on the one hand, we need

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certainty for businesses—I agree with that and so do Ministers—and then, on the other hand, that they want to drag the whole process out with talk of next summer for invoking article 50. Has my right hon. Friend got on any better than I in understanding and deciphering exactly where they are coming from?

Mr Davis: Listening to my hon. Friend’s question, I am reminded of the biblical comment that the first should be last and the last should be first. He asks a first-class question. He is right that it is impossible to work out what they are trying to do unless one assumes that they are trying to foil the interests of the British people.

5.17 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):
With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on our strategy for a better defence estate. Our defence estate is where our people work, live and train, where advanced equipment is maintained, and where cutting-edge research is undertaken. It is where major exercises are conducted and major operations are launched. Our estate is vital, but it is also vast. It is almost 2% of the United Kingdom’s land mass—an area almost three times the size of Greater London. Yet while the size and structure of our armed forces have changed to meet different threats, our estate has failed to adapt.

Our estate is too inefficient. It costs £2.5 billion a year to maintain, and 40% of our built assets are more than 50 years old. It too often fails to meet the needs of our armed forces and their families, with capabilities spread across small, remote sites, often far removed from population centres and job opportunities. Last year’s strategic defence and security review committed to increase the defence budget in real terms and to spend £178 billion to create a world class joint force 2025. However, an ambitious joint force needs an estate to match, so today I will set out a long-term strategy to achieve that ambition.

First, we will transform an estate built for previous generations of war-fighting into one that better supports military capability and the needs of our armed forces. It will help deliver joint force 2025 by bringing people and capabilities into new centres of specialism, clustering units closer to their training estates. Since the beginning of this year, I have announced plans to dispose of 35 of our most costly sites. Today, based on advice from the chiefs of staff, I am announcing the release of a further 56 sites by 2040.

I now turn to what this means in practice. The Royal Navy will continue focusing on operating bases and training establishments around port areas and naval stations, with surface ships in Portsmouth and Devonport; all the UK’s submarines on the Clyde; a specialist amphibious centre in the south-west, based around Devonport; and helicopters based at Yeovilton and Culdrose. It means the Army having specialised infantry in Aldershot; mechanised, wheeled capability, including two of our new strike brigades, in Catterick; air assault forces in Colchester; armoured and tracked capability around Salisbury plain; medical services in the west midlands; and hubs of light infantry battalions in London, Edinburgh, Lisburn, St Athan, Blackpool and Cottesmore.

It means the RAF building on its centres of specialism, with combat air in Coningsby, Marham and Lossiemouth; intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance at Waddington; air transport at Brize Norton; force protection at Honington; and support enablers at Wittering and Leeming.

Let me turn to the impact on the devolved nations. In Scotland, this strategy will result in investment being concentrated into fewer, better locations. Our proposals will release eight sites over the next 15 years. We will invest in main centres of specialisation: at Lossiemouth, home to one of our three fast-jet squadrons, where the new P-8 maritime patrol aircraft and an extra Typhoon squadron will be based; at Faslane where all the Royal Navy’s submarines, including the new Dreadnought class, will be based; and at Leuchars, where the Army
will consolidate its regional command. Contrary to some speculation and unnecessary scaremongering, Kinloss will be retained. This comes on top of the substantial investments I have already announced, such as £100 million for the P-8 aircraft at Lossiemouth and, of course, the Type 26 frigate, on which we will cut steel next summer. In Wales, we will release three sites and consolidate the defence estate into capability clusters, with a specialist light infantry centre at St Athan. In Northern Ireland, we are releasing three sites and consolidating our estate in larger centres of population. Full details are set out in the strategy, and I have placed a copy of the document in the Library of the House.

Secondly, this strategy will deliver a better estate for service families. Over the next decade, we will invest £4 billion in improving our infrastructure and modernising our accommodation. By locating our servicemen and women together with capability, we will provide better job opportunities for their partners and more stable schooling for their families, and increase their ability to buy their own home. We have purposefully focused on sites that will support recruitment and retention, giving our personnel and their partners greater certainty and confidence to put down roots in local communities. As we implement these plans, we will seek to minimise any disruption to the armed forces, their families and civilians, and give as much notice as possible over planned redeployments.

Finally, a better defence estate will deliver better value for money for taxpayers. By releasing sites we no longer need, we can help build the houses that we do need. I can confirm that the Ministry of Defence now has firm plans to achieve its target to release sufficient land to build up to 55,000 houses in this Parliament. My Department will now work with local authorities, the devolved Administrations and industry, as well as our personnel, to deliver that, supporting construction and infrastructure jobs, and boosting local economies.

In conclusion, this strategy looks ahead to 2040, to provide a better defence estate; an estate that supports a more efficient and effective military capability; an estate that gives our armed forces a world-class base from which to work; and an estate that helps defend keep Britain safe and promote our prosperity. I commend this statement to the House.

5.24 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for sight of his statement. We on the Labour Benches recognise that the requirements of the defence estate will change, and that there is a need to modernise to reflect that. The Government are right to seek to restructure the estate to ensure that we optimise our military capability and deliver value for money for the British taxpayer. The changes proposed in the report are very considerable in scale, and there is a real need to ensure that they are delivered in a way that does not cause undue challenges to our forces and their families.

The closing of so many bases will affect the livelihoods of a very significant number of people. The potential impact on communities with a long garrison history such as the City of York will be far-reaching: servicemen and women and their families will be required to move, and civilian staff will face redeployment. In the meantime, many face gnawing uncertainty, as the exact relocation of their base has not yet been decided.

Will the Secretary of State tell us how the Ministry of Defence will be consulting with all stakeholders? What will he do to minimise the period of uncertainty for all those concerned? What help and support will be given to employees who are not able to move?

The Public Accounts Committee has criticised the Government’s record on achieving value for money when disposing of public land. Will the Secretary of State set out how he will safeguard the public purse by ensuring the best possible price for taxpayers, and what commercial expertise will he bring in? Given the need to protect the defence budget, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Treasury about how much of the money realised by the sale of MOD assets will actually be retained by the MOD?

Finally, the Government have made much of releasing publicly owned land on which to build new homes, but we know that the Government’s record on house building has not matched the rhetoric of their promises. Will the Secretary of State assure us that the 55,000 houses that he says will be built on former MOD land during this Parliament will be located in areas where there are housing shortages, and that they will be homes that people can genuinely afford to rent or buy?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what I think was a welcome for the statement, as it showed an understanding of the task in front of us. The Ministry of Defence owns, I think, around 1,000 sites, 300 of which are very large. Today, I am announcing the disposal of 56 of those 300 large sites. Yes, it is a large number of disposals, but each one is based on military advice on how the capabilities that the armed forces need can be better clustered, and on how the families of those who work for us can be better looked after in terms of job opportunities for their partners and more stability for their children.

On the civilian employees, we will provide them with as much support as possible. In the document itself—I appreciate that the House will not have had time to go through this yet—we set out a timescale for the disposal of each of those sites. In many cases, it will be over 10 or 15 years hence. Yes, we will seek the best possible value for money for the taxpayer, but, in the end, this is not just for the taxpayer. The answer to the hon. Lady’s sixth question is that all of the receipts—just some of them—will come back into the defence budget, which shows that we have every interest in maximising the value from the sites that are to be disposed of so that we can get on and spend the money not just on our other defence priorities, but on modernising the estate that we are going to keep.

On the 50,000 homes, yes, we do need to build more houses where they are needed most, and that includes in the south and south-west of England where there are sites to release. We do not entirely control the planning process, but with regard to affordable homes, it is for the local authority to specify exactly what proportion of the estates those homes should have.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is the Secretary of State content that any historic buildings among the estate that is being disposed of will be suitably protected and preserved for the nation’s heritage?

Following on from his recent testimony to the Defence Committee’s inquiry into the Army and SDSR, is he satisfied that our relatively small forces will have the
capability to regenerate in time of war if they do not have a sufficiently large defence estate to occupy in times of emergency expansion?

Sir Michael Fallon: I note what my right hon. Friend says about some of the historic buildings sometimes found inside these sites. Obviously, we need to be careful to make sure that military heritage is preserved wherever possible. Sometimes that is not within the direct ownership of the Ministry of Defence; it has already passed to the trusteeship of the relevant museum or whatever; but I certainly note that point. There are a number of sites in the list today where that occurs and about which we may hear later this afternoon. On regeneration, the strategy being published today does not so far include the training estate where, to regenerate forces in time of war, as my right hon. Friend said, we would seek to rely on the training facilities that we have, and we are currently looking carefully at those.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for prior sight of the statement. Although we have been primed to expect big reductions in Scotland’s defence footprint, having now heard the statement, I fear that when a Government Department tries to spin cuts as investment “concentrated in fewer, better locations”, what it is actually saying is, “Prepare for a savaging of what remains of Scotland’s defence footprint”. Once the detail is published, it will go far beyond anything that we were prepared for. Let me be clear: it will be totally unacceptable if, once again, Scotland’s service personnel and our conventional defence capability are hollowed out and sold off because of this Government’s obsession with nuclear weapons—an obsession which is swallowing up more and more of the defence budget. My fear is that when the detail emerges of today’s announcement, it will do nothing to ease the grave concerns of many of us on the SNP Benches that our conventional capability shrinks to pay for our nuclear obsession, the United Kingdom’s first line of defence becomes its last line of defence.

At the referendum just two years ago, we were told that defence jobs could be protected only if we remained in the Union. The then Secretary of State for Defence, the present Chancellor, even claimed that Scottish independence would blight “the futures of thousands of families across Scotland”, and that Scotland would not benefit from the level of security or the prosperity provided by the UK armed forces and the defence industry. How hollow those words sound today. Fewer and better is rarely the case for those who are on the sharp end. I have one question for the Secretary of State: how is this cutback good for Scotland?

Sir Michael Fallon: First, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we are investing in defence in Scotland. I was there on Friday, announcing that eight of the most advanced warships that this country has ever built are to be built in Scotland over the next 20 years. We are stationing our new maritime patrol aircraft at Lossiemouth. We are making the Clyde the home of all the Royal Navy’s submarines. In terms of personnel, we are adding 400 personnel to the Royal Navy, more recently in Afghanistan. In Northern Ireland, of course, we will also be remembering those who served with the British Army and who gave their lives during the troubles.
The Secretary of State’s reference to the consolidation of our estate in Northern Ireland as “releasing three sites” is beautifully ambiguous, but I do not like ambiguity. Will he confirm whether Kinnegar in my constituency is included among those sites and, if so, what exactly he plans to do with the personnel? Can he guarantee that there will be no job losses and that there was consultation before this announcement?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** Yes, I can be very open in replying to the hon. Lady. The Kinnegar logistics site is going to be disposed of, and those who occupy it at the moment will be moving to the Palace barracks in Holywood.

**Sir Alan Haselhurst** (Saffron Walden) (Con): Despite the very generous notice my right hon. Friend is giving, does he accept that the closure of Carver barracks in my constituency will come as a shock to the military personnel and the civilian population alike, between whom there has been a very harmonious relationship over the years? Will he undertake to start discussions with Uttlesford District Council as soon as possible as to the ultimate destination of the quarters that already exist there, and with Essex County Council about the impact on certain primary schools?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I can certainly give my right hon. Friend that undertaking. The disposal date is foreseen to be 2031, but it is not too soon for us to start those discussions with local authorities to make sure that the best possible use is made of the site and the facilities there.

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State tell us what is going to happen to the brilliant infantry training base at Brecon?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** The infantry training base is going to stay in Brecon.

**Marcus Fysh** (Yeovil) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to Yeovilton. I commend to him the opportunities to take advantage of the dualling of the A303 in order to make the most of the estate by building on what is at that location.

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I know that my hon. Friend will be pleased that Yeovilton is to become one of the specialist helicopter centres. I visited the base with him only a year ago. I note again his bidding for the dualling of the local road. This is good news for Yeovilton.

**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be aware that Leuchars is one of the best military assets that the Government have. What are his plans for the investment he mentioned, and will there be any cutbacks there?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I am glad to have cheered up somebody on the SNP Benches. Leuchars is going to become an even more important base for the Army in Scotland. I visited it in July. There is room to house additional units in Leuchars. None of the changes that have taken place in Scotland involves any Army personnel moving out of Scotland. We simply have to decide on the best possible location for them in Scotland, and Leuchars is a very strong candidate.

**Michael Gove** (Surrey Heath) (Con): The investment in Lossiemouth, Leuchars and Faslane is hugely welcome. As the Secretary of State will know, if Scotland were an independent country, it would have inherited a huge budget deficit. How big does he think the defence forces would be in an independent Scotland? Would they be any bigger than a couple of stray corvettes and possibly an Argyll, but not a Sutherland, Highlander?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** My right hon. Friend is right—it would certainly be something of that order. I am very clear that that investment on the Clyde would not have gone ahead in an independent Scotland because our warships are built within the United Kingdom, and of course we would not be building anti-submarine frigates to help protect the deterrent if the SNP had triumphed in the referendum and voted against the deterrent.

**Mr Speaker:** It has been solemnly pointed out to me that the question was some distance from the defence estate. Nevertheless, as I have had reason to observe previously, I am inclined, on the whole, to enjoy the creative licence of the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), provided of course that it is exercised within reasonable limits. He got away with it today.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Can the Secretary of State assure me that this is not driven solely by the need to raise cash for the MOD and that the armed forces were actively consulted about alternative uses for the land that is being disposed of? Will he use every method of leverage possible to ensure that the homes that are built are affordable, both to buy and to rent? Will he acknowledge the concerns among service personnel about the future accommodation model and the potential impact on some service families?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** First, let me make it very clear to the House that every decision within this strategy is based on military advice—the advice of the service chiefs—as to how we better organise our capabilities. Secondly, in the end it will be for local authorities to rule on the exact proportion of affordable housing, but yes, we need more housing, and more affordable housing, in areas of shortage. Thirdly, we are consulting on the future accommodation model whereby we may be able to help service families in different ways. For example, rather than saying that their only option is to live on the barracks—on the estate—we could consider an option for them to have the money themselves to rent or, as has been suggested, to start to buy their own homes. We are looking at different ways of satisfying modern housing needs, but at the moment we are merely consulting on the different options.

**Mr Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He has previously announced the closure of Clive barracks at Ternhill in my constituency. That will be very sad news, as we have never had a regiment like 1st Battalion the Royal Irish who have got so integrated locally. Wearing my hat as a previous Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, may I ask him, as he looks for an alternative site, to try to make sure that he finds one with easy access to airports that go to Dublin and Belfast, as Ternhill has access to Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham? Can he give...
Mr Owen Paterson: [I] an idea of when the moving out might take place, and whether it will happen as one hit or be staged over a couple of years?

Sir Michael Fallon: The decision is to dispose of the barracks ultimately by 2022, but I will certainly consider whether it should move in more than one phase. I note what my right hon. Friend says about future location: there are, obviously, considerations to be taken into account with the Royal Irish Regiment. I assure him that no decision has yet been taken, but we will endeavour to take it in good time before 2022.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A decision to abandon the highlands, with the closure of the garrison at Fort George after 250 years of service and sacrifice, would be bad enough, given the disgraceful lack of engagement with our communities and even the Scottish Government. If that is correct, what assurances will the Secretary of State give to the 750 people in supporting jobs that are affected, the communities economically hit, and those who were told that the fort was the permanent home of the Black Watch?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is envisaged that Fort George will not close until 2032. There is plenty of time to consult the local authority and others on the future use of that site. Fort George is a very old barracks and it costs £1.6 million a year to run. It is extremely expensive to upgrade and it is not appropriate for a modern infantry unit. Inverness as a city has expanded by, I think, nearly 20% in the past 15 years and it has an unemployment rate of 1.3%.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I am pleased that the Secretary of State has confirmed that the strategy is informed by defence needs, and I am particularly pleased that he has detailed how important the investment will be for service families. However, those areas that have hosted a battalion will be disappointed that it will no longer be based in their constituency. Will he confirm when Beachley barracks in my constituency is likely to cease to have a defence use, and will he also confirm that detailed negotiations will take place with my local authorities to make sure that the best possible use can be found for the barracks in the future?

Sir Michael Fallon: The disposal date for Beachley barracks is set at 2027, so there is plenty of time for those discussions to begin. The purpose of publishing the strategy today is so that we can get on with those discussions with local authorities and see what alternative use might be made of the site. It could be residential or, indeed, commercial. My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) is already having discussions about a new technology park in the place of Sir John Moore barracks outside Winchester. There are many alternative uses that we will want to discuss with the local authorities concerned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State referred in his statement to three sites in Northern Ireland, one of which is Ards airfield, where the cadets meet. When hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and I met the former Minister, the hon. Member for Canterbury (Mr Brazier), to secure extra funding and equipment for the air cadets, that was agreed and the funding was put in place. My reaction to the statement’s proposals is one of great regret that the hangars are on land designated for recreational use only and that they will therefore have no potential for housing development. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss the matter and to ensure that, in this their centenary year, the Newtownards air cadets, who, importantly, co-operate with Regent House School and Ards flying club, will continue into the future?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am happy to offer the hon. Gentleman a meeting, perhaps with the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who has responsibility for defence personnel and is in charge of this particular portfolio. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the volunteer glider school at Newtownards has been disbanded, but it is important that the cadets should have proper provision, so I am happy for that meeting to be organised.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Although the defence estate takes up only 2% of the United Kingdom, it takes up nearly 50% of my constituency. To the east of Shoeburyness, on Foulness Island, QinetiQ does some excellent work. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give me about that land? Perhaps he could deploy the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), to come and review that excellent facility, which I understand is the best not only in the United Kingdom, but in the northern hemisphere; my hon. Friend will also be able to blow a few things up.

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend the Minister is readily deployable at a few hours’ notice, and I would be very happy to see him deployed to the ranges of Essex. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) talks about the ranges and training estate of Essex; they are not directly covered by this document, but we will go on to look at the training estate. The Shoeburyness ranges are a key part of the Army’s training needs.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) referred to the Public Accounts Committee inquiry on land disposal, and I commend our report, which was published last week, to the House. We had a number of representatives from each Department at our hearings, because we are hoping for some joined-up Government thinking about the disposal of that land and its purpose for meeting the housing target. May I invite the Secretary of State to encourage his own Department and others to work locally on the ground to make sure that the best use is made of that disposal for local people, including key workers and people in other sorts of housing need?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am happy to give the hon. Lady that assurance. I have read the reports of the Committee’s public sessions with interest. It is important that we move on from the statement and see these local discussions take place. We have a target, to which we have committed, of 55,000 new homes across this Parliament, so we, too, have an interest in making sure that we maximise the
number of homes that can be released. I was drawing the House’s attention to the other possible commercial uses—for small businesses, technology parks and so on—that may, in some circumstances, be more appropriate.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I am grateful for the statement from my right hon. Friend. I understand the arguments that he is making for carrying out the review at this time. I am disappointed that the earlier decision to shut the base of the 14th Signal Regiment at Brawdy in my constituency, which I was told a year ago had been reversed, now seems to be back on the cards. That has all been unsettling for the soldiers at Cawdor barracks and their families, who are a well-loved part of the Pembrokeshire community. Will my right hon. Friend provide a bit more detail of the timeframe for the closure of the base, if it is indeed to happen? Will he give an assurance that there will not be any freeze of investment and that the base will be maintained to an acceptable standard as we approach the closure date?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am certainly happy to discuss continuing investment in the facilities with my right hon. Friend. The estimated disposal date for Cawdor barracks is 2024, so I hope that that gives some more certainty to those who support the Signal Regiment there. We are shortly to confirm where the 14th Signal Regiment will be re-provided for.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): The Glencorse barracks in Penicuik in my constituency are a fundamental part of that community and the wider constituency, but there was no mention of the barracks in the Secretary of State’s statement. I am now wondering whether this is closure by stealth, as the Government look to continue to invest in weapons of mass destruction at the cost of conventional defences.

Sir Michael Fallon: No, that is not the case. We are reinvesting, as I have said several times today, in Scotland, which is a key part of the defence of the United Kingdom. Just as the RAF is centring all its squadrons on Lossiemouth and the Navy is focusing its submarines on the Clyde, so the Army will be not wholly, but principally, based around Leuchars Station in Fife. The result will be that the capabilities that the Army needs will be clustered more efficiently together.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I very much understand the need for consolidation of the Ministry of Defence estate and the importance of value to the taxpayer, but I want to point out that that will inevitably have a massive knock-on effect in Taunton Deane with the transfer of 40 Commando and the closure of Norton Manor camp. Those 40 Commando Marines and their families play such a big part in our community, living in our houses, going to our schools and taking part in everything. Please can I urge the Minister to give every thought to the careful nurturing and transfer of those people and their families? May I also urge him to give careful thought, working with me, the local authorities and everyone else concerned, to ensure that we can fill the economic hole that will be created when they all leave Taunton Deane?

Sir Michael Fallon: I understand my hon. Friend’s disappointment, and I appreciate the role that 40 Commando has played in her constituency. The disposal date is 2028. I emphasise to her that this is another decision that has been taken on military advice, on the advice of the Royal Marines themselves, so that they will be clustered in the Devonport area rather than spread out over a series of locations. There is plenty of time—another 12 years—for us to plan this departure and get it right.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): In the interests of clarity, will the Secretary of State name the eight sites in Scotland that are to be released, and will he indicate the extent of the consultation that will take place?

Sir Michael Fallon: While I am looking up the eight sites, I can certainly emphasise that consultation will take place, and that is the point of publishing this strategy document today. It will release these sites for detailed consultation with the local authorities concerned and, indeed, with the Scottish Government where relevant.

The sites to be disposed of in Scotland are Craigiehall, which has already been announced; Condor airfield near Arbroath; MOD Caledonia in Edinburgh; Redford cavalry barracks; Redford infantry barracks; DSG Forthside and Meadowforth barracks at Forthside, Stirling; Fort George, in the highlands; and Glencorse barracks.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the consolidation of the amphibious capability around Devonport, but could I ask the Secretary of State to bear it in mind that we have a fantastic facility at HMS Raleigh in Torpoint, in my constituency? Will he confirm that he will consider the possible relocation of some of those Royal Marines to the modern facilities in HMS Raleigh?

Sir Michael Fallon: The answer to that is yes. HMS Raleigh will be considered as a receiver site, as we call them, for some of the units that are being consolidated into the Devonport area and into the excellent accommodation, which I have visited.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Some 240 jobs are associated with the Forthside barracks in Stirling, which the Secretary of State mentioned a moment ago. That makes it an important employer and one of the few operational elements of the armed forces still associated with Stirling, particularly since the appalling treatment of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, which was mentioned a few moments ago, disgracefully, by the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). How many jobs will remain in Stirling following the move, and how many, in total, of the jobs that are there just now will be retained?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about the number of jobs per site, but I can tell him that the local authority has ambitious plans for the future development of that accommodation. Some of the units are likely to be re-provided for at Leuchars, but we hope to see that site become part of the commercial lay-down in the Stirling area.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) on the work that they have done to provide a good set-up
for defence and to meet the housing target of 55,000 homes. I urge my right hon. Friend, in looking at the accommodation strategy, to bear in mind that the provision of good-quality service family accommodation is crucial not just for retention, but, in many cases, for maintaining morale among soldiers and other service people who go to war, particularly when there are casualties.

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his earlier words. Some of the decisions in this strategy document were difficult decisions. That is inevitable when we have to match the defence estate to the capabilities and needs of the modern Army. It is important that we give families certainty about where they are likely to be going, which is why some of the timescales are some way out. So far as future accommodation is concerned, all the receipts from the decisions that have been taken in this document will come back to defence, and they will be part of the regeneration and renovation of the defence estate more generally. Much of that will find its way into better and new accommodation for our service members.

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): We live in uncertain times, and our armed forces have been reduced considerably. I understand the need for consolidation, but will my right hon. Friend tell the House what plans he has for the defence estate abroad, as these bases are crucial in maintaining our military flexibility and, of course, our liaison and so forth with NATO?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** That matter is important, although not directly part of my statement today. We have invested in the defence estate in the Falkland Islands, some 30 years after it was first built following the Falklands war. We have also invested in our facilities in Gibraltar and elsewhere. We have moved personnel back from Germany. As my hon. Friend says, it is important that we continue to upgrade the facilities at bases that are so important, including in the Falklands, Cyprus and Gibraltar.

**James Cleverly** (Brainintree) (Con): The proposed development at and disposal of MOD Weathersfield to the Homes and Communities Agency puts at risk the future of high-tech security businesses, air cadet flying and the headquarters and training functions of the Ministry of Defence police. I thank Ministers for making themselves available to discuss the disposal with me during the past few months. Whatever the future of the site, may I ask that the high-tech security businesses, air cadet gliding and Ministry of Defence police functions, which should not constrain other activities on the site, are prioritised in whatever negotiations take place with its future owners?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** I am very happy to agree to that. I think this site had already been announced for disposal some time ago. I hope that those discussions will continue as we move the police, in particular, further west. I note what my hon. Friend says about the importance of the elements on the site, and about making sure that we maximise its potential.

**Peter Heaton-Jones** (North Devon) (Con): There will be concern in North Devon that, as part of today’s announcement, the Royal Marines are to vacate their base at Chivenor. First, will my right hon. Friend confirm whether this move has been requested by the Royal Marines? Secondly, will he agree to visit Chivenor with me to meet the base commander, the leader of North Devon District Council and the local business community to discuss future support both for the military families who are concerned and for the local economy?

**Sir Michael Fallon:** The answer to my hon. Friend’s first question is yes. These decisions have been taken on the advice of the military, including on the concentration of marine units in the Devonport area. The disposal date for the Chivenor site is 2027, so there is plenty of time for the discussion that he has outlined. I always enjoy my visits to North Devon, and I would be very happy to come down to discuss this further with him and the local authority.

**Chris Davies** (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The Secretary of State’s statement will deliver a devastating blow to the people of Brecon. The town has been proud to host a barracks since 1805, and this country has been proud to receive from those barracks the servicemen and women who have defended this country. Today, as always, a large number of military and civilian personnel are based there, and they will be very concerned about the decision that has been announced. Within the barracks, there is a regimental museum, which hosts the display celebrating and commemorating Rorke’s Drift. As we all know, Rorke’s Drift was immortalised in the film “Zulu”. In the regimental museum inside the barracks, there is the largest collection of Victoria Crosses in this country. May I ask my right hon. Friend two questions? First—this was touched on earlier—will the Infantry Battle School in Dering Lines and Severn Bridge be unaffected by these cuts? Secondly, will he join me again—I repeat, again—in visiting the barracks to discuss what future role we can have?

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman will know that my natural generosity got the better of me.

**Sir Michael Fallon:** Let me confirm again that the infantry training centre will not be disposed of. My hon. Friend makes the very important point that the barracks contains the Royal Welch Fusiliers Museum. I have visited the museum, and seen the memorabilia associated with Private Hook and others in the battle of Rorke’s Drift. The position is that the museum is currently negotiating a long-term lease with the Ministry in order to secure lottery funding for an extension. The lease has not yet been finalised, but it is likely to contain a clause enabling the trustees to purchase the freehold if and when the site is disposed of. I hope that is helpful to my hon. Friend, but I am very happy to discuss all this further with him.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I have bobbed up and down so often this afternoon that I feel I have undertaken my own military fitness training.

I thank the Secretary of State very much for his statement. May I just clarify whether the barracks at Bassingbourn in my constituency, which has been closed for some time, will now receive personnel from Burgoyne barracks in 2019, RAF Henlow in 2019, Weathersfield in 2020 and Chilwell station in 2021? I understand that from an email that has just arrived on my phone. If that
is the case, that is an enormous and very welcome uplift in the number of personnel at Bassingbourn. May I have a contact in the MOD, so that the local authority can start to plan education, schools, GP surgeries and so on?

Sir Michael Fallon: Yes. This is good news for Bassingbourn. I can confirm the gist of what my hon. Friend said. Bassingbourn will be one of the key receiver sites for some of the units that are now on the move. She said that she would like a contact in the Ministry of Defence, and I suggest that she contacts the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster).

Points of Order

6.6 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker—

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a specialist delicacy to whom I will come in due course.

Clive Efford: I do not know how to take that, Mr Speaker. I have asked the Department of Health several questions on the process by which the Greenwich clinical commissioning group allocated a £74 million contract to Circle Holdings for our local orthopaedic services. In one of my answers from the Department of Health, I was told that there had been local discussions about the impact this would have on other national health services. Investigations I have undertaken into that answer have exposed the fact that this information, which was supplied to the Minister of State, Department of Health by NHS England, is incorrect. He therefore misinformed me—"I accept that he did so inadvertently"—as a consequence of the information he was given by NHS England. My point is that in many of the questions I have asked about this process, I have been told that it is a matter for the local NHS, and this dereliction of duty on the part of the Department of Health has even led to NHS England not scrutinising the process properly.

How can we get the record corrected? I will be shocked if you, Mr Speaker, have not heard that the Department of Health wants to make a statement to correct this error. I would like to know how it is going to improve its performance in scrutinising what is going on when such multimillion pound contracts are let.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is to be shocked, but I am afraid that he will be because, to the best of my knowledge and belief, I have received no indication of any intention on the part of the Government to make a statement on this matter in the way and of the kind that he wants. I am grateful to him for giving me notice that he wished to raise the matter. Let me say this: as I repeatedly remind the House, the content of Ministers’ answers to parliamentary questions is a matter not for the Chair but for the Minister concerned. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman’s point has been heard by those on the Treasury Bench and will be relayed with alacrity to the Minister of State. If the Minister finds that his answer was inaccurate—that was not altogether clear to me—and therefore essentially agrees with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis, I am sure he will take steps to correct the record. It may be—I am not saying it is—that the Minister takes a different view of the facts of the matter, but I cannot arbitrate between different views. Meanwhile, however—we await events—the hon. Gentleman has succeeded in placing his concern on the record.

Dr Julian Lewis: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I, with my customary delicacy, seek to return to a problem being encountered by the Defence Committee in its bid to examine the worrying plans of the BBC to close Caversham Park and make severe cuts in the BBC Monitoring service? We have been trying to get a relevant
Minister from either the Cabinet Office or the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to appear before the Committee and answer key questions on this matter, which is of direct relevance to defence and defence capability in terms of open source information. Is there anything I can do on the Floor of this House within the rules of order to try to add to the moral pressure I am trying to exert on one or other of those Ministers to do their job and appear before our Committee?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the right hon. Gentleman is that there is and he has identified it, namely to raise in eloquent terms a point of order drawing attention to the failure thus far of a Minister to appear, or apparently to agree to appear, and to register the dissatisfaction presumably both of the right hon. Gentleman in his capacity as Chairman of the Defence Committee and presumably of other members of the Committee at that failure or refusal. The question of whether a Minister appears before the Committee is not in the first instance—and arguably not in the last—a matter for the Chair. However, I have known the right hon. Gentleman now for 33 years, and I am bound to say that if Ministers think they can just ignore his protestations, frankly they do not know him as well as I do. It would be a lot better if they just gave up the unequal struggle and fielded one of these characters—preferably, sooner rather than later—because unless they do, they will not hear the end of the matter.

Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights

6.12 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I beg to move,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and workers’ rights.

It is a pleasure to have this opportunity to debate a matter as important as workers’ rights, which our country and this House have a very proud record and history of upholding. I am also pleased to be opening the first in a number of debates about some of the specific policy areas connected with leaving the EU. The Prime Minister has made it clear that Members of this House will have the opportunity thoroughly to discuss how we leave the EU with regard to a number of issues—we have had another opportunity earlier today—in a way that respects the decision that the people took on 23 June.

In the near future we will also have the chance to discuss other important issues that will affect the future of our country, but it is quite right that we start that series of debates with an issue that is so important to all of our constituents, namely the protection of workers’ rights. It is heartening to see so many Members from all sides of the House present to debate this issue, late into a day of intense interest. It affects every working person in this country.

This Government place a great deal of importance on the fundamental protections that workers in the UK have. Whether protection from discrimination or unfair dismissal, equal treatment—working full time or part time—or the right to a minimum wage or to paid holiday, the Government are committed to safeguarding those rights.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am delighted to hear the Secretary of State’s commitment to safeguarding existing employment rights here in the UK that derive from the European Union. However, is he aware that while we are debating our exit from the EU, it is forging ahead with new employment rights that we would hope people in the UK would also benefit from, and will he extend his commitment to ensuring that we do not fall behind the rest of the EU?

Greg Clark: I will come on to say something about that in a few seconds, which I hope will satisfy the hon. Lady.

No one listening to this debate should think that we have any intention of eroding the rights that we enjoy in this country through our process of leaving the European Union. In fact, the opposite is true. We will be using the legislation before this House to entrench all existing workers’ rights in British law, whatever future relationship the UK has with the EU.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I am delighted to hear the Secretary of State’s commitment to safeguarding existing employment rights here in the UK that derive from the European Union. However, is he aware that while we are debating our exit from the EU, it is forging ahead with new employment rights that we would hope people in the UK would also benefit from, and will he extend his commitment to ensuring that we do not fall behind the rest of the EU?

Greg Clark: I will come on to say something about that in a few seconds, which I hope will satisfy the hon. Lady.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I have been listening to the Secretary of State, but does he understand why people would have concerns that the Government might seek to undermine those rights given that this Government introduced the Trade Union Act 2016?

Greg Clark: This Government introduced the national living wage as well, and I will go on to talk about some other proud achievements. It is a helpful feature of this
debate that we are able to say, clearly and unambiguously, that all the rights derived from membership of the EU will be imported into UK law through legislation in this House.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that in many areas—for example, paternity leave—workers’ rights in this country are ahead of the European Union minimums and that going through the Brexit process will not change those?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This House has had good reason to be proud of the protections we have given workers in this country over the years. We do not need to rely on protections from the EU. We have inaugurated them in this House, and have a proud history of doing so over the years.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State just said that he would guarantee all protections. Will he absolutely confirm that that is going ahead of what the Government have said in the past—that it would only be “wherever practical”? Will he also rule out the idea of the great repeal Bill having a sunset clause that would mean that all EU law expired unless it had been specifically endorsed anew by the Government?

Greg Clark: I will be very clear that all of the workers’ rights that are enjoyed under the EU will be part of that Bill and will be brought across into UK law. That is very clear. There is no intention of having a sunset clause.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Currently all workers’ rights are guaranteed by the European Court of Justice. After we leave they will be guaranteed by the Supreme Court, advised by us. Therefore, in the future they can all be ripped up if we leave the EU, if that is the choice of future Governments; if we stay in the EU they cannot be ripped up but are guaranteed. They are guaranteed only under EU law. They cannot be sustainably guaranteed by the Secretary of State.

Greg Clark: I am surprised by the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. I would have thought that hundreds of years of parliamentary sovereignty and a robust and independent judiciary are a very strong guarantee of the rights we have in this country.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Brexit offers an opportunity to strengthen workers’ rights? [HON. MEMBERS: “Sit down!“] Will he look at my Parental Bereavement Leave (Statutory Entitlement) Bill, which would give the UK the best workers’ rights in the world?

Greg Clark: Opposition Members should attend with greater courtesy to my hon. Friend, who speaks with a great deal of experience and knowledge of rights for parents who have suffered bereavement. He has made excellent speeches about that in the House. His private Member’s Bill, which has a huge amount to commend it, would allow bereaved parents to have time off to deal with the consequences of an infant death in their family. I look forward to working with him to make use of his knowledge and wisdom, and to see whether, through the reforms that we will introduce, we can capture the spirit of what he says. I am grateful for his intervention today and his earlier contributions.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way again—he is being extremely generous in taking interventions. Does he recall as I do that, in the previous Parliament, many of us campaigned on the matter of zero-hours contracts? Nothing had been done about that for 13 long years under the Labour Government, and our Government, and campaigners on the Government side of the House, including me, made the case for legislation on exclusivity contracts, which was passed. We did not wait for Europe; we did it here.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have not waited for Europe. Through many centuries the condition of working people has been an important responsibility of the House, and we have advanced that consistently, as we did on zero-hours contracts. When my hon. Friend says that I am being generous in taking interventions, I interpret it as a coded signal that I ought to make progress, so I will do precisely that.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Greg Clark: Not at the moment.
As the House knows, from last year, subject to certain conditions, parental leave can be shared by the father of a child, giving families choice as to how they balance their home and work responsibilities. That is not part of EU legislation—the House introduced it. In addition, the UK offers 18 weeks’ parental leave, and that provision goes beyond the EU directive because it is available until the child’s 18th birthday. All UK employees enjoy more than five weeks’ statutory annual leave—5.6 weeks—not just the four weeks set out in EU law. It is therefore clear that in this case, as in others, British law is stronger and goes further than EU law. The Government have shown our commitment to extending workers’ rights when that is the right choice for the UK. We will continue to do so when we leave the European Union.

Many of the increases in rights for working people that the Secretary of State has mentioned are the result of Labour Governments who have been incredibly progressive on workers’ rights. The Government have introduced tribunal fees and increased minimum employment thresholds to restrict individuals’ access to their rights. With regard to primary legislation, will the working time directive have the same status as the Employment Rights Act 1996 as and when all laws are entrenched in UK legislation through the great repeal Bill?

We have discussed a number of areas in which the Government have extended workers’ rights. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) cited the important protection against exclusivity in zero-hours contracts. This Government and our predecessors introduced the national living wage. The hon. Lady should therefore be a bit more generous in giving credit. Of course, the working time directive, like all other directives that are part of EU law, will be transposed into UK law so that there is continuity.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) says, the Conservatives have a record of such action over hundreds of years. Robert Peel, the father of Sir Robert Peel, introduced the very first Factory Act under the rather wonderful title of the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802.

My hon. Friend is exactly right and we continue that tradition today. I am not sure that we regulate the morals of apprentices, but the health of apprentices is very important. The Conservative party has been the party of workers’ rights over the centuries, from Shaftesbury’s Factory Acts to William Hague’s Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Conservatives have always understood that the decent treatment of people at work is not at the expense of industrial success, but a foundation of it.

Since 2010, the Conservatives have strengthened the rights of workers. This April, the Government introduced the mandatory national living wage for workers aged 25 and above, meaning that a full-time low-paid worker earns £900 more a year than they did before its introduction. We have also cracked down on employers who break national minimum wage and national living wage law. We have increased the enforcement budget by more than £9 million and strengthened enforcement so that people who break the law face an increased financial penalty—it has increased from 100% to 200% of arrears.

Our measures to protect workers’ rights and support our labour market have meant more people in work, more people earning a living and more people contributing to the prosperity of the UK than ever before. Our high employment rate is complemented by strong protections for UK workers, so our country is not only a great place to start a business, but a great place to work. However, to maintain that position, especially as we leave the European Union, we cannot stand still. We need to make further changes that support workers’ rights in the tradition of Conservative Governments over the years.

This Government will not only maintain existing rights, but set a very high standard. Like most Members of the House, I want to deliver an economy that works for everyone. Workers’ rights have an important part to play in that. We will build on the work that the Government have done to combine the dynamism of the UK labour market with robust protections for workers.

I do not share the enthusiasm of my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) for the European Court of Justice. The ECJ’s LaVal and Viking judgments undermined the minimum wage and changed the definition of what it was to go on strike, which loosened workers’ rights. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that he will look at those judgments with a view to increasing workers’ rights, guaranteeing the minimum wage against those judgments, and maintaining the previous definitions of going on strike?

I will look at those judgments, but the hon. Gentleman establishes the point that the House is more than capable of setting high standards of protection, as it has done for many centuries.

The Secretary of State will know that the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice established the principle of direct effect for various provisions of EU treaties and directives, meaning that they require no implementation at all by the Government. Will he confirm that, even with the great repeal Bill, those rights that are directly effective, and on which workers can rely, will remain post-Brexit?

Yes, the intention is that all workers’ rights that derive from the EU will be brought into British law.

I am listening carefully to the Secretary of State. It would appear that Opposition Members believe that everything that Europe does is marvellous for workers, but that is not right, is it? Will he comment on the Uber cases, in which the EU has singularly failed to protect self-employed people?
**Greg Clark:** I think it is clear from what I and my hon. Friends have said that we have a proud tradition in the House of setting standards for workers and employment protections that are adjusted to this country, and that go beyond the more basic protections offered by other countries and the EU. I will not comment on the Uber case; I believe it is subject to an appeal.

The Government announced an independent review of employment practices in the modern economy to investigate how we can respond to the rapidly changing world of work to ensure, as we have in the past, that changing patterns of employment are accompanied by a consideration, including by the House, of appropriate necessary protections so that the economy continues to have the right framework of employment protections for the workers of this country. The review will address six themes: security, pay and rights; progression and training; defining rights and responsibilities in new business models; representation of employees; opportunities for under-represented groups; and how new business models can be supported. Colleagues may have read or been present for Friday’s excellent debate on unpaid internships that was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). I am pleased that we have included the question of unpaid internships in the review.

**Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): Several times the Secretary of State has referred to the plan to transpose all these matters into UK law and several times he has referred to this House. What consideration has been given to issues that are clearly within devolved competencies? At what point will they be devolved? Will it be from day one with the commencement of the great repeal Act, or will those powers be held in some sort of holding centre here before they are subsequently devolved?

**Greg Clark:** When we set out the legislation, I am sure my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will want to meet Northern Ireland Ministers and the hon. Gentleman’s party to consider how best to deal with that. The clear intention is that all rights and protections available through the EU will come back to the United Kingdom and be active from day one. There will be no gap.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), will the Secretary of State confirm whether discussions have taken place with the devolved institutions? Employment rights are particularly intricate for the Northern Ireland Executive.

**Greg Clark:** My colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in particular, will have those discussions as we draw up the great repeal Bill.

Where rights are breached, we are taking action. We have already named nearly 700 employers that have not paid the national minimum wage. They owe more than £3.5 million in arrears between them. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will investigate every complaint it receives and ensure that miscreants are made to pay their arrears and fined for any offence. Crucially, we will be vigorous and proactive, looking across the workforce and wider society to ensure that all rights and interests are protected.

Since 2010, there has been a record number of women in work, but we know we have more to do to achieve gender parity. That is why, for example, the Government have been piloting a scheme to help talented women to gain the experience they need to get their first board appointment. In addition, we have asked Baroness Ruby McGregor-Smith to lead a review to examine the obstacles faced by businesses in developing black and minority ethnic talent, from recruitment right through to executive level. We are encouraging and supporting disabled people to take steps into work where they are able to and to fulfil their potential.

The Government have shown their commitment to extending workers’ rights when that is the right choice for the UK and we will continue to do so when we leave the European Union. We will set and expect the highest standards for protecting workers and their rights. The Prime Minister and I have set out a clear vision for the Government’s approach to workers’ rights, on top of what we have already achieved for individuals across society and for the wider economy. It is not just a question of fairness: a strong relationship between businesses and the workers who sustain them underpins our economy and our future prosperity.

We will not dilute or dissolve workers’ rights. They will be not just protected but enhanced under this Government, because the Conservative party is the true workers’ party and the only party dedicated to making Britain a country that works for not just the privileged few, but every person in it. I look forward to the remainder of the debate, which is our first general debate on matters relating to the exit of the EU. This is a strong and important subject with which to begin. It underlines the positive future that we will have when the House has control of this agenda on which we have had such a proud record over decades past.
on terms that carry the country with them. There are few areas on which Brexit has more potential to impact on people’s lives than workers’ rights.

Stephen Doughty: Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Foreign Secretary says he wants to scrap the social chapter and the International Development Secretary says she wants to halve the burden of EU employment and social rights, we should be very concerned? That is exactly why Parliament should be scrutinising this issue.

Clive Lewis: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. It reminds me of the old adage “Never trust a Tory”—that is what this comes down to.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Lewis: I will make some progress. I will give way, but I will make some progress first—[Interruption.] I will take nothing back.

It is a well-established fact, and not one that reflects well on us as a country, that many protections and rights awarded to workers in Britain reside in EU legislation. Throughout the referendum campaign and since, my party has sought assurances that leaving the EU will not lead to any erosion or dilution of those rights. It follows that much of what the Secretary of State has said today will be welcomed by Opposition Members, but let us not forget that it is EU law that has given working people in this country their rights to a limited working week and guaranteed rest periods. It is the EU that has ensured equal pay and protection against discrimination, and it is to the EU that we owe maternity and paternity rights and much, much more. Removing these rights would cause real damage to the lives of working people.

It is a relief to hear that the Government intend to transfer those rights into British law, but that is not enough. I share the Government’s assessment that the overwhelming majority of the 17 million people who voted in favour of Brexit were not voting to axe our employment rights, but there is a tiny minority who were. It is that minority that has a strong presence on the Government Benches.

John Redwood rose—

Clive Lewis: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, one of the individuals in question.

John Redwood: As someone who has always fully supported the transfer of all these rights into British law, I welcome the Secretary of State’s promise. Will the Labour party promise us that, assuming the proposed Bill transfers all those rights unequivocally, they will support that Bill? It will be the only way to transfer and guarantee those rights.

Clive Lewis: That is a really important point. What we did not hear from the Secretary of State was any promise or guarantee that employment legislation will not, once it comes out of international law, simply go into secondary law. We want to see it in primary law, and our concern is that once it goes into secondary law, the Government will use statutory instruments to undermine employment law and workers’ rights, and that is not what we want to see.

Let us carry on. I am talking about the Foreign Secretary, who described the weight of EU employment legislation as “back-breaking”. Then there is the Secretary of State for International Trade who dismissed the idea of protecting workplace rights as “intellectually unsustainable”. Then there is the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU who spent years attacking employment rights embodied in EU law as “unnecessary red tape”.

Melanie Onn: Does my hon. Friend also recognise that the former Minister for Employment, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) went so far as to call for the UK to “halve the burdens of EU social and employment legislation” after Brexit?

Clive Lewis: The list is lengthy.

Let us go back. Who spent years attacking employment rights embodied in EU laws as unnecessary red tape before undergoing his recent makeover into an ally of the working class, insisting that it is only “consumer and environmental protections” that he regards as unnecessary? As an aside, it is worth emphasising that those protections are as important to the quality of life of working people as employment rights, but they are not the topic of today’s debate.

Caroline Lucas: The hon. Gentleman is making a very strong case. Does he agree with me that what many workers value most of all is the right to work in other EU countries, and that the best way to guarantee that is by free movement? Will he therefore join me in pressing for free movement to be a fundamental right that needs cast-iron protection as part of any future relationship with the EU?

Clive Lewis: That is a very important point, and it is one to which I shall come back in the future.

Let me return to the issue at hand. While I welcome now, as I have before, the Government’s recent apparent Damascene conversion when it comes to workers’ rights, I cannot but remain sceptical about how deep it goes. When it comes to limiting the number of hours people have to work in a week and giving temporary workers the same rights as permanent staff, the Conservative party has resisted at every turn the enhanced protection for workers that was introduced through EU legislation. Yet now we are asked to believe that they will defend that legislation. How are the workers of this country supposed to trust them? The public have already been misled about what Brexit will mean.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Gentleman says that these developments are recent, but as I pointed out to the Secretary of State, in fact they go back hundreds of years—back to 1802, which saw the very first factory Act enacted by a Conservative Government. Furthermore, there is no need for these laws to be protected by the EU, because we enhance those protections and have already done so.
Clive Lewis: Shall we have a little history lesson? How many Acts of Parliament between 1980 and 1993 that attacked working people through anti-trade union legislation do you think your Government took part in? Was it one, two or three? No, it was six, so don’t lecture us on the history of workers’ rights. You have nothing to say on it.

Charlie Elphicke rose—

Clive Lewis: I am going to make some progress.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Lewis: No.

The public have already been misled about what Brexit will mean. On the morning after the referendum, Mr Farage’s hangover had barely set in before the leave campaign withdrew the promise that leaving the EU would free up £350 million a week for the NHS. In the last week, we have seen that the Government are prepared to go to the highest court in the land to avoid proper democratic scrutiny of the terms of Brexit.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman give way to the right hon. Lady.

Clive Lewis: Do you know what, I will give way to the right hon. Lady.

Anna Soubry: Will the hon. Gentleman tell us how many pieces of legislation introduced by the last but one Conservative Government the then Labour Government repealed?

Clive Lewis: I think you will find that through the employment legislation of the last Labour Government, we made considerable strides on improving workplace rights for working people, so we will take no lectures from the right hon. Lady on workers’ rights.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the only reason the social chapter was introduced into legislation in the United Kingdom was that we had a Labour Government?

Clive Lewis: You make the point very well. When it comes to the rights of working people in this country, it is only the Labour party that can be trusted to deliver.

Several hon. Members rose—

Clive Lewis: I want to make some progress.

So why should we believe that the party that has fought tooth and nail against EU protections for workers and that has dismissed as “unnecessary red tape” laws that have made UK workplaces more fair and more humane now will be the defender of those rights? I want to believe it—I truly do—but I cannot. It is not just because of the Government’s record of opposing the very legislation that they now claim to support; it is because, despite his good intentions—I am prepared to believe that he has good intentions—nothing that the Secretary of State or the Prime Minister or anyone else in this Government has said or done over the past six years convinces me that they understand or care about the lives of working people. This Government are the children of Thatcher. Sticking up for workers goes against every instinct and is contrary to the very political DNA of so many Conservative Members.

I would like to shift focus and reflect on people’s experiences of the world of work under this Government, on how workplaces and labour markets are changing, on what this has meant for working people and on what the Government have—or, more often, have not—done for them. From the recent expose of Victorian employment practices at Sports Direct to the horror stories of Uber drivers being unable to take a toilet break, working conditions in this country are getting worse, not better, for too many people. Over the past six years, jobs have become lower skilled, less secure and worse paid. We have seen the rise of zero-hour contracts and growing reliance on agency workers. We have seen the birth of the gig economy, taking more and more workers outside formal employment regulations. The Tories boast about the recovery of employment since 2008, but on every other criterion, our labour market is failing.

Geraint Davies: Given that there will be enormous pressure on business from tariffs, no more money coming in and less inward investment because of blockages to the markets, does my hon. Friend accept that the business community will ask for their costs to be reduced, which will threaten statutory holiday pay, maternity pay and other workers’ rights? Once those powers have been given to this Government, they will be empowered to repeal those things in the future, and there will be no European guarantees. We will be at the will of future Governments. [Interruption.]

Clive Lewis: I hear Conservative Members talking about scaremongering, but the facts speak for themselves. You are the enemy of working people. The Tories boast—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. First, the House is too noisy. This is meant to be a genteel and well-behaved debate on an important matter. Secondly, although I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) while he is speaking from the Dispatch Box, I must point out that he has now used the word “you” on several occasions, and that there are several good reasons why we use the third person in this place. It has to do with keeping the level of debate reasonable and courteous. I know that the hon. Gentleman is extremely courteous and will want to continue to be courteous. If he wants to accuse hon. Members of something, he should not accuse me.

Clive Lewis: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I stand formally chastised, and rightly so. I think, however, that it reflects the level of anxiety and passion felt by Opposition Members about workers’ rights. I so often see smugness from some Conservative Members who obviously feel that Brexit is going to be bonfire of regulatory rights in the workplace—and we do not want to see that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Clive Lewis: I shall make some more progress.
The Tories boast about the recovery of employment since 2008, but on every other criterion, our labour market is failing. Wages, which have been falling as a share of national income for decades, have stagnated under the Tories, creating nearly a decade of lost pay. Too many people are having their work-life balance undermined by rising workloads and suffering stress due to punitive performance reviews. Even those who are not in precarious employment worry about their future job security.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Lewis: I am going to make some progress, if that is all right.

We cannot continue to prioritise quantity over quality in the belief that if we want to ensure that everyone has a job, we have to accept any job. From the millions of women who continue to be paid less than men to the growing number of involuntarily or bogusly self-employed, it is hard to escape the reality that, for most, conditions have become worse. What have the Tories done in the face of all that? They have frozen public sector pay for six years running; they have introduced fees for employment tribunals, making it harder for people to gain access to the rights to which the law entitles them; they have placed severe restrictions on the right to strike; and onerous burdens on the ability to organise. In the Trade Union Act 2016, they have pushed through the biggest attack on workers’ rights in a generation.

We are back to the issue of trust. The Government have recently taken to calling themselves the party of working people, but in their last six years in office, they have not acted like that; on the contrary. Is it any wonder that, for those of us who genuinely care about workers’ rights, the promises that the Secretary of State knows, it is not for me to decide whether what a Member says is reasonable or otherwise, but I am sure that the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and I will bear in mind what has been said by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) will bear in mind what has been said by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and will moderate the way in which he is using his excellent rhetoric. I do not intend to brand the Secretary of State a liar; he seems to me to be a decent guy.

Clive Lewis: I think that the peace process—a Labour-oriented peace process—would have had a great deal to do with that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Clive Lewis: I will make some headway now. I can see that you are agitated, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Ian Paisley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it right for the hon. Gentleman to use the peace process as an excuse for unemployment legislation?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is not for me to decide whether what a Member who has the Floor is saying is reasonable or otherwise, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) will bear in mind what has been said by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and will moderate the way in which he is using his excellent rhetoric.

Clive Lewis: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Even if we take the Secretary of State at face value, he is surrounded by the kind of free-market fanatics who, past behaviour suggests, will always work to undermine workers’ rights rather than to bolster them.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way, on that point?

Clive Lewis: I am going to make some progress. I am conscious of time, and many other Members clearly want to have their say.

Last time I had the pleasure of facing the Secretary of State across the Dispatch Box, he reached out to me in the name of bipartisanship. One cannot help wondering if the opinion of some of his colleagues has forced him to consider whether he might find it more congenial to work with us on the Opposition side of the House. I sympathise: if he truly believes what he said to us today, no wonder he has reached out for allies on our Benches. So I say to him, “You’re on, “ If he is serious in his commitment to workers’ rights, let us work together towards three goals.
First, the Secretary of State must accept that given his Government's record, a day one transfer of EU rights to UK law is simply not enough. Grant Shapps must not get his sunset clause.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I really have tried not to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, and when he has done something once I have let it go, but I am afraid that I cannot do that twice. In the Chamber, we must either refer to each other by constituency or refer to “the Minister” or “the Secretary of State”. I will not insist that the hon. Gentleman get the constituencies right; just the odd reference to “the Minister” would do fine.

Clive Lewis: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. It was a genuine error, for which I apologise.

The right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) must not get his sunset clause. Instead, workers need a cast-iron guarantee that rights will not be eroded over time, either by a failure to keep pace with new EU legislation or because UK courts interpret it more weakly.

Secondly, all EU citizens who are currently employed here must be guaranteed the right to remain. These are people who have built their lives in this country. To leave their future shrouded in uncertainty so that they can be used as a pawn in future negotiations with the EU is quite simply wrong. It is also bad for businesses. We know that many are already having to recruit and train replacement staff as EU workers up and leave before they are pushed.

If the Secretary of State would agree to work with us to achieve those two objectives, it would prevent us from going backwards, but we cannot afford to stand still when it comes to workers’ rights. The United Kingdom ranks 31st richest out of 34 on the OECD’s employment protection index. Among comparable economies, we already have one of the least regulated and least protected workplaces in the world. That simply is not good enough.

Charlie Elphicke: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Lewis: No, I am going to press on. I do apologise.

The fact that we have relied on the EU for so many of our protections reflects badly on all of us in this place. How can we interpret the referendum results other than as an expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo—a demand for a better deal? Labour wants to give the people a better deal, and where better to start than in the workplace? Labour markets are changing, and technological progress is opening up new possibilities for the way in which we organise our workplaces and working lives, but for too many workers, new technology has meant not new freedoms, but new forms of exploitation.

Brexit Britain faces a choice. We can enter a race to the bottom, steadily eroding workplace protections in an attempt to attract investment and custom away from low-wage countries, or we can lead the way on workers’ rights across Europe, rather than digging their heels in and resisting every advance. It sounds far-fetched, but it is time for the Government to put their money where their mouth is. You say you want to be the party of workers, Mr Secretary of State.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. No: they say they want to be that. I do not say anything.

Clive Lewis: They say they want to be the party of workers. They say they want to work together. Well, these are the terms, and we are game if you are.

It seems to me that we have for once got a wonderful understanding or agreement between the two parties. So I just ask the Labour party to understand that sometimes they have won—that sometimes they are in agreement with the Conservatives, and, as disagreeable as they may find that, surely it is cause for celebration that both main parties wish to advance employee rights, and have absolutely no wish to undermine employee rights that currently come from the EU and wish to offer the legal framework to protect them. So I repeat again: will the Labour party now agree to welcome and offer the legal framework to protect them. So I repeat again: will the Labour party now agree to welcome and support the great reform Bill when it shows that all those crucial rights—not just the worker rights, but the environmental rights and the others they have mentioned—will be transferred?

Geraint Davies: But does the right hon. Gentleman not accept that if businesses face higher costs through tariffs and Britain wants to attract international inward investment platforming into Europe, it will move towards reducing costs in respect of public health and the environment and, in particular, workers’ rights, which are currently guaranteed through the European Court of Justice but will no longer be guaranteed other than in a sort of gentleman’s agreement here which is not sustainable in law?
**John Redwood:** I think this high court of Parliament—this great legislature of ours—is quite capable of defending workers’ rights, and I do not believe the Government will get very far if they first promise the British people that they will guarantee all those rights and then a year later turn around and say they are not going to. I have got some pretty difficult colleagues on this side of the House who would also object rather strongly to that. If I have given my word to my electors that all those rights will be transferred, the Whips are not going to find it very easy to get me to vote against them, but I do not believe I am going to have to, because I am quite sure I believe the Secretary of State and there is absolutely no reason to assume something else is going to happen.

I would like to begin, Madam Deputy Speaker, in an uncharacteristic way by praising both the Speaker and the Deputy Speakers of this House for having shown in the run-up to the referendum that they have been able to grant time and make sure the voices of the minority were heard over a very sensitive and explosive public debate. As part of the leave minority in this House—we were rather a modest minority in terms of numbers; we were very outgunned in terms of weight of office and numbers of votes and the amount of material coming forward from both the Government and Opposition Front Bench—I am very grateful for the way the Speaker and the House authorities made sure we had our chance to make our case. If that had not happened, I think the public would have felt their Parliament was completely out of touch, because we now know that we on the leave side spoke for 52% of those voting in the referendum, a massive 17.4 million people, and it is important that our Parliament stays topical and is able to take the minority view in here because it might be the majority view out there.

I am equally sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that you and the Speaker will make sure, now that the tables have been turned and we know the majority in the country is with the leave side, that there will be plenty of opportunity for those who wish to represent the views of the significant remain minority and make sure their legitimate worries are considered and taken into account in the longish process that will follow as the Government, after sending in the article 50 letter, start the negotiations on our future arrangement once we are again an independent country having a series of crucial working relationships, collaborations, agreements and trade arrangements with our former partners in the EU.

We hear from Labour all the time that the Government are not coming clean about the negotiating aims. I find that very difficult to understand. We have heard tonight, on the matter that most concerns Labour MPs, an absolutely definitive statement. Question: “Are our employment rights at any risk?” Answer: “No, they are not if you vote for the repeal Bill.” Question: “Are other rights at risk?” Answer: “No, they are not because they are all being transferred by that same repeal Bill.”

Turning to the question of the high-level aims, Labour have a perfectly reasonable point when they say, “Of course the Government must explain the high-level aims” while also agreeing that the Government cannot provide a running commentary or give the intermediate or fall-back positions in a negotiation as that would be crazy. But Labour always say they have not heard the high-level aims, yet I think we have already heard them so let me have another go at explaining them. The aim is to take back control. The aim is to make sure all the laws that apply to UK citizens are made in this Parliament, not in Europe. The aim is to ensure legal continuity with all current laws that come from Europe being transferred, for obvious reasons. The aim is to make sure we control our borders. The aim is to make sure we control our own taxes and spending plans. The aim is that we take back those controls so that we can again be a sovereign Parliament representing a sovereign people. What is so difficult to understand?

The issues that we will have to discuss with our partners are mainly about trade and future collaborations in a number of areas, and as the Prime Minister has rightly said, that will be a grown-up discussion between a country taking back control of its laws and policies and a group of other countries working together in what they wish to advance as a monetary and political union. It will be a free and fair negotiation where I think, in the end, when angers have cooled and tempers calmed down, our friends on the continent will understand that tariff-free—and reasonably free—trade makes even more sense for them than it does for us, and that surely is the aim we are trying to achieve.

**Mark Durkan:** The right hon. Gentleman refers to the great repeal Bill, which is in essence the great download and save Bill for day one of Brexit. Who controls the delete key thereafter as far as these rights and key standards are concerned? Is it, as he implies, this House? Would any removal of rights have to be done by primary legislation, or could it be done by ministerial direction? And where is the position of the devolved Administrations in this? These matters are devolved competencies; will they be devolved on day one?

**John Redwood:** I hope they will be devolved in good time.

**Mark Durkan:** In good time?

**John Redwood:** Why does the hon. Gentleman laugh? The Government are engaged—I think, again, in good faith—in an earnest discussion with the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments of the United Kingdom. I presume that quite shortly after the powers have returned, they will be properly devolved. As to the question of what guarantee there is that these major powers cannot be eroded, the first guarantee is that the Government have already made it clear that they have no plans to do so. They have given their word, and if they broke their word there would be very strong protests in here and there would be the usual pressures of public opinion, and then loss of seats for loss of faith should the Government proceed in that way. But as I understand it, primary legislation will guarantee all these rights and laws from the EU; these are not secondary matters, and so primary legislation will be required in order to deal with them in the future. And it may be that in the future we will want to improve these rights, which would entail amending them, and that is something we will be entirely free to do once we have taken back control; we can then do it in the way we see fit, without any complications from European law.

The 17.4 million people voted to take back control, and that was a remarkable vote. They voted to take back control despite being told by the great and the good, the Government and leading figures in the Opposition that there would be a short-term economic cost to them...
if they dared to vote to have a sovereign Parliament representing a sovereign people. We did not believe them, however, and I am very pleased that we did not do so. We have now had four months of growth, with more jobs, more spending, rising incomes and all the other things that they said could not possibly happen, were we to dare to exit the European Union. Is it not good that experts are sometimes wrong and sometimes too pessimistic, and that sometimes the people are more sensible and know what is right for them?

The people also understood that this was about more than money. They did not feel that their money was at risk; they felt that something bigger than money was at issue. What was at issue was the question of who controls. Do the people any longer have their sovereign power? Can they elect a Parliament to do the things they want Parliament to do? They realised that they could not. They realised that this Parliament could not abolish VAT on tampons or green products in the way that most people would like it to because to do so would be illegal under European law. They realised that this Parliament could not amend the fishing rules in order to have a fishing industry that was good for English fisherman, and Scottish fish because that would be illegal under European law. They realised that both the major parties in the general election wished to make changes to the benefit law. They did not feel that their money was at stake. That promise was crystal clear. I feel, and I think my right hon. Friend agrees with me, that we are passing the decision to the British people. That promise was crystal clear. I feel, and I think my right hon. Friend agrees with me, that we are passing the decision to the British people.

Anna Soubry: I appreciate that the results of the referendum were declared on a local authority basis, but could my right hon. Friend confirm that the people of Wokingham actually voted to remain?

John Redwood: That is by no means proven. As my right hon. Friend says, Wokingham borough had a modest majority in favour of remain, but Wokingham borough comprises parts of four different constituencies. My own constituency contains bits of Wokingham borough as well as parts of West Berkshire. According to my canvass returns, I think it was roughly 50:50 in my constituency. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] Anyway, it does not really matter—[Interruption.] My right hon. Friend must listen, because I think she actually agrees with me on this, although she will not admit it.

Members from both sides of the House trooped solemnly through the Lobby to put through the European Union Referendum Act 2015, and it was crystal clear from what Ministers and others were saying at the time that we were passing the decision to the British people. We were not asking their advice. We were not giving them a rather grand and expensive opinion poll. Ministers said, “You, the British people, will make this decision.” And just to ram it home, a leaflet was sent to every household in the country—at the taxpayers’ expense, which some of us were a bit worried about—repeating that message. A solemn promise was made by the Government. The Opposition were involved with this, because they did not object and they helped to speed through the money for that promise to be sent to every household. That promise was crystal clear. I feel, and I think my right hon. Friend agrees with me, that we are now under a duty to expedite the decision of the British people.

Charlie Elphicke: I backed remain, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), but a majority of the people of Dover voted to leave. Is it not incumbent on all of us to listen to our electors and to act on the instructions that we have been given?

John Redwood: I think it is incumbent on this Parliament to accept the verdict of the referendum that we gave to the British people and to understand that we are all under a duty now. Democracy is on trial. What would the public think if their Parliament gave them a decision to make and then tried to stop that decision being implemented? That would put us in an impossible position, and anyone who followed that course would have a very miserable time when they next faced the electors.

Once the referendum is over, we have a duty to represent all our constituents. I have to represent the remain constituents of Wokingham just as much as the leave constituents. I cannot possibly vote on both sides of the issue, but I can ensure that the legitimate concerns of my remain voters are taken into account. I can assure the House that I will be very active in lobbying Ministers when remain voters identify real problems. The main problem that they see at the moment is the uncertainty. They want us to speed up, and the more Members think that delay is a good idea, the more the uncertainty will build and the more damage could conceivably be done. We all have a duty now to speak for all our constituents, but we can only have one vote. Surely MPs must now vote for the settled will of the British people, having offered them that referendum.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does not my right hon. Friend find it rather strange that, although the people on the remain side who do not want to accept the verdict of the electorate in the referendum want to drag out and delay the process of triggering article 50, the other members of the European Union want us to get on with it? We talk about the binding nature, or otherwise, of the referendum, but is not the person who best illustrates its binding nature none other than David Cameron? If it was just an advisory referendum, why on earth did he feel it necessary to announce his resignation the following day?

John Redwood: That is another piece of evidence—of which there is so much—that it was not an advisory referendum. We know that from ministerial statements at the Dispatch Box, from the Hansard records of the passage of the legislation and from the leaflets that were sent to every household. That was one of the few things on which the remain campaign and the leave campaign agreed. Both stressed to the voters the fact that this was deadly serious, that it was their decision and that if they got it wrong, they might not like the answer. Indeed, the whole purpose of the remain campaign, as I saw it, was to terrify people. It worked on the premise that if we voted to leave, we would be out. I remember
Mr Dimbleby announcing the final result on television—the BBC was a bit reluctant to get to that point, but it eventually did so—that we were out of the European Union. He did not say, “Oh, we’ve just had an interesting advisory vote and maybe some people in Parliament will now think they ought to do something about it.”

Geraint Davies: A lot of the Brexeters I have spoken to voted for Brexit on the basis that there would be lower costs—the figure of £350 million a week was mentioned—yet we are now going to tear up the deficit plans in the autumn statement. They also voted on the basis of continuing market access, which is now at risk from tariffs, and of lower migration, which is obviously going to go up in the next two years as people run in through the door. Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the British people should have a referendum on the exit package when they can see whether what they reasonably expected has come to fruition? They could then vote to leave if they wanted to, and if not, they could vote to stay in.

John Redwood: There is absolutely no point in having a referendum on the exit package. By the time we get to that point, we will already be leaving. The people have decided to leave. If we had a vote on the exit package and decided that we did not like it, the rest of the European Union would not say, “Oh, we’re very sorry, United Kingdom. We’ll improve your exit package.” Absolutely no way! They would say, “We are absolutely fed up with you, United Kingdom. You can’t make up your mind, you mess us around and you dominate the door.” Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that we have only a limited amount of patience. Some of them do not have very much patience already.

I regard my views and my vote as being those of a good European. I have always understood the full nature of the European project. It is a noble ideal to unite countries around a united currency, a political union and much more collaborative working. I also know that the British people, including myself, do not wish to do that. It is too close for us. That is why the British people have made the bold, heroic and sensible decision, as good Europeans, to say, “We don’t want to join. We don’t want to join Schengen. We don’t want to join the next bit, which will be the political union.” So is it not good that Britain has honestly said—

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As much as I am enjoying the right hon. Gentleman’s dissertation on the Brexit vote, it has been some time since we have spoken about workers’ rights. Is there anything that we can do about that?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am speaking more about exiting the EU than the specific issue of workers’ rights but, as Members should understand, workers’ rights are entirely subsumed by the process of exiting the EU. We have to talk about the principles and the way in which we will exit the EU to make any sense of the workers’ rights part of the debate.

Tom Brake: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way on workers’ rights?

John Redwood: I will give way on workers’ rights to the Liberal Democrat.

Tom Brake: One of the many claims made by the Brexiteers during the EU referendum campaign, and one to which the right hon. Gentleman has not referred, was the famous figure of £350 million a week for the NHS. One of the other claims was that they would support the rights of EU workers. I wonder whether he might touch on that because it directly affects the 1.5 million to 2 million UK citizens who are in other EU countries.

John Redwood: The Vote Leave campaign was clear that we want the Government to guarantee the rights of all legally settled workers in this country. The Government have said that everyone who is here legally is quite entitled and welcome to stay on the assumption that no one from our country who is living overseas is threatened. I do not believe that any of our European partner countries will threaten any of our people who are legally settled in those countries, so I think it is more or less absolutely guaranteed that everybody is welcome to stay and that the British Government have absolutely no plan to suggest that they should not be.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The right hon. Gentleman may be aware of an EU ruling in Northern Ireland just in the past two weeks. The Northern Ireland Assembly allocated some £7 million to help fund a direct link between Belfast International Airport and New York, but that was overruled by the EU, which said that it was out of order. Is that not another example of why we should be exiting the EU right now and not waiting until 31 March?

John Redwood: I am very much on the hon. Gentleman’s side on that issue but, as he knows, that will not be possible given the delays that are now being built in as a result of various issues and processes.

This House must now rise to the challenge of ensuring workers’ rights and removing the senior powers of the European Union in the way that the British people voted for. Of course, we want to take back control of the money and, once we have, the Government will have considerably more to spend on their priorities. The Vote Leave campaign recommended health as a priority, but it will be for the Government of the day, as Vote Leave always made clear, to decide exactly how to spend the money.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way again. On workers’ rights, did he hear the shadow Minister talking about the importance of making it easier to strike and his intention and desire to roll
back trade union legislation? Does he share my concern that that would not help workers’ rights but simply reduce the number of workers?

John Redwood: I think that goes beyond the issue of European workers’ rights. All I want to say today on workers’ rights is that we must guarantee all of them as promised. I am strongly in support of the Minister.

In conclusion, we have a brave public who decided, despite the odds and the advice, that they wished to leave the European Union. They were not only brave but right. They are fed up with a Parliament that cannot do their bidding, that cannot even choose the taxes to impose on them, that cannot spend the money that all the taxes raise, and that cannot choose laws for them or amend them in the way that they wish. The issue today and in the weeks ahead is whether the MPs in this House can rise to the challenge. Can MPs at least follow the public and realise that they want a sovereign Parliament to represent a sovereign people? Where are the peace-loving Pyms and Hampdens of the modern era? Where are those who say, “Yes, we will support that great repeal Bill. Yes, we will give those powers back to this Parliament. Yes, we will make it easier to achieve Brexit, not more difficult”? That is what the public want and the Opposition should join us, welcome that view and get on with it.

7.24 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate today and, I have to say, to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood). Although I have great respect for the way in which he delivered his speech, I could not agree with a word of it apart from when he said that democracy is on trial. It is indeed, and the people of Scotland are watching intently.

However, begging your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to start with probably the only thing I have to say today that will garner support from Members on both sides of the House and offer my congratulations to Scotland’s own Andy Murray on securing top spot in the global tennis rankings. Becoming the first Scottish or British men’s No. 1 in the strongest era of the global sport of tennis is an incredible achievement. He will go down as not only one of the best Scottish or British sportsmen, but one of the greatest ever male tennis players. Well done, Andy; it is thoroughly well deserved.

We are now approaching five months since the EU referendum vote took place and we are still no clearer than on 23 June about what leaving the EU will actually mean. We still do not even know what role this House of Commons or the devolved Parliaments will have in invoking article 50. You would have thought that this would be a fairly simple matter of process that would be spelled out in a document before the referendum—perhaps something like a White Paper. Regardless of what people thought of the White Paper on Scottish independence—whether people agreed with the blueprint for an independent Scotland or not—it is clear that the people of Scotland were given far more information about what their vote would mean than happened in the EU referendum.

The Scottish Government produced a 700-page White Paper on Scottish independence. Whether this UK Government or the leave campaign, nobody came up with as much as a side of A4 on what would happen if the UK voted to leave—no plan, no blueprint, no vision. That is why it is impossible to tell what motivated a majority in the UK to vote to leave. Was it some idea of British nationalism? Was it immigration? Was it the whopper about £350 million a week for the NHS? Was it the ridiculous scaremongering from the former Chancellor or all the surviving former Prime Ministers? That is why when people talk about mandates and what the people want, it is clear the Prime Minister has a mandate to pursue exit from the EU, but she has no mandate over what that exit looks like, or to rip Scotland from EU institutions against its will. Indeed, the only detailed mandate that has been delivered to the Tories regarding Brexit is on the matter of the single market. It is spelled out in their 2015 manifesto, which states: “We say: yes to the Single Market.” It could not have been clearer, yet now we see prevarication.

What is clear is that far from having a cunning plan, this Government do not even have a seating plan. Where do they sit on the single market, on the customs union, on social security rights for UK nationals living in Europe, on the right to take advantage of the Erasmus scheme, or on Euro? Finally—although this list is far from exhaustive—where do they sit on the rights of EU workers to remain here in the UK?

John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: I think you’ve had your say—[Interruption.] I think the right hon. Gentleman has had his say.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. That was a good correction just in time, but if I have to be strict with the Official Opposition Front Bench at this end of the Chamber, I have to be strict with the SNP Front Bench at that end as well.


Despite months of SNP campaigning for the security of EU workers based in the UK, they are still to be played as bargaining chips or negotiating pawns for at least another two years. We have no idea how EU workers in the UK will be treated after Brexit or what rights they will have. This is about not just morality and the fact that these workers and their families have chosen to live, work and contribute to the UK, but the economic value that they add. The Scottish Parliament’s Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee is currently taking evidence on the economic impact of exiting the European Union. A paper submitted by 4-consulting states that EU workers contribute £7.3 billion to the Scottish economy. That is why the SNP is so keen to see a different immigration system for Scotland, one that recognises not only the value of workers from other countries to our economy but how dependent many communities and sectors are on imported skilled labour. But this Government will not give Scotland those guarantees, and we have no guarantees about workers’ rights in general either. We are getting mixed messages from those on the Government Benches. We are being told by some that workers’ rights are a burden, with the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) wanting a sunset clause, and others saying that we should implement only the workers’ rights that are practical.

 Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 7 NOVEMBER 2016 Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1324
Michael Tomlinson: As ever, the hon. Gentleman is making his case eloquently. However, did he fail to listen to the speech made by the Secretary of State, who set out clearly that all these rights will be transferred?

Neil Gray: For how long? In addition, does the Secretary of State carry the confidence of his Back Benchers? We are still to find that out. As I have said, so many of his colleagues have given us mixed messages about the so-called “burden” of EU workers’ rights on this country.

A substantial component of UK employment law is grounded in EU law, and where it exists it provides a minimum standard below which domestic employment cannot fall. Although some protections already existed in domestic law before being enhanced at an EU level, in many cases new categories of employment rights have been transposed into domestic law to comply with emerging EU obligations. Subject to the provisions of the EU withdrawal arrangement or a subsequent trade agreement, withdrawal from the EU would mean that the UK employment rights currently guaranteed by EU law would no longer be so guaranteed, which leaves us reliant on a Conservative Government to step up for workers.

A post-Brexit Government could also seek to amend or remove protections enshrined in EU law for UK workers. The House of Commons Library paper makes it clear that EU-derived employment rights that feature in primary legislation would be relatively safe from the effects of leaving the EU, but would be “newly susceptible to the possibility of change.”

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): On 27 October, I received a reply to a question about what would be in the great repeal Bill. Part of the answer was that on exit day existing rights would be enshrined, but subsequently it would be open to the Government and this Parliament to change those rights.

Neil Gray: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and the point he raises will fill workers up and down this land with dread, because it will be this Conservative Government who are going to be responsible for the workers’ rights that we all enjoy. The Library paper identifies the greatest risk as the uncertainty surrounding the protections in secondary legislation, which is where much employment law is contained. That is where Unison and others also see the greatest risk, with the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield having been reported as seeking a five-year sunset clause to the great repeal Bill. That would mean that all protections currently the subject of EU regulation would automatically expire, wrecking intended and unintended damage to hard-fought workers’ rights and, in turn, to the economy.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that workers’ rights are most vulnerable in areas relating to agency workers and working time limits, particularly now that the Cabinet contains senior Members who have previously advocated a bonfire of the regulations on workers’ rights?

Neil Gray: Absolutely, and I will come on to those points later in my speech.

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 predates EU rules, but EU standards have led to the introduction of broad duties on employers to evaluate, avoid and reduce workplace risks. According to the TUC, the number of worker fatalities in the UK has declined significantly since EU directives were implemented. The Scottish National party continues to argue for better working conditions and fairer working environments. The protections for workers in insecure employment, including part-time workers, agency workers and those on fixed-term contracts, are enhanced by the EU.

Kevin Foster: The hon. Gentleman said that workers should be filled with dread, but should they not feel encouragement, as in so many areas this Parliament has legislated for standards that are higher than the EU minimum, not lower? There is no reason to believe that that will not continue, not least when people want to put election manifestos forward at election time.

Neil Gray: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the recently passed Trade Union Act 2016 and hope that he will consider his comments in those terms.

In these challenging times, we have seen moves to zero-hours contracts across many industries, and conditions where workers are vulnerable to exploitation and being trapped in a cycle of low pay. EU TUPE rights introduced important protections for workers affected by contracting out, company buy-outs and even the privatisation of public services. Without those rights, employees in permanent, secure jobs could be placed into more uncertain contracts or have their terms and conditions reduced.

The UK must continue to comply with EU employment law in full, including new rights adopted within the EU, meaning that future Governments cannot remove rights at work. UK workers should not be denied any of the rights enjoyed by working people across Europe. New rights are already under discussion within the EU, such as protections for posted workers, improved rights for working parents and the European pillar of social rights, so UK workers could be excluded from these protections post-Brexit. The TUC has said that “workers should benefit from the highest level of protection in the EU. It should not be possible for future governments to take the opportunity to compete with other countries on the basis of a race to the bottom on rights at work.”

It is female workers who stand to lose the most from Brexit. Alongside the European working time directive, we also now have protections over maternity leave and equal pay, and better protection from sexual harassment and from pregnancy or maternity discrimination. Women in the UK secured the right to equal pay for work of equal value thanks to the EU, and although there is still a long way to go to close the gender pay gap, the protections from the EU push the agenda forward, rather than backward. We have no idea of what is to come post-Brexit. Pregnant women and new mothers have been protected by day one rights and unfair dismissal rights, and by protection from discrimination. The right to paid time off to attend antenatal appointments is now secure for pregnant women, keeping them in work. The parental leave directive allows parents to take up to 18 weeks’ unpaid leave to care for a child and protects workers who need to deal with family or domestic emergencies. A staggering 8.3 million working parents qualify for these rights in the UK.

Perhaps one opportunity I can see from Brexit is to discuss where the powers and responsibilities currently held at EU level will reside when the UK leaves. Obviously, we would expect the areas of devolved responsibility,
such as agriculture and fisheries, to be automatically devolved, along with their substantial budgets, but I would like this to go further. Last year, during the Scotland Bill debates, we were told that we could not devolve employment law, but it makes perfect sense to do it post-Brexit. It is not just the rights currently enjoyed by workers that we can see being eroded; current and future events are likely to have a detrimental impact on working conditions and the quality of life of working families.

We have a perfect storm approaching for working families. We see the report from the Resolution Foundation today on the devastating impact of the benefit cap, but we also have cuts to universal credit work allowances coming down the line, a potentially devastating spike in inflation predicted to arrive next year, a massive drop in the pound and the potential threat to employment law post-Brexit. Employers and employees alike are demanding information, details and plans from this Government to provide security where there is currently significant insecurity and uncertainty.

This evening we are going to hear, as we have indeed already heard, Tory after Tory trump up—that pun was intended—that somehow they speak for workers in these isles and that somehow because it was Conservative Governments that brought in factories Acts in the 19th century, that absolves them of their most recent disastrous history. So let me remind the House that it was a Conservative Prime Minister who destroyed the lives and livelihoods of mineworkers with generations of unemployment; that it was a Conservative Chancellor who said at that Dispatch Box in 1991 that unemployment was a price “worth paying” for bringing down inflation; and it was those Government Members sitting opposite now who forced through the worst legislative attack on workers’ rights in living memory, in the form of the Trade Union Bill. So forgive me if my party and the people of Scotland do not trust any Tory government with workers’ rights.

7.39 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate although, in many ways, it has little value. On the basis of some of the speeches that we have heard from Opposition Members, it has added nothing to what should be a serious consideration of how we move forward as we give effect to the will of the people. The majority was slim—we must always remember that—but nevertheless we have to accept the verdict.

We are debating something that was never a strong point for the remain camp during the referendum debate. I had a very firm view on this, because we do pass laws in our Parliament and we do have a sovereign Parliament. I really do not want to rehearse all the arguments of the EU referendum debate, but when it comes to the issue of workers’ rights, I think that the argument advanced by some in the remain camp was weak, because this Parliament has extended workers’ rights. Doubtless other Conservative Members who contribute to the debate will remind us of our party’s fine tradition of extending workers’ rights. For example, in the previous Parliament, I was proud that we extended paternity rights in a way that the EU had not. I always thought that it was just a non-debate to say that, for those who wanted to remain, the heart of the matter was protecting workers’ rights.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady not appreciate that many of us had to argue that case because trade unions used EU law to get victories for their workers in court?

Anna Soubry: Yes, but the unions did not need to use EU law—that was the point. This country has rights through common law and in statute; it was just not a problem. I am somewhat concerned and slightly agitated about this matter. The very firm words from our excellent Secretary of State— I was delighted when he was appointed to his job—could not have been clearer. He said that all the rights that we have by virtue of our membership of the EU will be transferred into substantive British law. Which part of that do Opposition Members not understand? My right hon. Friend could not have been clearer. I absolutely do take his word, and indeed the Government’s word, on this. In many ways, this is a bit of an otiose debate—if I can put it in those terms—because I have no fear that any of the rights that have been accrued over decades by virtue of our membership of the EU will be diminished.

Neil Gray rose—

Anna Soubry: And now, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, because this is a debate.

Neil Gray: I ask the right hon. Lady to forgive me for not giving way during my concluding remarks; I thank her for giving way to me. Although she may take her Secretary of State at his word on this, can she not understand our worry that there are members of this Government who are quite clearly of a different view, and who made that very clear during the EU referendum campaign?

Anna Soubry: Heaven forbid that we should ever have different points of views within the Government. I will come on to the concerns that some rightly raise about the rhetoric of the leave campaign. I wanted to intervene on the hon. Gentleman because, as someone who had experienced the miners’ strike on an almost daily basis—I was a reporter working for Central Television in Nottingham—I wanted him to understand that what the Conservative Government rightly did was to protect the rights of coal miners in counties such as Nottinghamshire who had had a vote and had decided that they wanted to work. They faced, on an almost daily basis, a small army of pickets who came down and used the most atrocious tactics to try to prevent them from exercising their right to work.

Neil Gray rose—

Anna Soubry: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I am more than happy to have a debate with him about the rights and wrongs of the miners’ strike outside the Chamber, but I take grave exception to the rather large amounts of nonsense that he was spouting when he gave us his comments about Margaret Thatcher and the then Conservative Government. None of those pieces of legislation that were passed by the Thatcher Government—particularly when they were up against the tyranny of trade union leaders who frequently denied workers the right to have a say about how they worked—to restore workers’ rights and to do the right thing by working people were repealed in the 13 years that Labour were in
government. Why was that? It was because members of the Labour Government knew in their hearts that that legislation was what working people wanted. I say that as someone who is a proud trade unionist and who was a shop steward in my union.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. I am glad that we will be on the same side on this issue. Does she agree—I think she has alluded to this—that the Brexit debate has been characterised by a lot of misinformation and broken promises, hence the need to make sure that this matter stays on the agenda? Does she also agree that there is understandable concern and perhaps confusion about the Government’s commitment and their ability to bind any future Ministers and Governments, because some Conservative MPs have raised the issue of a sunset clause or a watering down of employment protections, and have promised to implement that wherever practical?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady will have an opportunity to make a speech later.

Anna Soubry: Given the hour, the fact that we are all on a one-line Whip and the fact that the House will rise tomorrow, I suspect that a lot of Members will want to make their speeches by way of a quick intervention. I forgive the hon. Lady for her intervention and hope she does make a speech.

If there are to be further debates, we should consider some of the matters raised by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), who seems to have vacated his place. He talked about the detail of how the transfers will take place. Will that happen in a general sense under the great repeal Bill, or will it be done in dribs and drabs by virtue of statutory instruments? The effect will be exactly the same, so I do not have any concern in that regard. His point about how the devolved Administrations will be affected is important.

The hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) should have raised such matters in his speech, but instead he used the debate as an excuse to launch off a series of slogans based on ideology that were, in many ways, deeply offensive. He then turned his speech, in a rather childlike way, into a tirade against Tories. His hugely unsubstantiated and sweeping statements did nothing to advance the argument for having a proper debate and restoring politics in this country to a much more civilised footing.

I do understand that Labour is in a huge dilemma. The reality is that seven out of 10 Labour MPs represent seats that not only voted remain, but, in most cases, overwhelmingly voted remain—[HON. MEMBERS: “Leave.”] Sorry, I meant to say leave. If only they had voted in the way I said, but sadly they did not. Would that not have been a sweet moment? Would it not have made the vote on article 50, it is inconceivable that Labour Members to a man and a woman will not vote to leave the EU, not least because many of them, like me, understand that we went to the nation saying clearly that if people voted leave, that was what they would get.

I will be quite honest: I have struggled with this ever since June. It has been my long-held belief that our country—our nation—is considerably better off as a member of the European Union. I have spoken about that at length. I am a firm remainder. If there was a scale from one to 100 showing how firm a remainder someone was, I would put my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) at 100 and myself at about 95. I have grappled with my own long-held views, which I hold passionately, and with the fact that when I stood up and addressed my constituents, wrote my email newsletter or went out into the streets of Broxtowe and beyond, I said, “If you vote leave, you will get leave.” One colleague—it might have been my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)—said that we in the remain camp were very clear about that.

Although I will find it extremely difficult, because it will be against everything I have ever believed in, I cannot see how I have any alternative but to be true to what I said I would do and true to my party’s manifesto—I never demurred from any of this at any time. Therefore, with huge regret, I would have to vote in favour of article 50 being triggered when the matter comes to this House. I am a firm remainder.

Geraint Davies: I am amazed that the right hon. Lady thinks that everybody who voted to leave was voting unconditionally to leave. Many of the voters in my
constituency believed what they were told: their jobs were secure, they would save money and all the rest of it. In fact, the deficit plan has been ripped up. In Swansea Bay, 25,000 jobs depend on EU exports, many of which will be at risk. If people wake up and find that they have lost their jobs, they will think, “This is not what we were promised,” and they will be very angry. It is ridiculous to give unconditional support, as if everything that was said was true and there will not be problems.

Anna Soubry: I am sort of grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I have never given up on anything, but I have to understand, as he must, that we were very clear. We said to people that the referendum was their decision and that if they voted leave, they would get leave. However, that does not mean that I would not fight tooth and nail to make sure that the Government go into the negotiations seeking to make sure that we stay a member of the single market, for example.

The hon. Gentleman knows my views on the free movement of labour and people. Along with the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), I am the most liberally minded—with a small l—Member of this House on immigration. Labour Members have the huge problem that they find themselves looking over their shoulders at the vote in their own constituency knowing, as I hope they do, why their constituents voted as they did. In many constituencies, people voted to leave because they wanted to reduce the number of people coming into our country. We should be clear about that. Labour Members have far more of a dilemma than I have as we leave the EU and try to work out the best deal for our country. I have no difficulty in making the case for us to stay in the single market, and I certainly have no difficulty in making the case for the free movement of people.

Kevin Foster: My right hon. Friend may take some solace from knowing that I am in a similar position, having voted in remain in the referendum, while the majority in my constituency voted leave. Does she agree that all the way through the campaign it was clear that people employed people and protect their rights. For what it is worth, I agree that we should have workers on the boards of businesses.

There is far more that can be done to protect the rights of workers. I completely agree that conditions in places such as Sports Direct are totally unacceptable. I wish the local Member of Parliament had raised the matter in this place considerably sooner. I am delighted that our Prime Minister has made it clear that she takes the firm view that among her priorities are workers’ rights, and responsibility among businesses for how they employ people and protect their rights. For what it is worth, I agree that we should have workers on the boards of businesses.

It is important to talk about British people’s rights to free movement and travel so that they may go to other countries in the EU and work. Immigration—migration of labour—is a two-way process. Undoubtedly, our economy benefits greatly from the fact that people come here, whether they are low-skilled, no-skilled, middling skilled or high-skilled. We benefit from them coming to our country and working in our businesses and industry. We would be lost without them. When constituents of mine say, “We want less immigration. We want to send these people home”—that is the tone of the debate that is breaking out in our country—I say to them in quite robust tones, as the House may imagine, “Who is going to do the jobs? Who is going to do the work?” If we look at those areas with the highest rates of employment, that is where there are more migrant workers, because they do the jobs that need to be done. This is a two-way process.

I hope that the Government will think carefully before they rush down a route that leads to over-reducing and over-curtilating the number of migrants coming into our country, for all the reasons that are not the subject of this debate. Many hundreds of thousands of British people have the right to go and work freely in the EU. I think that that right is worthy of being protected.

This debate is not the most important of all those that we shall have when we consider and, more importantly, decide how we leave the European Union. I do not know who chooses the topics—[Interruption.] It is the Government. May I gently suggest to the Government that we should have real debates about the real difficulties, the real dilemmas and the need to make sure that we get the right guiding principles as we leave the European Union?

There is one last thing, which is very important. We talk about the 17 million people who voted leave, but we are in real danger in our country if we forget the more than 16 million people who did not vote to leave. At the moment, they feel forgotten and marginalised. Some of them feel bullied, threatened and intimidated on Twitter and other social media, and that is not acceptable. The job of all of us now is to bring people together and to move forward, not to reheat and rehash all the arguments we have had. We must come together, respect all points of view and move forward as we leave the EU.

8 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and I begin by echoing the last point she made: we are a divided nation, and what this referendum has shown is that we are divided, almost entirely down the middle. We in this House have a responsibility to seek to heal the wounds and to reduce the division that has been created by this big
choice—like the right hon. Lady, I accept the result, even though I campaigned passionately for remain, although I am not going to say where I would rate on her scale. However, we have to uphold and respect the decision of the British people, and it is very important that we are clear about that. Secondly, I very much support what she said about this being, I hope, the first of many debates in which the House has an opportunity properly to scrutinise the enormous task we have as a country in negotiating our withdrawal from the European Union and in establishing a new relationship with the 27 member states—although we are leaving the institutions, we are not leaving Europe. Therefore, I welcome the fact that we are having this debate.

We have heard already that membership of the European Union has made a significant contribution to the development of rights and protections for workers in the UK. I am bound to reflect on the fact that that played an important part in changing the attitude of the party of which I am proud to be a member, and of the trade union movement, towards Europe. One could trace that back to a particular moment: the speech Jacques Delors, the President of the European Commission, gave to the Trades Union Congress in 1988, when he laid out before delegates the vision of a social Europe—I think he was named Frère Jacques because of that speech. The Labour party and the labour movement, which had been Euro sceptic, began moving towards a strongly pro-European position, as the Conservative party, which had been pro-European, passed us in the other direction, heading towards being a predominantly Eurosceptic party.

The Government have given a commitment to maintain employment rights and workers’ rights, and I am absolutely sure that the House will hold Ministers to that commitment. I want briefly to raise four issues in relation to that. The first is the relationship between the great repeal Bill and those rights. As all Members of the House know, those rights are already enshrined in our law, but some are to be found in primary legislation—for example, the equality rights in the Equality Act 2010—so they can be amended only by primary legislation. Others—for example, working time rights and the protection of agency workers—were implemented by means of secondary legislation, and can therefore be more easily changed and repealed. There are also some EU rights that have direct effect because they are derived from the treaty.

Therefore, there is a serious question to the Government, which I hope the Minister will address in responding to the debate. Given the different basis of these rights—my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) made this point forcefully in his opening contribution—how exactly will they be given equal status and equal protection in the great repeal Bill? In particular, what will be the mechanism for making any changes to the different types of legislation? Could that be done by amending statutory instruments in the case of those rights that have been put in place by that means, or would primary legislation be required to entrench them and therefore give greater reassurance?

Obviously, it remains to be seen what is in the great repeal Bill, which is actually the great retrenchment Bill, because the only repeal bit will be the very last stage of the process, which is repealing the European Communities Act 1972 to take us out, but the rest of it will entrench in legislation these rights and many others, as well as environmental protections and so on. However, I just say to Ministers that the House will need to be reassured that there will be full and proper parliamentary scrutiny of any proposal to undo or change legislation.

Given the nature of the reassurance that Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have given, there is also the related question of what will happen to the body of European Court of Justice judgments that have interpreted the way in which legislation has been applied, and of whether anyone, once we have left the European Union, will seek to re-litigate some of the judgments that the Court has made, which some people in this country have taken exception to—wrongly, in my view.

The second issue I want to raise is the relationship between our potential future access to the single market and the further development of workers’ rights in the European Union pending our departure from it and after we have left. As we know, the Government have yet to make a decision about the nature of our continuing access to that market, but there is a question as to what would happen if and when the 27 member states, after we have left, decide to change or improve workers’ rights inside that market, and the UK, for the sake of argument, has access to it, but is not a full member of it. Understandably, in those circumstances, other member states might be worried that the UK, by not applying those rights if we do not follow suit, is in some way undercutting those other member states or engaging in a race to the bottom. Therefore, in terms of arguing for the fullest possible access to the single market, which I presume is what Ministers will eventually conclude is the right thing to do, not least because of the assurances they have given to Nissan to secure future investment, it would be helpful to hear from the Minister what approach Ministers would intend to take in the eventuality I have described.

The third issue is the Government’s negotiating objectives, which we dwelt on to a great degree in the Secretary of State’s statement earlier today. The truth is that we now know what the Government’s negotiating objectives are in relation to workers’ rights and employment protection, because those have been set out in the debate so far: we are going to move them into domestic legislation. We therefore now know what the Government want to do on that. We also now know what their negotiating approach is to the motor manufacturing industry, because of the commitments set out clearly to Nissan. In particular, we know that their negotiating objectives for the industry are not to have tariffs, but also to ensure that there are no bureaucratic impediments—those were the words of the Secretary of State—that make it more difficult for trade to be undertaken, whether that is rules of origin, or greater certification or product standards. Therefore, it is perfectly legitimate for the rest of industry and our service sector—80% of our economy is services, and we have 1 million jobs at least in financial services—to ask, as I suspect they will, “So what are the Government’s objectives for our industry, our sector, our future, our concerns and the reassurance we are looking for?” I gently say to Ministers that I really do not think they are going to be able to sustain the position they are currently taking, which is to resist such requests in the face of what will be a growing queue of people who will be looking for facts, reassurance and a plan.
That brings me to my final point, which is about transitional arrangements. Given that the Government have not ruled out transitional arrangements—if we believe today’s report in The Times, those are under active consideration—what approach will they take to such arrangements, including in so far as they affect employment rights, pending the negotiation of a new trade and market access deal? It may be that the Government will be able to pull off the divorce negotiations, which is what article 50 is really all about—the parallel would be dividing up the CD collection and deciding who is going to pay the outstanding gas and electricity bill—in under two years. The Prime Minister has said that she wishes to trigger article 50 by the end of March. However, there are elections in France and in Germany, and in all probability we will not know the nature of the new Governments—certainly in the case of Germany—until the autumn, and it may well be hard to start substantive negotiations until such time as there is clarity about the position of the German Government. If article 50 is triggered at the end of March, we could therefore have just over a year and a half to complete all of this. If it is not going to be possible to do it all—the divorce settlement and negotiating a new trade and market access agreement—then it would be very wise for the Government to look to negotiate a transitional arrangement, and even more wise for them to say now that that is what they intend to do.

Anna Soubry: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Should we trigger article 50, very simply through a very simple piece of legislation, as soon as possible, and then look at the other arrangements that he is talking about, or does he fear, as I do, that we will have no option as soon as this place has triggered article 50—if it does so—or the Government do so in March, since the clock will start ticking as soon as that happens?

Hilary Benn: I have consistently made clear my personal view—the Select Committee has not yet considered this—that it is wise to keep the issue of triggering article 50 and the Government publishing their negotiating objectives, for the reason the right hon. Lady gave in her speech. Those of us who campaigned for remain lost the referendum, and we have to uphold the result. I fear that bringing the two things together—conflicting them—would inevitably turn any vote on the triggering of article 50, if it is allied with conditions, requirements or whatever, into what the public would see as a vote about whether we are going to uphold the outcome of the referendum. We should deal with the two things separately.

When the time comes, I shall, as I have already said, vote in favour of triggering article 50. The referendum decision having been made, the only way in which we can honour that—the only way for us to leave—is for the article 50 button to be pressed; there is no other mechanism. We are therefore bound to vote in that way. I know that not all Members will share that view, but I believe that the vast majority will accept the logic of the argument. We should keep separate our request to the Government, which we will hear increasingly in all parts of the House, to tell us what the plan is. That is a very strong argument for this.

It is not seeking to undermine the referendum result; it is not unpatriotic, it is not demanding a running commentary, it is not trying to tie the Government’s hands, and it is not trying to box in the Prime Minister and the Ministers who are going to negotiate this to say to the Government, “Please share your plan with this House.” Parliament would like to be a participant in this process, which is the most important task that we have faced as a nation for decades. I sincerely hope that it will not be too long before we get a chance to see that plan.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful and important point. The question in these negotiations will be the extent to which the 27 are willing to talk informally about tying up these arrangements. If the argument in Europe is, “We should leave that until later”, the need for transitional arrangements becomes even more urgent because otherwise we are left with a cliff edge, as many people have described it. If one is going to fall off the edge of a cliff, which is not something I have ever done, it is probably wise to plan where it is one is eventually hoping to land. That is a very strong argument for this.

It is not seeking to undermine the referendum result, it is not unpatriotic, it is not demanding a running commentary, it is not trying to tie the Government’s hands, and it is not trying to box in the Prime Minister and the Ministers who are going to negotiate this to say to the Government, “Please share your plan with this House.” Parliament would like to be a participant in this process, which is the most important task that we have faced as a nation for decades. I sincerely hope that it will not be too long before we get a chance to see that plan.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. This has been a very good and lively debate, and I do not want to put on a formal time limit because that curtails the quality of the debate, but if, from now on, Back Benchers would take approximately nine minutes each, then everyone who wishes to speak will have a chance to do so.

8.16 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is a great pleasure, Madam Deputy Speaker, to catch your eye in this important debate. It is also a great
pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chairman of the new and important Brexit Committee. I hear what he says, but I am concerned about revealing too much of the negotiating position. I enjoyed what he said about the ECJ and the body of case law. He is right that there is an important amount of work to be done in that regard. It is also a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). We approach this from different sides having fought on different sides of the argument in the run-up to the EU referendum and, I suspect, on some of the detail thereafter. I applaud the tone and maturity of her speech. I also applaud what she said about triggering article 50, and entirely and wholeheartedly agree.

Employment and workers’ rights is a very important subject. I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on youth employment. Very sensibly, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith), changed the name of the group from “youth unemployment” to “youth employment”—an altogether more positive outlook—and I have continued that tradition. Each month, we look at the latest figures and statistics on unemployment and the labour market. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe is entirely right in her analysis of those figures. I am afraid that the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) is wrong in much of his analysis. I need only mention one or two points to show that that is correct. Employment is at a record level of 31.8 million—up by over 500,000 this year, and up by over 2.8 million since 2010. The hon. Gentleman said that wages are decreasing, but he is wrong. Pay, including bonuses, rose by 2.3% over the past year. There are now over 740,000 job vacancies, despite the fact that we are at record levels of employment and of people claiming jobseeker’s allowance. Just touching on those figures makes it abundantly clear that when the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Prime Minister say that the Conservative party is the workers’ party, it is said with a very straight face, utterly seriously and sincerely.

In the nine minutes or so that you have allowed me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to discuss two points. First, there are the accusations made by Opposition Members that the Conservative party cannot be trusted with workers’ rights. Secondly, it has been said, wrongly, that we rely on and need the European Union in order to protect workers’ rights. Those accusations are wrong on all fronts.

It is successive Conservative Governments who have strengthened workers’ rights. My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe, who made many good points, mentioned two issues: the living wage and lifting those on low pay out of taxation. I will add a third, namely the coalition Government’s measures on family rights, including maternity and paternity rights, which the Secretary of State himself mentioned. Those rights are not reliant on the EU; they go further than the EU. The EU’s minimum requirement of 14 weeks is far outstripped and exceeded by the 52 weeks introduced by this Government.

I will come back to the EU, because for now I am going to concentrate on the successes and track record of successive Conservative Governments. I mentioned in an earlier intervention the wonderfully titled Health and Morals of Apprentices Act 1802, which was introduced by Robert Peel, the father of the Robert Peel with whom we are more familiar. He was first baronet and Member of Parliament for Tamworth, and the Act was the very first document on the statute book to formally protect workers’ rights. For the very first time, working hours and conditions of labour were regulated, not by a Labour Government—the party did not yet exist—or a Liberal Government, who were very illiberal at times, but by a Conservative. His son, as Prime Minister in 1844, continued that tradition and further strengthened workers’ rights.

In 1878, Disraeli consolidated the Factory Acts. In 1901, Lord Salisbury further consolidated and enhanced workers’ rights. Neville Chamberlain is remembered for many things, but rarely for his excellent work further consolidating and strengthening workers’ rights in his Factories Act 1937. I could go on, but I will mention just one more example, because I am mindful of your time restriction, Madam Deputy Speaker. In 1961, another Conservative Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, introduced another consolidating Act and workers’ rights were strengthened.

People could say, “1802, 1878, 1901 and 1961 are ancient history. What relevance do they have?” They are relevant not only because it was Conservative Prime Ministers who strengthened the rights of workers, but because it happened before we were in the EU. Far from requiring the EU, we were leading the way and doing so at every turn.

I turn to the false argument that we need the European Union in order to have strong workers’ rights. That is wrong. In fact, the United Kingdom has been ahead of the game for a long time in terms of workers’ rights, particularly health and safety, which is very important. I will digress momentarily, because the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 was enacted by a Labour Government. We should not forget, however, the important work of Willie Whitelaw, who unfortunately was booted out of power before he had a chance to enact that legislation as the Secretary of State for Employment. He stood at the Dispatch Box in January 1974, before the general election, attempting to legislate on the subject.

I will stick with the theme of health and safety at work. The United Kingdom has consistently had one of the lowest rates of fatal injury across the EU. According to a 2016 paper that refers back to 2013, the rate was 0.51 per 100,000 employees. Of course, any figure relating to fatalities is too high, but it is worth noting that that figure is among the lowest in the EU—it is second only to Malta—in terms of health and safety records. I will mention just one other statistic that is worth taking into account: only 1.4% of United Kingdom workers reported an injury occurring at work that resulted in sick leave, compared with 1.8% in Spain and 3.1% in France. Again, the figure is too high, but it is among the lowest and it demonstrates a high level of commitment in this country to the health and safety of workers. We are consistently ahead of the European Union and have been for a long time.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) mentioned—I have no doubt that he is still discussing it now—the European Court of Justice, but he was wrong to pray in aid the ECJ as some sort of helper for workers’ rights. The truth is quite the opposite. Let me
give just one example. In 2007, the ECJ determined whether this country was in breach of article 361 of the 1989 European directive on health and safety at work. Thankfully, the Court eventually determined that this country was not in breach of it: it took it only 33 years to determine that this country had, in 1974, secured the very workers’ rights that the proponents of the EU who opposed us had said that we had not enacted. It is a shame that it took 33 years for the ECJ to accept that the 1989 directive had already been secured by this country. Those rights that the EU said that we should protect had already been protected in 1974. We do not need the European Union in order to protect workers’ rights. This country has long been ahead of the game.

Melanie Onn: In the spirit of this and the immediately preceding Government’s championing of workers’ rights, does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that a rule that stood for more than 150 years, namely that a worker injured as a result of a breach of health and safety legislation could bring a civil claim for damages, was simply swept aside in 2013, meaning that only criminal sanctions are applicable, thereby reducing the rights of working people?

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention, because that was the very point that the ECJ looked at in 2007. It determined that a criminal sanction was a more than sufficient and adequate remedy and protection for workers. It determined that this country was ahead of the game back in 1974, albeit as a result of an Act introduced by a Labour Government. The Prime Minister is right to say that we should leave the jurisdiction of the ECJ. We do not need its help in order to be ahead of the game when it comes to workers’ rights.

Does that mean that all is perfect? No, of course it does not—there is always room for improvement—but neither does it mean that the accusations levelled at us from the Opposition Benches are right. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have confirmed that EU law will still apply and that existing workers’ rights are guaranteed.

I can see your thumbs drilling a way, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have exceeded my nine minutes by a minute, but I have had an intervention. I will end by saying that the Secretary of State is absolutely right to call us the workers’ party. We should not rely on the EU or the Labour party to protect workers’ rights, because they will not do so. Workers’ rights did not start with the EU, nor will they end when we leave. We can be confident that, under this Prime Minister, workers’ rights will be protected.

8.28 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I welcome the thrust of what the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has said today, and I welcome the assurances given by the Prime Minister in her conference speech. I am genuinely inclined to believe that this is what the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union honestly think will happen, given what the latter argued in an article on the ConservativeHome website after the referendum but before he got his current job:

*The great British industrial working classes voted overwhelmingly for Brexit. I am not at all attracted by the idea of rewarding them by cutting their rights. This is in any event unnecessary*. However, my concern is that the Government’s proposals so far simply do not measure up to their rhetoric. At the risk of echoing the salient words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), despite what the Secretary of State has said today about the great repeal Bill we have not been offered any more explanation about it and the Secretary of State has stopped short of offering a commitment to primary legislation to protect workers’ rights. That gives me continuing cause for concern. The great repeal Bill will not protect all existing workers’ rights. It will leave them in a much more vulnerable position.

According to the House of Commons Library, the Government’s great repeal Bill is likely to seek to secure in its existing form all legislation passed under the European Communities Act 1972. That includes equal rights for part-time and agency workers, the working time directive and the TUPE regulations. Those who were in the Chamber for the launch of my Workers’ Rights (Maintenance of EU Standards) Bill will remember that I am no fan of those regulations. However, maintaining workers’ rights laws in secondary legislation while removing the minimum floor that the European Union provides will put those laws in a weaker position after we leave the European Union. This is not about saying that we must remain in the European Union. This is not, as has been suggested repeatedly, about frustrating the process of leaving the European Union. This is about ensuring that the future for working people in this country is not left hanging in the balance.

In theory, the proposals that have been laid out would allow any future Government to repeal or reduce existing employment protections without holding a debate or even a vote in Parliament. Realistically, I do not think that any Government—not even this Government—would simply repeal wholesale parental leave or any of the other fundamental rights that we have derived from the EU. I am, however, concerned about a chipping away at workers’ rights after we have left the EU, in the name of efficiency, cutting red tape, easing the burdens on business and streamlining regulation. I know that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has ruled that out, but his word only goes so far—much to his annoyance, I am sure. The fact is that the other two thirds of the team responsible for leaving the EU disagree with him.

In 2014, the Foreign Secretary said:

“The weight of employment regulation is now back-breaking”.

He said it was “very disappointing” that the previous Prime Minister, the former right hon. Member for Witney, took employment rights off the table during his renegotiation. The International Trade Secretary—the man who will be negotiating our trade deals post-Brexit—thinks that it is too difficult to fire staff in this country. He has said:

“It is intellectually unsustainable to believe that workplace rights should remain untouchable”.

When the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) mentioned health and safety legislation, my immediate thought was to consider this country’s excellent record in health and safety legislation. How has that been ensured? It has been by having health and safety representatives in workplaces, as agreed under collective bargaining rules with trade unions. Despite that, the Conservative Government have introduced
legislation to try to decrease the opportunity for people to have paid time off to carry out those essential roles in the workplace.

When several members of the Cabinet, including the Prime Minister herself, have gone on record with statements similar to those that I have quoted, there is more than legitimate cause for concern about the future of workers’ rights. The Government could protect those rights by putting such laws into the strongest form of legislation. Any future Government that wished to reduce, alter or improve employment protections would have to hold debates and votes in both Houses of Parliament, under the full scrutiny of the parliamentary process, and they would have to make their argument in public.

Beyond allowing workers’ fundamental rights to be weakened, as I have already mentioned, the Government’s great repeal Bill—or the great entrenchment Bill—will also in effect cut a huge number of smaller employment protections. The Transport Secretary, when he was sent out on the Sunday morning of the Conservative party conference to explain the great repeal Bill, said that “the Act gets rid of the supremacy of EU law. Decisions made by the European Court of Justice over the United Kingdom cease to apply.”

In practice, that means the ruling giving care workers the right to full pay for sleep-in shifts would cease to apply, as would the ruling saying that holiday pay must take account of overtime and commission payments, the provision for uncapped compensation for discrimination, the ruling that travel time is working time and the ruling protecting parents who care for their disabled child from discrimination at work. All those rulings would no longer apply.

There is a clear contradiction. If the Government’s great repeal Bill means that ECJ rulings will immediately cease to apply and it does nothing to protect people in such cases, a huge number of workers’ rights will be lost the day we leave the European Union. How does that square with the guarantees the Secretary of State gave the House earlier and with what the Prime Minister promised in September? The Government must address this point as soon as possible. My proposed Bill, which is currently going through this place, does exactly what I have argued for—protecting all existing workers’ rights in the strongest form of UK legislation. If the Government are serious about this issue, as they have said they are, I hope they will support my Bill when it returns to the House on Second Reading.

Finally, I want to address the suggestion made by the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) in The Times two weeks ago, and reiterate that it would not be a sensible way to move forward. This was mentioned earlier in the debate, but there is no harm in repetition. He suggested that a sunset clause should be attached to the Government’s great repeal Bill to impose a limit of five years on every law passed under the European Communities Act. Parliament would then have to agree to each law it wanted to retain, and any that were not secured in time would fall at the deadline. However, this House would spend five years on nothing other than passing laws that already apply in this country. I cannot speak for the people of Welwyn Hatfield, but I know my constituents sent me here to win them more jobs, bring them higher wages, and to argue for better schools and hospitals, not simply to be content with the world as it is. The idea that we should allow him and his colleagues the opportunity to ransom working people’s rights, which trade unions fought for decades to win, is as laughable as it is dangerous. I hope the Minister will assure the House that the Government will whip their Members to vote against this ridiculous proposal as and when it reaches the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have about an hour left and eight Members wish to speak: they can do the arithmetic for themselves. I thank the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) for keeping to the informal limit, but I think it should now be nearer to eight minutes.

8.37 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), a Unison colleague.

I have to say from listening to some of the Government Members that the debate so far has been a bizarre, surreal and Orwellian experience—or should I say a Dickensian experience, given that reference has been made to the Conservative party’s glory days in 1802? Let us remind ourselves that Ebenezer Scrooge was a boy and children were sent up chimneys in 1802, the Conservative party’s glory days. As for the Conservatives being the workers’ party, I can only assume that Comical Ali is working in Conservative central office.

On the real issue about workers’ rights, I disagree with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), because I do not think we emphasised workers’ rights enough during the EU referendum. I say that because of the legal advice issued by Michael Ford QC to the TUC, which states that employment rights in the UK are guaranteed by EU law. These rights include: protection against discrimination;... protections of workers on transfers of undertakings and in insolvency; health and safety;... rights to collective information and consultations on transfers and redundancies; working time rights; protection against discrimination of fixed-term...workers”—

I have had to use that very key EU law as a trade union representative before I came to this place—and, indeed, “data protection rights.”

Workers’ rights need to be protected if the UK—or even part of the UK—leaves the European Union. As others have said, those of us on the Opposition Benches have every reason to fear for workers’ rights if the Government are freed from the constraints of the EU. Our real fear is that there would be a war on workers’ rights from this Government. As others have noted, the Secretary of State for International Development said in a speech to that advocate of workers’ rights, the Institute of Directors: “If we could just halve the burdens of the EU social and employment legislation we could deliver a £4.3 billion boost to our economy and 60,000 new jobs.”

I do not accept that economic illiteracy. It is a bit like the claim that the national minimum wage would cost £1 billion a year, when in actual fact it did the opposite. Who argued that position? It was the so-called workers’ party, the Conservatives. Viewed from working people’s end of the telescope, those so-called burdens are protections that we should be very keen on.
Which rights coming from the EU must be protected? The first is surely the EU equal treatment directive, which underpins equal pay legislation and has secured equal and improved pay for millions of women across the public services. Improvements do not rely only on directives; common law decisions of the domestic courts rely heavily on EU law. That has had the positive effect of women not needing to find a male comparator where they have suffered pregnancy discrimination.

The part-time workers directive has resulted in thousands of part-time workers gaining access to public sector pensions when previously they had been prevented from joining a pension scheme. The agency workers directive has resulted in UK agency workers gaining access to pay and leave improvements, and in many agency workers gaining permanent employment.

The much maligned working time directive has resulted in increases in holiday pay so that it includes regular allowances and so that pay is not reduced during holiday periods. It has allowed care workers on sleepover shifts in care homes to have their working time recognised when they are woken in the middle of the night to help the elderly. It has ensured safe shift patterns, reducing accidents and critical incidents, and pro rata annual leave for zero-hours contract workers for the hours that they have worked. The EU collective redundancy regulations have kept thousands of workers in work, rather than on the dole, by ensuring meaningful alternative redeployment or retraining are considered first before a final decision on employment is made.

Those are not burdens but real protections and have provided fair rights at work. Those workers' rights must be protected. If the UK, in whole or in part, leaves the EU, we must ensure that those protections stay, and are not protected. If the UK, in whole or in part, leaves the EU, provided fair rights at work. Those workers' rights must be on employment is made.

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Those are not burdens but real protections and have provided fair rights at work. Those workers' rights must be protected. If the UK, in whole or in part, leaves the EU, we must ensure that those protections stay, and are not under attack from the zealots and fanatics who believe nothing good has ever come from the European Union.

8.43 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who mentioned many of the benefits that workers get. The European Court of Justice guarantees those rights in work. The simple fact is that once we leave the EU, those rights will no longer be guaranteed. It is all very well having undertakings from Government Front Benchers that they will be there for the next few years; subsequent Parliaments may choose to repeal laws and get rid of those rights. If we stayed in the EU, they would not have that power.

It is also the case that if we leave the EU, as it looks like we will, we will face considerable tariffs and business costs. Businesses such as Nissan have already negotiated sweetheart deals, money under the table and that sort of thing; others will do the same, to have a level playing field. People suggest that there will not be tariffs, but only Germany and Holland have a net trade surplus with us. Other countries are likely to vote for some level of protectionism, if only to stop others leaving the EU.

Businesses will try to recover those costs and the Government will respond by reducing environmental standards, health standards and rights at work. The Government have already been taken to court by ClientEarth because 40,000 people are dying of diesel pollution. Why did the Government not act automatically?

Of course, once we are out of the EU there will be no mandatory enforceability under EU standards. The case will be similar for people at work.

The Prime Minister has a vision of free trade for all. The International Trade Secretary has simply signed off the comprehensive economic and trade agreement—the Canadian trade deal—without reference to Parliament. The agreement enables companies to take democracies to court in arbitration courts without due process. They can sue Governments for passing laws that increase costs and reduce profits. We know the risks, and the assurances we have heard today cannot be trusted for the future.

My view, which I know not many people share, is that we should delay triggering article 50, because as soon as we trigger it, we have no negotiating power and have handed back our membership. The 27 other states will decide the deal we get and tell us what it is, and we can like it or lump it. Up to that point, we have negotiating power, but only if the EU assumes that we will map out a settlement that we can put to the people in a vote on the exit package.

I appreciate that there is not much appetite in the House for that, but I contend that the people of Britain who voted for Brexit did so on the basis of market access and lower costs—£350 million a week for the NHS. We know from the Chancellor that he will rip up his deficit reduction plans and borrow billions more. Obviously, there will be less money because there will be less inward investment, and therefore fewer jobs. They also voted on migration, but we have yet to see what will transpire. The simple point is that if people vote in principle for a product or action, they should have the right to vote again on whether their reasonable expectations have been fulfilled. In my view, they simply will not be fulfilled. In essence, people were mis-selling to the British public, and we will end up with a situation in which we all will be the poorer.

A lot has been said about the punishment from the majority of the British people if we have a quiet reconsideration of the situation and the exit deal, but I contend that the silent majority is already no longer in favour of leaving. That is clearly borne out when we look at the polls. Obviously, if 16 to 18-year-olds or ex-patriates had also been included, we would not have voted to leave. People are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with what is happening in the economy, whether it is because of the £14 for a visa to go to Europe, because of the £14 for a visa to go to Europe, because of the £14 for a visa to go to Europe, or because of the 30-year low in sterling and increasing inflation.

I do not believe that the advisory vote gives the Government a blank cheque to jump over the edge at all costs. We should certainly be free to debate and discuss these things without the intimidating tactics of people such as Nigel Farage, who said that we will see “political anger the likes of which none of us have ever witnessed in our lifetimes”, that there will be disturbances on the streets, and that he will summon up 100,000 people to march on the Supreme Court in order to put mob rule ahead of the rule of law and of parliamentary democracy. He seems to be the new, emerging Oswald Mosley.

It is frightening that the Government, in making the poor poorer by punishing them for the bankers’ errors, and in turning round and saying, “You can blame foreigners,”
have helped to whip up a frenzy in the Brexit debate. The reality is that people from Europe who are working in Britain on average contribute 5% more in taxes than they consume in public services. I fear the direction of travel politically in this country. It is extremely divisive. As I have said, people are conjuring up hate and violence. Assuming that this goes through without people having the opportunity to have a final look at what they have voted for before jumping, they will be dissatisfied with what they get. Those who have most hope have most to lose.

The Labour party passed a conference motion saying that many people had, for various reasons, voted to leave and that the final settlement should be agreed to if it is considered acceptable. If it is not, we should have another look at it through a vote in Parliament, a general election or a second referendum. I appreciate that view is not held wholeheartedly by my Labour colleagues.

I will conclude now, Mr Speaker, to give other Members time to speak. My fear is that people have voted in good faith for a stronger economy, lower migration and lower costs, but will not get that. If the package that is ultimately negotiated does not achieve that, they should have the right to reject it.

8.50 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Every single MP I have spoken to since the referendum respects the result, but there is considerable disquiet about the Prime Minister’s hard Brexit rhetoric. She seems intent on severing not only all political ties but economic ones as well. Such a reckless Brexit would be disastrous for the economy, with a negative impact on the financial wellbeing of those we have been elected to serve.

Following the referendum, there is a clear ideological divide in this House between those who favour a hard Brexit and those who prefer a soft Brexit. I do not find the sort of rhetoric we heard following the High Court judgment—that we who prefer a soft Brexit are backsliders—particularly helpful. Since the High Court’s decision, the UK Government have been briefing heavily that if the House of Commons tries in any way to undermine the chosen path of the UK Government, they will hold a snap election. A general election could be triggered by a simple majority of MPs if the Government decide to bring forward a no confidence motion in themselves. As parliamentarians, our foremost duty is to look after the interests of our constituents. It is clear that, following the referendum, a softer Brexit is the best outcome we can hope for. A hard Brexit, whereby the UK leaves both the single market and the customs union, would be fraught with economic danger, even if the UK Government were miraculously able to negotiate a comprehensive new bilateral trade deal before the completion of exit procedures.

In the event of the UK Government cynically engineering a vote of no confidence in themselves, under the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, an election will be held unless an alternative Government with the confidence of the House of Commons can be formed within 14 days. The Prime Minister could risk being challenged by an alliance of MPs from all political parties who oppose her hard Brexit trajectory. At such a pivotal moment in the UK’s constitutional history, pragmatic MPs should come together, rise above party politics and negotiate a soft Brexit for the UK.

The UK Government find themselves in this position because there was no plan for Brexit if the leave side won the referendum. By contrast, during the Scottish independence referendum, the Scottish Government published a 300-page White Paper on what independence meant. The UK Government effectively have a blank canvas, which is why we find ourselves having such debates and trying to work out the Government’s intentions on vital issues such as workers’ rights.

Following the result, the absence of a clear plan has meant that irresponsible politicians have been interpreting the result to fit their own ideological priorities. There is now apparently a mandate to leave the single market, despite the clear pledge in the Tory general election manifesto to protect our membership, to introduce draconian immigration targets, and to force companies to produce official lists of foreign employees. There is no mandate, however, to destroy the economy, which would cost jobs and affect people’s financial wellbeing. The overriding priority for all decisions should be to choose the Brexit option that minimises that impact.

Wales is, alas, more exposed because it has an exporting economy. Wales turns out a £5 billion annual surplus. Some 200,000 jobs in Wales are sustained by membership of the single market. Our great trading success is driven by our relationship with the European Union, not least the 53 deals we have with countries across the world as a result of the customs union. In answer to my parliamentary question, the UK Government disclosed that 15% of UK exports are dependent on those 53 international trade deals. The key question, therefore, is this: how long will it take to renegotiate all those international trade deals if we choose a path outside the customs union?

A trade deal with the EU might not even solve the wider issues around trade barriers, as they often just focus just on tariffs. Tariffs are, of course, a concern, but a blinkered focus on these obvious obstacles to trade detracts from the greater impediment of non-tariff barriers. On average, non-tariff barriers are over six times more costly than tariffs in the EU, and there is only one way to ensure that these non-tariff barriers are kept to a minimum—full single market membership.

Very simply, the terms of debate around Brexit are being driven by what is most important—economic concerns or concerns over immigration—and it appears that public opinion is already shifting. A poll earlier this month said that the economy was far more important than controls on immigration as people began to focus on the impact of Brexit on their jobs and wages. Perhaps the big driver has been the fall in the pound. I am someone who is normally seduced by arguments around devaluation, but the 20% fall that we have seen has been driven not by deliberate central bank policy, but by currency markets that are now betting heavily against sterling, affecting future confidence in the economy of the UK. That means that the sterling zone is now up there with the Nigerian naira, the Azerbaijani manat and the Malawian kwacha as one of the worst-performing currencies in the world. The impact of devaluation on people’s lives is, of course, that disposable income gets compressed as prices for food and fuel increase.
We should also be concerned about the extra costs that the UK Government will face if they want to borrow. We urgently need direct capital investment in infrastructure to drive economic growth, but the cost of putting that in place will be far dearer because of the fall in the pound. That is not to mention the £66 billion deduction in revenues that has been leaked by the Treasury. As the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) mentioned earlier, supply-side reforms in the economy could endanger workers’ privileges, protections and rights. The end result of these reduced revenues will be to smash the Treasury’s deficit targets, so we await the autumn statement, and not least the Office for Budget Responsibility report, with great interest.

The Prime Minister has triumphantly proclaimed that existing workers’ rights will continue to be guaranteed in law as long as she is in office. However, as the House of Commons Library and other legal experts have pointed out, many workers’ rights stem directly from EU treaties—the right to equal pay between genders, for example—and once we leave the EU, those rights would cease to exist, so new primary legislation would be needed to reinstate them. Do the UK Government intend to bring forward primary legislation to do that? Rather than bringing in a repeal Bill, should we not be bringing forward a continuity Bill? As events proceed, people will become increasingly angry about the way things are going.

We have heard good points from SDLP Members about devolved competencies, but I do not think we had a clear answer to how the great repeal Bill envisaged by the UK Government will work with the devolved nations. As we know, there is a hugely diverging agenda between the Welsh Government and the UK Government when it comes to workers’ rights, as was evidenced by the recent court case over the agricultural workers dispute.

Returning to trade, we have heard a duality of messages from Brexitters since the referendum. There was supposed to be a protectionist paradise. Such arguments held considerable sway in the steel industry in south Wales in the face of Chinese dumping. Of course, dairy farmers face competition from Ireland and hill farmers in Wales are challenged by lamb coming from New Zealand. Yet the rhetoric that we currently get from the UK Government is that Brexit will lead to a free trade bonanza.

Given the time constraints, I shall finish now. If there is to be a future outside the customs union—as envisaged, I fear, by the UK Government—it is vital that the devolved nations have a veto and a direct say in discussions about international trade deals.

8.59 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the chance to speak in today’s debate at a very critical stage in our nation’s history. Today’s debate is on workers’ rights and leaving the EU. It is very important because it is also symbolic of who could win or lose in post-Brexit Britain. The debate is vital, I believe, for our future fairness and prosperity. I hope that the choice of debate reflects an understanding on the Government’s part that this is one aspect of Brexit that it is vital for us to get right. Workers’ rights must be maintained in post-Brexit Britain. I also believe that the debate must strongly engage, and respect, the voices of those who voted or campaigned for leave as well as the voices of those who voted or campaigned for remain.

Over the summer, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), I wrote a piece proposing a six-point Brexit plan to help to support our prosperity and security. We said we believed that the UK needed to remain a member of the single market, although some reform of the market might be necessary if it were to do so. We recognised that the Tories’ 2015 manifesto promised to safeguard Britain’s interests in the single market. We called for, and understood the need for, greater controls over freedom of movement, on which, in my view, we should seek to negotiate with other countries. We said that we should protect our financial services sector—for example, through passporting rights—and keep up with the EU in respect of measures to tackle tax avoidance. I believe—I shall say more about this shortly—that we must keep our stake in the European Investment Bank. We said that we must shadow the EU’s environmental legislation, and must not become the weak link in Europe when it comes to tackling pollution and climate change. Vitally, however, we need to shadow the EU’s employment legislation: that, I believe, is absolutely crucial.

During the referendum campaign, people were promised that our “legislative rights” would be protected in a post-Brexit Britain. Yes, that means protecting the rights that we currently have, but it must also mean keeping up with future rights so that people in Britain, including the workers, do not have worse terms and conditions than their counterparts in Europe, where there may be companies that work across boundaries, and, indeed, where we want to ensure that our workers, particularly young people, have the best chances and opportunities for their futures as well. We want to ensure that we do not have weaker employment legislation than the rest of Europe. That would send all the wrong messages about Britain, which, as a progressive nation, has fought for so many rights over so many years, and, indeed, has been a leader in Europe in many debates of this kind.

Last week, I was proud to be part of the launch by the Fabian Women’s Network of a charter to help to protect the rights and support that we currently receive from the European Union, which make such a difference to women’s lives in the UK and whose loss could well have the most impact on women. That includes maintaining our workplace rights, much of which are underpinned by EU legislation; meeting “funding requirements for the work programmes currently reliant on the European Social Fund which support women moving into work”; safeguarding and protecting “funding for programmes addressing violence against women and girls”, and safeguarding the rights of survivors of such violence by ensuring that women have the same access to rights and legal remedies as they have under EU law; continuing to “push for wider representation of women in top positions across all industries within the public and private sector, and step in to support female entrepreneurship and start-ups”, including those in industries of the future, such as innovation and tech; and making a commitment “to tackle the rise of hate crime and protect the rights of refugee women and ensure that the health and maternity needs of women who are imprisoned or detained are properly addressed.”

Women who voted leave did not vote to be worse off, or vote for their daughters to be worse off, and I hope that the gender impact assessments will form part of the Government’s plans.
[Seema Malhotra]

We have big questions that need answering, and that is why the political process that we go through is important. We have big questions that must be answered before we are ready to get to grips with the details of how to protect employment legislation. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) laid out very clearly the disparities in the basis of our rights in law and how a lot of detailed work will need to be done to make sure that they can all be embedded in UK law going forward and be on an equal basis.

It is because of the importance I place on getting this right for workers that I am so concerned about the process that we put in place now. If Parliament does not even have a say without there being heckling on the membership of the single market, what hope do we genuinely have of making sure we keep up with the finer points of employment legislation? As things stand, it appears the Prime Minister expects us to do nothing but rubber-stamp whatever deals she manages to negotiate by 2019. This seems to expect a sovereign Parliament to sit quietly by while she and her Ministers strike a deal behind closed doors. To say that her Cabinet Ministers are giving mixed signals would be an understatement. She called for a hard Brexit precipitating a fall in the pound to a 168-year low and she then started promising an article 50 just seven months before federal elections in Germany and presidential elections in France, effectively wasting a quarter of our negotiating period, and meanwhile three of her MPs have resigned. More than four months after the referendum, we still have no idea what her plan for Brexit is, and as a senior leader recently said to me, we appear to be the only country in the world without a plan for Brexit.

As parliamentarians, our vital role is to hold the Government to account, and that means to scrutinise and have a say in the decisions that affect our constituents. We are not trying to kill off Brexit, and castigating those who ask probing questions as being enemies of the people or something similar is frankly a terrifying way for the Government to behave, and is not where we should be. We respect the mandate for leaving, but the terms matter. The precise terms on which we negotiate are vital and Parliament should have sight of, and comment on, those terms. Indeed our constituents—their lives, livelihoods and families—could face a very different outcome and future depending on the terms we negotiate.

We need a strategy for negotiation, therefore, and the Government must urgently review their approach and put their plans for Brexit before the House of Commons, and if not their detailed plans yet, then their priorities. They should include ensuring ease of doing business, ensuring that there are still maximum opportunities for young people to travel and learn, ensuring that there will still be opportunities for collaboration between scientists and investment in our universities, and making sure that our country is open and that people see we are ready for investment. We would then not have the sort of comments we have heard this week from the former high commissioner for India, who said that Britain is no longer seen as open and is becoming less relevant and less influential. We need to fight for the best possible deal—a deal that protects jobs, the economy and workers' rights.

It is important that we maintain our stake in the European Investment Bank, and that we maintain a relationship that is as close as possible to what we have now. We need that infrastructure investment to support our economy now more than ever. It is the way we will address poor productivity and drive up growth and wages. When it comes to infrastructure investment, the EU has been critical to Britain's prosperity and competitiveness. We currently hold a sixth of the shares in the EIB and last year it lent about €6 billion for 40 projects up and down our country, a 10% increase on the year before. Those cheap loans have been a vital source of funds, including £400 million for social housing in London. They have supported skills, jobs and apprenticeships and we should be doing all we can publicly as well as privately to push for this very beneficial relationship to be maintained post-Brexit. Indeed, how are we to ensure, understand and believe that the Government are doing all they can to negotiate the best possible deal if there is no scrutiny?

I welcome today's debate. I also welcome the fact that the Government say that they want to secure our rights, but they need to do much more to cement their commitment. They need to address the questions about our different sets of rights. Some have their basis in primary legislation and some in secondary legislation, and different areas of our rights are underpinned by EU law. The Government need to set out how this will be taken forward in their great repeal Bill and how these rights will be maintained on an equal footing.

The Government must also make clear their position on a sunset clause in any great repeal Bill. They must give a cast-iron guarantee that there will be no dilution of current workers' rights, and they must recognise the wider concerns expressed by stakeholders about the uncertainty that is currently being created. For example, the British Chambers of Commerce has reported that skilled EU migrant workers who have played an important part in our economy are leaving this country and going home because of uncertainty about their future. That is a wider issue relating to skills and employment. We also need to look closely at the transition arrangements, to ensure stability for investment in industry. There is a bigger picture here as well. We need to be assured that the rights and fair treatment that workers will be clearly set out so that we will not be worse off in a post-Brexit Britain. There is more than one way to Brexit, so let us make sure we get it right.

9.12 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). Like her, I shall restrict most of my remarks to the subject of women, who are often disproportionately affected by the decisions that are made here. First, however, I should like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who so eloquently laid out the Scottish National party's position on Brexit and on workers' rights. In a similar vein, I also want pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who has impeccable credentials in this respect. He has been a champion of workers' rights all his working life. We have heard mention of democracy and democratic will throughout the debate. I again want to put on record—in case anyone has forgotten—how Scotland voted in the European
I remind the House that 62% voted to remain. We have heard today about the democratic will of the people of Scotland and the fact that the Scottish Government have a triple mandate to keep Scotland within the EU.

The subject of today’s debate is workers’ rights. In the past few decades, our membership of the EU has played a pivotal role in protecting and promoting equality and the rights of women in our country and across our continent. Thanks to EU legislation, women in the UK secured the right to equal pay for work of equal value. While there is still a long way to go in closing the gender pay gap, the protections that have emanated from our EU membership have served to push this agenda forwards. Thanks to EU laws, pregnant women and new mothers have been protected by a day-one right to unfair dismissal rights and to protection from discrimination. It was not that long ago that pregnant women could be immediately dismissed by employers, who had no responsibility whatever to re-hire mothers who had taken leave to have a baby. Now, specific rights have been enshrined in EU regulations, which provide protection for pregnant workers and new mums. Rights to paid time off to attend antenatal appointments are also now secure for pregnant women, keeping them in work.

The parental leave directive, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts, has helped 8.3 million working parents—a huge number—across the UK to take up to 18 weeks’ unpaid leave to care for a child. The directive also protects workers who need to deal with family or domestic emergencies. There is, however, still some distance to travel to deliver true gender equality at work, and the EU has brought us some way to protect families who are struggling to balance paid work and care for their children.

Over and above those specific rules to promote equality for women, EU legislation guarantees workers’ rights in areas such as protecting our entitlement to paid holidays and ensures, most importantly, that part-time, fixed-term or agency workers get fair and equal treatment in the workplace. The rights are some of the key reasons why I and so many others voted to remain in the EU. It is also the case that many who voted to leave want to see the rights that have been given to workers in the UK are now under threat due to these practical issues. Can the Minister set that out today?

Throughout today’s debate, the Conservatives have sought to portray themselves as the party of workers’ rights. Our current rights were often resisted by the UK Government during EU negotiations, such as with agency workers’ rights and limitations on working time, so I am not quite sure why they are asking us to trust them today—we certainly do not button up the back. The ever-helpful House of Commons Library’s note prepared for this debate states:

“For example, having negotiated concessions in the proposal that became the Working Time Directive and then abstained from the final vote, the UK challenged the Directive’s legal basis.”

Those rights are now under threat again today. For example, we need clarity from the Government about the impact of Brexit on a range of specific rights and provisions for workers.

We are constantly, and rightly, contacted by constituents, such as mine in Ochil and South Perthshire, about what the result means for them, so I want to ask the Minister a series of questions. Will the Government seek to impose a cap on the compensation available for discrimination claims? Do Ministers intend to re-evaluate whether workers should continue to accrue holiday entitlement during a period of sickness absence or maternity leave? At present, workers cannot work in excess of 48 hours a week unless they opt out of this protection, but do the Government plan to consider removing that restriction? Following Brexit, what plans are being considered to remove or reduce worker’s TUPE rights? The Agency Workers Regulations 2010 give agency workers the same rights to basic employment and working conditions as other workers, so will the Government seek to remove or amend those regulations, which protect so many female workers?

It is all very well to say, as we have heard throughout the debate, that all rights will continue on day one. As the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), who is not currently in his place, has said so often and so eloquently, the Government may well intend to highlight and copy in some of the rights from day one, but I am more interested in where “Select all”, copy, delete or paste will apply. We want to know that the rights will continue. Indeed, we want to know whether the UK will continue to keep up with much or all of the good legislation that comes out of the European Union about protecting workers’ rights if and when the UK leaves the EU. The Government need to be transparent about their intentions and act to reassure workers who are watching at home right now and guarantee the rights that have served women and men in this country for so long.

9.19 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I rise to speak as a Member with more than 15 years’ experience as an employment lawyer before I entered this place and as someone who was motivated to seek election here in part because I do not believe our current system of workplace protection is adequate.

As we saw in the EU referendum, telling someone on a zero-hours contract or in agency work that there is a risk to their job from Brexit just did not cut it; a culture has been created in this country that views employment
as a flexible, disposable concept. People do not know from one week to the next how many hours they will work or whether they will work at all, yet some still wonder why millions of people voted to reject the status quo. So although I welcome the assurances given on workers’ rights so far, I believe we need to go much further to obtain a workplace settlement that puts fairness at its heart. As I will explain, I am still concerned, despite the assurances given, about whether employment rights will be retained, given the track record of many in the Cabinet on this matter.

Employment workplace protection in this country at its current level is woefully inadequate. A person can work somewhere for two years of their life but still find themselves cast aside without any reason and without recompense, even if they have done nothing wrong—that was introduced by the coalition Government. How can people feel confident enough to plan for their future if we have a system that sacrifices that future at the altar of flexibility? We need a country where people have the security of knowing that if they do a good job and if their employer runs the business well, they are going to be rewar ded properly and are likely to stay in work. What we have instead is a hire-and-fire culture where workers are seen as disposable commodities and where loyalty counts for nothing.

I would like to see many improvements in the current law—a reduction in the qualifying period for unfair dismissal claims, the strengthening of unfair dismissal laws and the abolition of employment tribunal fees, which we are still waiting for the Government’s review of—but in the context of Brexit the immediate concern has to be to retain what we currently have.

As I said, I welcome the assurances given, but they do not go far enough. We are all familiar with the term “gold-plating”, and in 2011 the Government announced they were ending the gold-plating of EU legislation and would not go beyond the minimum requirements of the EU legislation when implementing it in this country. I consider the term “gold-plating” to be misleading and insulting when talking about basic rights at work, as it conjures up images of opulence and extravagance that simply do not reflect the reality of most people’s experience in the workplace.

One example of where employment legislation is considered to have gone beyond the original EU rules is what is covered by the definition of “pay” in the agency worker regulations, but probably the most widely discussed relates to the working time regulations. The most obvious example of supposed “gold-plating” is the requirement for 28 days’ paid leave in UK law, whereas only 20 days’ paid leave is granted in the directive. It is not just the removal of the gold-plating that concerns me, as many other facets of the regulations could be altered domestically which would fundamentally change and weaken those rights. Could the maximum working week be increased? Could the number of hours worked before entitlement to a rest break accrues change? Could the way weekly rest breaks are calculated alter? Could these be changed across industries to suit? Could we see a return to the prevention of the accrual of holiday pay during sick leave? On collective redundancies, we have already gone down from 90 to 45 days in respect of the consultation, but the Government could go even lower. At the moment, businesses are required to consult trade unions where they are recognised, but what is to stop this Government taking the opportunity to undermine trade unions yet again by altering the rules so that employee representatives could be consulted instead?

There are similar provisions in the TUPE regulations, where there is also another good example of supposed gold-plating, with the application of the service provision changes. That applies to thousands of transfers every year, so I hope there will be no attempt to restrict TUPE’s reach. Another area where there is an opportunity for those who want to see an erosion of rights in relation to post-transfer changes to terms and conditions of employment, a fiendishly complicated area of law, much of it subject to European Court of Justice judgments. I fear there will be a temptation for those who want to rid us of supposed red tape to say that it would be much simpler just to say there are no specific post-transfer restrictions on changes to terms and conditions.

So the Government can claim to be protecting employment rights derived from the EU, but they could, if they chose to, nibble away at those rights in the way I have outlined. I believe the temptation will be too great for many Government Members—I refer not to removing rights altogether but to significantly weakening them. Why do I say that? One has only to look at what members of the Cabinet have said in the past to get a flavour of where they are coming from. Although we have heard plenty about them tonight, these comments are so concerning that it is worth repeating a few again. Let us start at the top, because the Prime Minister, in an interview with HR magazine in March 2010, when she was shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, said:

“Issues we are particularly concerned about are the Working Time Directive…and the Agency Workers Directive.”

In 2012, the Foreign Secretary said that the UK should scrap the social chapter. Last year, he said that the Government should “weigh in” on all that “social chapter stuff”. He claimed that the weight of employment regulation was “back-breaking”. When the Secretary of State for Defence was Minister for Business and Enterprise, he said that the Government must “turn the screws tighter on burdensome red tape”, and “de-regulate further and faster.”

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), has also had quite a lot to say on the subject:

“To restore competitiveness we must begin by deregulating the labour market. Political objections must be overridden...It is too difficult to hire and fire, and too expensive to take on new employees. It is intellectually unsustainable to believe that workplace rights should remain untouchable”.

I could not disagree more with that. It is not just what the Government have said, but what they have done. The last coalition Government introduced legislation that enabled employees to be bought out of their statutory employment rights. They also introduced employment tribunal fees that have proved to be a massive barrier to people seeking to enforce their rights, as well as doubling the qualifying period before people can claim unfair dismissal.

If there has been a sudden and belated conversion to the importance of employment rights, I would welcome it and encourage Government Members to join me in
arguing for increased workplace protection. If they agree that these rights are important, they will also know that not only are they about individual dignity and respect in the workplace, but they have social and economic value and are an essential component of a healthy, stable and progressive country.

Employment rights ensure that people can participate in the labour market without facing unfair discrimination. They give vulnerable workers more job security and stability of income. They help to encourage a committed workforce and the retention of skilled workers. They are not something that we spend enough time talking about in this place, but most of our constituents will be affected by them. While we need more workplace protection not less, I and everyone else on Labour's Benches will be keeping a close eye on this Government in case they attempt to water down the rights that we currently have.

9.26 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Last year, the people of Scotland made their voices heard loudly and clearly by filling these Benches with Scottish National party Members. The public discontent was palpable during the election campaign. Many people were sickened by the broken promises of the better together campaign. One may find no better example of that than being told that the only way to secure EU membership was to vote no. Indeed, people clearly remember Ruth Davidson MSP promising just that during a live televised debate on 2 September 2014, when she said:

“I think it is disingenuous...to say that no means out and yes means in, when actually the opposite is true. No means we stay in; we are members of the European Union.”

Let me be clear from the outset. I am here to represent my constituency, but as a member of the SNP, I was put here to ensure that the interests of Scotland are heard in this place. I was elected on a manifesto commitment to oppose withdrawal from the European Union.

The SNP Scottish Government were returned for an unprecedented third term in May on a pro-EU manifesto. It was the express will of the Scottish people a few weeks later in June to remain within the European Union. Scotland as a whole voted overwhelmingly to remain, as did every single one of Scotland’s 32 local authority areas.

While the Prime Minister fumbles around with what Brexit means—something that the people of Scotland rejected which is now being forced upon them—I can categorically tell her what it means to us. It represents economic uncertainty, a devalued currency, rising inflation, higher bills and mortgage payments, and a loss of up to 80,000 jobs. This is the plague of locusts that was supposed to follow a yes vote, according to the no campaign during the independence referendum. It really is not good enough for Scotland to be treated as secondary partner during Brexit negotiations. Scottish citizens are EU citizens, and their interests should not be sidelined by a Tory Government for whom they did not vote.

People in Scotland voted to remain for a whole host of reasons, but when I was out campaigning in the run-up to the referendum, workers’ rights were a common refrain from voters. They recognise the impact that the EU has had on the health and safety duties of employers to evaluate, avoid and reduce workplace risks. According to the TUC, the number of worker fatalities in the UK has declined significantly since EU directives were implemented. Pregnant women and new mothers have been protected from day one by unfair dismissal rights. There is a real understanding of the enhancements that the EU has delivered to the UK’s discrimination laws to include rights on grounds of sexual orientation, religion or belief, and age. The Prime Minister has been unable to give a cast-iron guarantee to Scottish citizens on the future of these and other workers’ rights after we leave the EU.

The European Union has ensured that workers are not subjected to exploitation or discrimination. Through its promotion of beneficial working practices, it has ensured that workers are treated fairly. As we have seen already with the introduction of tribunal fees, the draconian Trade Union Act 2016 and the increase in the qualifying period for unfair dismissal claims, the Tories seem intent on eroding the rights of people in the workplace. The bottom line is that the Conservative party cannot be trusted with workers’ rights. I worry about what the Government will attempt to do post-Brexit, unfettered by the EU.

Although EU-derived employment rights which feature in primary legislation would be relatively cushioned from the effects of Brexit, the greatest risk is the massive uncertainty that surrounds the protections afforded in secondary legislation, in which much employment law is contained. These laws are susceptible to revocation by secondary legislation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) said, the Prime Minister made a commitment at the recent Tory party conference to guarantee existing workers legal rights as long as she is Prime Minister. This gives me and many others little comfort. We have heard nothing of plans to move EU employment rights contained in secondary legislation into primary legislation as part of the great repeal Bill. If the Prime Minister wants to give guarantees, that would represent a good starting point.

A report recently published by Professor Alan Page of the University of Dundee entitled “The implications of EU withdrawal for the devolution settlement” suggests that many laws affecting devolved issues could be unilaterally scrapped by Westminster following a withdrawal from the EU. The repeal of EU regulations brought about by secondary legislation would not require the consent of Members of the Scottish Parliament. Professor Page has described this as “a significant potential gap” in law-making in devolved areas, and he points out that “there is no requirement of the Scottish Parliament’s consent to UK subordinate legislation transposing EU obligations in the devolved areas”.

I agree with Professor Page’s conclusion that there are very considerable implications for devolution.

I say this today as a warning to the Prime Minister. What she does now—the action that she takes which affects Scotland—must be carefully considered. Her party holds no mandate north of the border, and people there will not stand idly by while she disrespects their wishes. Whatever Brexit means to her, she can rest assured that it will mean something completely different in Scotland. Those of us on the SNP Benches will not vote for anything that will damage the interests of the people of Scotland, and if the Prime Minister is serious about keeping Scotland in the United Kingdom, she will not ask us to.
Jim Shannon: (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called in this debate. I thank the Minister and hon. Members for giving us all a chance to participate. There are a number of issues that my constituents have asked me to raise in the House and I intend to do so.

My office staff will laughingly point to a sign in the office which works out time off in such a way that they owe me. Annual leave is only one of many workers' rights that will be discussed and, more importantly, protected during negotiations. The Government told us:

"This is your decision. The government will implement what you decide"—no ifs, no buts," no second referendum. It was not a regional or a constituency referendum. It was a decision which all the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland took collectively, and that decision was to leave. Let us get on with the job and make sure that that happens.

The Government have been clear about the protection that will remain. The Prime Minister said that "by converting the acquis into British law, we will give businesses and workers maximum certainty as we leave the European Union. The same rules and laws will apply to them after Brexit as they did before. Any changes in the law will have to be subject to full scrutiny and proper Parliamentary debate. And let me be absolutely clear: existing workers' legal rights will continue to be guaranteed in law—and they will be guaranteed as long as I am Prime Minister."

That is what our Prime Minister said. It is very clear. Let us focus on that as well.

I am probably a lone voice on the Opposition side of the Chamber, as one of those who voted out. I am very happy to say that I voted out, and my constituency voted that way as well. I genuinely respect every Member on this side of the House, and I enjoy their friendship, but the fact of the matter is that I have a different opinion from many of them.

Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way? Will he say how long the Prime Minister is going to be—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman should not chunter from a sedentary position. We have to start the wind-ups at 9.40 pm.

Jim Shannon: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I am quite clear on what my time is.

Workers in the UK are entitled to five weeks and three days of paid holiday a year, including public holidays. The Working Time Regulations 1998 guarantee four weeks' paid leave as a European minimum, but for 35 years before joining the EU, the United Kingdom had legislation on paid holidays, so that is very likely to change or to be renegotiated—indeed, my office staff would be the first to revolt if it were, and my life would not be worth living.

It is clear that we have the morals and the principles in terms of European law. At times, we have even furthered protections and enhancements. Such is the case with maternity leave. My parliamentary aide had a child and came off maternity leave after only six months, as she was only two months pregnant. If our law would have enabled her to have two years off—one after the other—and we have said that mothers should be allowed to take that decision, she felt she needed to return to work for a few months to keep her head in the game. However, the ability to take that leave is what we have enshrined in the law at present.

We have even enshrined it in law that mothers must take two weeks off work—or four if they work in a factory. That law will stand. It is the mother's decision. I wonder at those who seem to say that mothers will have fewer rights if they decide to have another baby after article 50 is invoked. That is nonsense. The 52 weeks of statutory maternity leave in the UK is considerably more than the 14 weeks guaranteed by EU law, and of those 52 weeks, 40 are available for shared parental leave.

EU workers are important in my constituency, as they are in everybody's constituencies. The agri-food sector in my constituency depends a great deal on them for the work they do in companies. We will enshrine their needs and rights and ensure that they are protected.

The issue of workers' rights will differ from person to person. I have had small and medium-sized enterprise owners asking for the opportunity to have an input into any new regulations, and Brexit gives them that ability. If there is a need to change the law, it will be done in the normal way in this place. That will allow people to sow into the legislation they harvest from.

The issue of small and medium-sized businesses needs to be re-addressed. It is sometimes argued that employment regulation is fine for larger organisations with human resources departments, which have the resources to deal with red tape, but it is much more difficult for small and microbusinesses to cope with it. The nuances of employment law will remain unchanged unless we act to change things in this place. I therefore ask the Minister for more help for the small businesses that do not have the HR budget or the resources, so that they can know their rights and help their employees to understand their rights as well.

For those who have told employees that they will lose their holiday, sick pay and maternity rights, it must again be underlined that, if anything, our rights have been more robust than the ones imposed by Europe. We take protection of our workers seriously, and that is highlighted by the fact that recent changes to the unfair dismissal qualification period, and the introduction of fees for employment tribunal applications, emanated from the UK, not Brussels, as did the introduction of shared parental leave regulations in April last year. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) talked about some of the issues we need to address, and there are issues that have been raised on the Opposition side of the House that need to be looked at.

There is uncertainty as to the practice in terms of primary and secondary legislation, but it has been made clear that any change in rights will come through legislation and not through a repeal of all rights that come from Europe—that cannot happen, and will not happen, in what we fondly call the highest seat of democracy in the world, which is right here, in this House. The scaremongering must stop. People should rest assured that, should article 50, by some miracle, be invoked on new year's eve, new year's day will still be a public holiday for the British, still the first day of the New Year, and they can have as many children as they like without fear that they will be sacked from work. That is a fact of life.
I recently watched the film “Amazing Grace”, which shows Wilberforce’s journey to get this House to ban slavery. I do not believe that any Member here is interested in reinstating slavery for anyone in the world, let alone our own citizens. We have a history of protecting the little man and little woman, and that will not change because, in theory, there is a possibility that it could change. We are still interested in doing the right thing in this place, and we are still accountable to the public for the decisions that are made. Yes, the Brexit team will need to work on the nuances of the rights of our workers in Europe, but intimating that this will be the time to eradicate rights is mischief and nothing more.

9.39 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and to contribute to the first of an important series of debates.

We have heard a number of thoughtful contributions from Members on both sides of the House and from all parts of the United Kingdom, but I want to pick out four in particular. My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) spoke with his usual eloquence, setting out a very detailed case with questions and points that I hope the Minister will respond to. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) made a very thoughtful speech. She should be commended for the ten-minute rule Bill she introduced a few weeks back, which raised lots of the concerns that have been aired today. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), who brings a particular set of views to the debate, rightly raised concerns about the Government’s intentions in this area. I must also single out the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who is not in her place at the moment. I did not agree with everything she said, but she spoke with her customary candour and robustness, and brought an important set of views to the debate.

There has been a fair amount of consensus on the view that our membership of the European Union has played an important role in protecting working people, particularly women, from exploitation and in combating discrimination, and has acted as a vital bulwark against pressure for the further deregulation of our labour market. Of course, it is right to argue, as many Conservative Members did, that in some areas where the EU has legislated, the UK already had laws in place, such as on equal pay and maternity rights, and we have indeed gone further in a number of areas. Even so, EU action has improved and extended a wide range of rights and delivered stronger protection with regard to equal pay for women, workplace discrimination, equal treatment at work for agency workers, rules limiting working time, health and safety protections, and a host of other essential safeguards.

Britain has one of the most lightly regulated workforces in the OECD. As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) said, many of us would like to go further on employment protections to adjust to the changes we are seeing in our economy and in our labour market. As a minimum, the Government have a duty to maintain and protect the floor of rights that workers currently enjoy, which are underpinned by EU law. There is also good reason to believe that that is what British workers, and the majority of remain and leave voters, expect. In a TUC poll carried out in the wake of the referendum, the vast majority of remain and leave voters backed, by considerable margins, safeguarding vital rights such as maternity leave and protection against discrimination at work. That is important because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) argued, this is ultimately about who wins and who may lose from Brexit.

We have heard a number of pledges from the Secretary of State and other Conservative Members that reiterate those made by senior leave campaigners during the referendum. I want to be very clear that those pledges are welcome. However, Conservative Members protest too much when they disparage our very real concerns that in the process of bringing EU-related law into domestic effect, parts of that legislation may be chipped away and watered down. The record of this Government and of the previous coalition Government, whether on increasing the qualifying period before individuals are able to claim unfair dismissal or introducing fees to access employment tribunals, gives cause for concern. I do not doubt in any way that there is a genuine Conservative tradition of social reform. Nevertheless, I hope that Conservative Members can understand why some of us are concerned, not least given the comments made by some senior leave campaigners, including some who are now members of the Cabinet.

However, let us take the Government’s pledge at face value. I am willing to do that, and I am sure that the Minister will further clarify the position. That said, the form and details of the mechanism by which those workers’ rights are transposed into British law is important, not least given the comments made by senior leave campaigners, including some who are now members of the Cabinet.

First, a number of hon. Members have pointed out that UK laws that derive from EU law and have been implemented not by primary legislation but by regulation—from protections relating to the transfer of staff to new companies, to maximum hours of weekly work—are more vulnerable in the process that we are about to undertake. We have heard conflicting messages from the Government. I recently wrote to the Minister, asking him specifically whether the repeal Bill—I think that, technically, that is its correct title, rather than the great repeal Bill—would give effect to 18 EU directives and regulations in domestic legislation. He replied that the Government will convert existing EU law into domestic law, “wherever practical”. There is a discrepancy between that reply and what we have heard today, so it would be useful if that was cleared up.

When he winds up, the Minister has another chance to confirm how workers’ rights that derive from EU law and have been implemented by regulation will be given domestic effect by the repeal Bill. Will he confirm, as a number of my hon. Friends have asked, whether they will be underpinned by primary legislation? It would also be useful if he touched on the sort of regulations that may come into force in the next two years, as we negotiate an exit, and whether they will be introduced as primary legislation.

Secondly, a number of hon. Members have raised concerns about what the Government intend to do to protect workers’ rights that derive from rulings of the European Court of Justice, including those on equality and working time, and the Court’s recent decision that
the calculation of workers’ entitlement to holiday pay should include earnings from bonuses, commissions and overtime payments. The Prime Minister has been clear that her vision of Brexit involves the UK leaving the jurisdiction of the ECJ, so it would be useful to know the Government’s intentions with regard to those employment rights that have been given greater legal strength as a result of ECJ case law, and how and whether they will be enshrined in the forthcoming repeal Bill.

Thirdly, this may be a minor point, but primary legislation influenced by EU law will not be automatically repealed once we leave the EU, but it could be modified. For example, the Equality Act 2010, which was opposed by the Conservative party, could be amended to introduce a cap on compensation for discrimination claims, as contemplated by the coalition Government-commissioned Beecroft report in 2011. Will the Minister confirm that it is not the Government’s intention to use Brexit to repeal or amend vital rights delivered by previous Governments?

Finally, the Minister needs to rule out the possibility of any attempt by the repeal Bill and the Brexit process to time-limit existing workers’ rights. Pledges have been made and we have heard denials of the proposal of the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) to insert a sunset clause in the repeal Bill. Support for that proposal may be confined to a minority consisting of just the right hon. Gentleman, but I suspect that other Government Members share his view. It would be useful to know how the Government intend to get the repeal Bill through without amendments and without time-limiting any of the legislation so that, although it might be amended by a future Government, all existing workers’ rights given effect by EU law will be pulled over for the remainder of this Parliament.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central raised a number of points about the impact of the negotiations on workers’ rights and employment regulations. How will our potential access to the customs union free market on whatever terms that the Government may propose be used to influence employment rights? It would also be useful to hear from the Minister about the impact that any transitional arrangement with the European Union would have.

I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies). Like the vast majority of my fellow Labour Members, I accept that the British public voted to leave the European Union and the democratic imperative that that vote created. In voting to exit the EU, however, the British public did not vote for any diminution or dilution of their employment and workplace health and safety rights. If any of those existing rights are lost or watered down in the process of Brexit, it will be seen as a gross betrayal. Labour will keep a close eye on how the Government bring those rights across, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s wind-up.

9.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) in what, I believe, his first appearance at the Dispatch Box. This has been an excellent debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed to it. It is right that the question of workers’ rights should be debated at length and in some detail, because it is of fundamental importance to Members on both sides of the Chamber.

This has been the first in a series of debates on important issues that arise in the context of the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union promised by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. My Department intends to bring forward, in Government time, a number of further debates on key issues related to EU withdrawal over the coming weeks and months.

Let me first reiterate that, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy said in his opening speech, the Government fully recognise the fundamental importance of strong workers’ rights in this country, and we are determined to preserve them. Not only do they exist for the protection of all employees, but they have a vital function in encouraging the development of a productive and thriving economy. It is clear that the Government’s determination to preserve, and not to erode, employment rights is shared by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the Government will not, as a consequence of our withdrawal, allow any erosion of rights in the workplace, whether those rights derive from EU or UK law. She has further made it clear that the Government are determined to deliver an economy that works for everyone, and fundamental to that is the preservation of existing workers’ rights.

I repeat the point made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in his opening speech that the UK already goes beyond EU minimum requirements in a number of areas of employment legislation. For example, UK domestic law already provides for more than a week’s additional annual leave—5.6 weeks rather than the minimum of four weeks set by the EU—nearly four times the required amount of statutory maternity leave and much greater flexibility around shared parental leave, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out.

Furthermore, we have recently adopted a number of measures to strengthen further the protections provided to workers, including introducing the national living wage in April this year and increasing funding for enforcement activity to ensure that employers are meeting their responsibilities. We have commissioned a review of modern employment practices—the Taylor review—with a view to ensuring that new practices of working, which were touched on by the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), do indeed work for everyone. We are legislating to ban exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts to stop the abuse of such contracts. We introduced shared parental leave in 2015 and extended the right to request flexible working to all employees from June 2014. Those are measures pursued by a Conservative Government committed to providing strong protections for workers. We are determined to maintain those protections beyond withdrawal from the EU by enshrining them in our law under the great repeal Bill.
A number of points were touched on by hon. and right hon. Members, and I will seek to address them in the brief time available to me. One point that was made by a number of Members—including by my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), in what I thought was an excellent and passionate speech, and by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn)—was the need to heal the wounds, so to speak: to build a national consensus ahead of our exit from the European Union. That is what the Government are seeking to do, and we hope that debates such as this will help to achieve it.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), echoed by the hon. Members for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) and for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), raised issues about devolved competence and how they will affect the negotiations. The Government have made it absolutely clear that the concerns of the devolved Administrations will be central to the negotiations that we are embarking on. Indeed, the first meeting of the Joint Ministerial Committee for the exit negotiations will be held this very week, so there is close consultation between the Government and the devolved Administrations.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr Jones: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will not give way. I have very little time, and I am trying to deal with as many points as I can.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central made an excellent speech, which underlined his credentials as the chief scrutineer of the Government in his capacity as Chairman of the Select Committee. He raised a number of issues, and I will briefly touch on them. He asked what changes to employment legislation in the great repeal Bill will be made through primary as opposed to secondary legislation. Such issues fall to be considered during the passage of the Bill. The House will therefore have the opportunity to debate those issues in full in due course. There will have to be full parliamentary scrutiny, and I have no doubt that his Committee will play an important role in that regard.

The right hon. Gentleman raised, as did the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), the issue of what will happen to EU case law and judgments of the European Court of Justice. I wish to make it clear that the starting position of the Government is that EU-derived law, from whatever quarter, will be transferred into United Kingdom law in full at the point of exit.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the important issue of what happens if the United Kingdom has access to the single market, but we do not follow whatever new legislation may be developed in the EU. The word “if” is of course important, and it remains to be seen whether we will have full access to the single market. It is fair to say that the Government are still working on the many details that will determine our future relationship with the European Union. This will be an important consideration in that process, and, again, I have no doubt that his Committee will want to explore this issue further.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) made what I have to say rather a bleak speech, although he seemed to recognise that Members on both sides of the House accept that Britain is indeed leaving the European Union, and he acknowledged that his is a minority opinion. He seemingly accepted the word of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that workers’ rights would not be eroded, but he expressed concern about what future Parliaments might do. I must point out to him that no Parliament can bind its successors, but the whole purpose of exiting the European Union is to restore sovereignty to this Parliament and to place our trust in our successors in the Parliaments of the future.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) made a very thoughtful and useful speech. She raised several important issues, particularly women’s issues, which were echoed by the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Smith). May I say that the contribution of the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston to this debate is exactly the sort of contribution that the Government are looking for in debates such as this? Such contributions will certainly inform the Government’s consideration of the future relationship of the United Kingdom with the European Union.

There were several other excellent speeches, but, sadly, I do not have the time to deal with them all. The United Kingdom has a long and distinguished history of protecting workers’ rights, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) pointed out in his erudite and instructive speech. For example, the principal plank of our workplace safety legislation is the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, which was developed independently of the EU. In this country, we have a comprehensive framework of legally guaranteed minimum rights for workers that seek to ensure that everybody is treated fairly at work and that businesses thrive. The UK has led the way on improving workplace diversity. Our generous provisions on maternity and parental leave have helped record numbers of women into work, and as a consequence of our approach the UK economy is thriving.

This has indeed been an excellent debate. It has fully justified the Government’s approach of holding general debates. As I have said, all the contributions have been valuable, and they will inform our consideration as we leave the European Union.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered exiting the EU and workers’ rights.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016 (Independent Reporting Commission) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 15 September, be approved.—[Christopher Pincher.] Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

Ordered,

That the Local Government Pension Scheme (Management and Investment of Funds) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 946), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—[Christopher Pincher.]
EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Ordered,
That Damian Green, Alec Shelbrooke, Kelly Tolhurst and Heather Wheeler be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Steve Double, Michael Tomlinson, David Warburton and Mike Wood be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION COMMITTEE

Ordered,
That Mark Durkan be a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Ordered,
That Helen Jones be discharged from the Finance Committee and Sir Alan Meale be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

Ordered,
That Ian C. Lucas be discharged from the Procedure Committee and Jenny Chapman be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Midland Main Line Electrification

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

10.1 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker, for granting this Adjournment debate. I thank colleagues from the midlands who are here this evening to support the debate; we have representation here from Leicester, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, Derbyshire and even as far north as Sheffield.

In politics there is often a sense of déjà vu. Back in April 2012 I led a similar Adjournment debate on proposals to upgrade and electrify the midland main line between Bedford and Sheffield. The line serves the cities of Derby, Leicester, Nottingham and Sheffield, my own constituency of Loughborough, and a number of other growing towns across the east midlands, including Chesterfield, Market Harborough, Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough. Together, those places are home to more than 5 million people and 2.1 million jobs; we believe that they comprise the economic backbone of England.

The east midlands in particular has helped to lead the United Kingdom out of recession, with strong private sector job growth over the past five years. We have huge potential for export-led growth, already accounting for 20% of gross value added. Latest projections from the Office for National Statistics suggest the population of the east midlands will rise by half a million people by 2030 to 5.1 million, which will be the fastest growth outside London and the wider south-east.

The midland main line itself has been a huge success story. As those of us who are frequent travellers on the line know all too well, passenger numbers have increased by 130% in the past 15 years—I can probably say on behalf of colleagues that there are times when it feels like all 130% are on the particular train I have caught from London St Pancras—and a further 30% rise is expected in the next 10 years. Rail freight is also booming, showing a 70% increase since the mid-1990s, but the line has suffered from years of under-investment. It is the only north-south rail route yet to be electrified. It has some of the slowest mainline speeds in the country, meaning that trains are rarely able to go at their top speed.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for securing this vital debate. She points out, correctly, that inter-city connectivity between these crucial areas of growth is so poor that without electrification we cannot legitimately look for a midlands engine, which is, after all, the Government’s supposed priority for the next Budget.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We know from our constituency experiences just how much the east midlands is driving economic recovery in this country. He is right to highlight the importance of transport connectivity to the success of the midlands engine, which we believe can rival the northern powerhouse.

Some of the rolling stock is more than 40 years old, so I was delighted when in July 2012, the then Secretary of State for Transport announced that the upgrade and
electrification scheme, which had been promoted by councils, local enterprise partnerships and business groups in the east midlands and south Yorkshire, was to be delivered in full by 2020. Since then, there has been progress on implementation, but not everything has gone according to plan. The pausing of the electrification elements in 2015 resulted in the demobilisation of a high-skilled technical team within Network Rail, which has taken time to reassemble. The pause also had a considerable financial impact on local companies in the supply chain.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The right hon. Lady makes a compelling case. Does she share my concern that any further delay to electrification would not only break the promises that Ministers made to our region, but further damage our vital east midlands rail industry, which is important to her constituents? Businesses have told me that that will mean less investment, fewer jobs and fewer apprenticeships, and that it could harm their prospects of export growth.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. As I understand it, the east midlands has the largest cluster of companies that rely on the railways and rolling stock, and other businesses that form part of the supply chain, anywhere in the world. The point is that the debate is not just about one railway line. As she says, it is about economic growth, and the impact on local companies and local jobs.

Alberto Costa (South Leicester) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on bringing the debate to the House. Does she agree with the east midlands chamber of commerce that electrification is vital to the long-term economic needs of constituencies such as Loughborough and South Leicester, and those throughout the east midlands? Does she also agree that any further delay will only increase the costs of electrification and reduce the confidence that businesses in Loughborough, South Leicester and elsewhere have in Government projects?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree that this is about driving economic growth and reflecting the fact that the midlands is an engine for that growth. He is right that the costs of the project go up the longer it takes, which is why Members are so keen for the Government to give the project the full green light so that we can get on with it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Nicky Morgan: I am very popular. I give way to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) first.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way to a voice from as far north as Sheffield. She makes a powerful case about the midlands economy, but does she recognise the importance of the electrification of the midland main line to the northern economy? Does she also recognise that, should there be a further delay in that investment, it will be taken as a very bad signal of the Government’s commitment to investment in northern infrastructure and to regenerating the northern economy?

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. He is right that we are talking not only about the midlands, as they might be known, but the impact on the train line to Sheffield and further north. I will talk about HS2 in a moment, but he is right, as we all know from those who journey north from our constituencies, that the electrification project is important for connectivity further north.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for bringing this vital debate to the House. Does she share my concern—my constituents and lots of people along the midland main line share it—that the line is the poor relation of the rail network? If the Government have to find savings for investment in other lines, the midland main line will once again be delayed and have its investment cut. The people in our constituencies will be the losers. The Government need to listen to her and other hon. Members, and get on with doing something about the midland main line.

Nicky Morgan: As I said, the midland main line is the only north-south rail route yet to be electrified. In fact, I think it is the only inter-city line that remains to be electrified. It is fair to say that the midlands should not be paying the price for cost overruns on other infrastructure projects around the country.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): I do not want to tempt the right hon. Lady too much, but does she agree that the electrification of the midland main line is more important than HS2? Go on, have a punt!

Nicky Morgan: I have resisted the hon. Gentleman’s blandishments for many years. The point I will come on to in a moment is that the schemes go together. There are strong feelings about HS2, in the midlands and elsewhere, but both projects need to be delivered.

Mr Skinner: It costs a lot less.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Gentleman is right to say electrification of the midland main line offers better value, but both are needed for capacity.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I feel I have to say something on behalf of myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), because Leicester has not been mentioned so far. [Interruption.] The right hon. Lady did refer to Leicester, but it has not been mentioned during the debate. On behalf of Leicester, may I say that the electrification will provide not just growth but additional jobs? We should also pay tribute to the staff on the railway who work very long hours, it responds to customers, both the good and the bad. He is right that jobs would be created along the line. It would also enable people who live in the midlands to commute elsewhere to work on a safe and reliable service.

Nicky Morgan: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. He is right to pay tribute to the staff of East Midlands Trains. We are fortunate to have such a good train operator. I enjoy reading its tweets and how it responds to customers, both the good and the bad.
Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): May I draw attention to the point that the right hon. Lady made about some trains being 40 years old? The HST trains will have to be replaced in 2020 because they are no longer compliant with disability legislation. If electrification does not get the go-ahead as per the current programme, there will not be a case in 2020 for replacing the old rolling stock with electric-compatible rolling stock. The whole programme could be delayed, effectively for ever.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is important that the Government make a commitment now because of the need to procure new rolling stock.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way—I would have hated to miss out. Perhaps I can take her back to HS2, which I support. Given its strong benefit-cost ratio, does she agree that if the Department or Network Rail are short of money, the electrification scheme has the best return? It should be prioritised, not put to the back of the queue.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend makes a good point. He is right to say that the scheme represents very good value. The Minister might want to address the benefit-cost ratio. It is why we midlands MPs, as well as those from further north, feel so strongly that it should not be our area that pays yet again for cost overruns elsewhere in the country.

I mentioned the pausing and how it led to the technical team that Network Rail put together being demobilised. The extended completion date of 2023 is not ideal, but the decision of the previous Secretary of State to press ahead gave certainty to passengers, local communities, businesses and investors. I am reassured that the main upgrade measures remain on track to be delivered by 2019, and by recent public statements from Network Rail that work on electrification is also progressing. The reason for holding this debate is that colleagues in the House hear, for the Government’s midlands engine initiative. We have also talked about the impact on the local supply chain. Any further delay or uncertainty will fundamentally undermine business confidence in the Government’s ability to deliver major investment. We have also heard about the potential impact on apprenticeships. For our residents and constituents, electric trains offer a quieter, smoother and more reliable passenger experience. They have a positive impact on air quality and thus on people’s health, which is becoming a major issue in many areas along the midland main line.

In conclusion, the midland main line is a major driver of local economic growth and a key asset, as we have heard, for the Government’s midlands engine initiative. The upgrade and electrification scheme was conceived as an integrated package. Only by implementing the whole scheme can the benefits to passengers, freight operators and local businesses be delivered in full. It remains vital that the Government deliver the upgrade and electrification scheme in full by 2023 at the latest. I hope that the Minister will acknowledge the concerns of Members and give his commitment to the whole scheme. We heard the invitation of my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) for the Minister to agree to facilitate a meeting between himself, the Secretary of State and Members present today.

10.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) on securing this debate, and I note the presence of so many regional MPs in the Chamber to show their interest in, and concern about, this issue—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) will just have to wait, and he should not intervene from a sedentary
position. My right hon. Friend is, of course, chair of the all-party parliamentary group on heritage rail, which I look forward to addressing in the coming weeks. I also note that this particular midland main line programme uses local suppliers such as Brush Traction in my right hon. Friend’s Loughborough constituency, as well as supporting new apprenticeships in Network Rail and the private sector. I think my right hon. Friend spoke powerfully about the importance of this project to her constituents—not just as passengers, but economically.

Let me talk first about why this Government have chosen to invest in our rail network and why we chose to invest in it for the future. We are making journeys better, simpler, faster and more reliable. Most importantly, we want to make transport not just safer, but more sustainable. I thus entirely agree with my right hon. Friend that the investment we are making today will help prepare our country for tomorrow. Our national plan will support jobs, enable business growth and bring our country closer together.

That is why we are supporting a record £70 billion investment in rail, roads, ports and airports, and we are undertaking the biggest rail modernisation since Victorian times. We are ensuring that every part of Britain benefits from a growing economy, and that all those who work hard have the opportunities that they need in order to succeed. As Members have pointed out tonight, the midland main line services provided for passengers today are compromised. The attempt to serve all passengers with inter-city trains means that, as my right hon. Friend has said, long-distance passengers suffer from slow peak journeys, and commuters to London have to board already crowded inter-city trains.

To solve the problem, as we design and build the next franchise, we will create two distinct services, one for commuters from Corby, Kettering and other stations to London and one for long-distance travellers, in order to serve both more effectively. That will significantly reduce journey times from Sheffield and Nottingham to London by reducing the number of stops on those long-distance services, as well as speeding up the trains themselves. On average, the slow Sheffield morning peak services will be reduced by between 20 and 30 minutes to about two hours, and the Nottingham services will be reduced, on average, by between 10 and 20 minutes to about an hour and a half.

It is vital for the first steps of the capacity work to be completed, and I am delighted to say that we are making good progress in delivering that. We will make the whole route between Bedford and Kettering four-track, and the whole route between Kettering and Corby two-track. The stops between Corby, Kettering and other stations and London, mainly used by commuters, would then be served by electric trains up to 12 carriages long.

That proposed approach will be consulted on as part of the upcoming East Midlands franchise competition, ahead of a planned invitation to tender in May 2017. I would greatly welcome engagement and input from Members to help us to achieve the right balance between journey time and connectivity on the route, and I am more than happy to accept the offer from my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) to meet the Secretary of State and me to discuss such matters further. I look forward particularly to seeing bidders’ innovative proposals to improve services for passengers and other users of the railway, building on the Government’s substantial investment.

We are committed to electrification on the midland main line. We will deliver electrification from London to Kettering and Corby by 2019. Electric train services taking advantage of those improvements will begin as soon as possible after the completion of the infrastructure works, providing passengers with better trains, more seats, and better facilities on board. Those enhancements will provide increased capacity to relieve congestion on the railway.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: If the hon. Lady waits for one minute, she may hear what she is hoping to hear.

The move to electric services to Corby will mean that we are able to deliver a third more carriage miles than today across the route. I can also assure Members on both sides of the House that development work is continuing on further electrification of the route to Sheffield and Nottingham. I am keen to ensure that the scheme delivers value for money for the taxpayer, and a better experience for the passenger.

We recognise that this is a challenging programme, with many difficult engineering hurdles to overcome, but we are determined to work with Network Rail to face the challenges and deliver the best possible railway for the people of this country. Work has already started to deliver the programme. If one travels from Corby to Kettering, one can see that the track-doubling and electrification are already in delivery. A major blockade to deliver those enhancements has just finished where work on strengthening bridges and viaducts was successful. Tens of millions of pounds are being spent on the project, which is laying the foundation for the new electric services.

We will remove the long-standing bottleneck at Derby station in 2018, to speed up midland main line, CrossCountry and freight services. We are improving the line speed between Derby and Sheffield, and at both Leicester and Market Harborough. Platform-lengthening work is going on throughout the network to enable longer trains to run. Overall, the programme will nearly double capacity into London in the morning peak, giving passengers a significantly quieter and smoother ride as well as a shorter journey. I believe that there will be a much better service for both current and future passengers.

Vernon Coaker: The Minister has made some interesting comments, particularly about the line from St Pancras to Kettering and Corby. Can he, in a nutshell, tell me and the House what he is saying about the Government’s commitment to investment in the electrification of the line from Kettering and Corby to Sheffield, Derby, Nottingham and the stations in between—

Keith Vaz: Leicester!

Vernon Coaker: And Leicester, of course.

Paul Maynard: Let me make it clear that we are committed to continuing the ongoing development work, and my focus today is on how, in the shorter term, we can deliver faster journeys and better trains for the hon. Gentleman’s constituents.
Lilian Greenwood: Last year, the then rail Minister assured hon. Members that the Hendy re-plan would mean that “we will have a deliverable and affordable set of improvements.”—[Official Report, 16 September 2015; Vol. 599, c. 330WH]

When the project was unpaused, the chairman of Network Rail assured us that “the line north of Kettering to Derby/Nottingham and Sheffield can be electrified in stages by 2023.”

Will this Minister commit to that timescale?

Paul Maynard: I will merely repeat what I have just said, which is that we are committed to the development of the ongoing electrification programme. I urge the hon. Lady today to consider the benefits that will accrue to her constituents and her local economy from the improvements in journey times that we are going to be accelerating through the new franchise process. There will be faster, better trains for her constituents, as well as constituents in Leicester, Sheffield and around the east midlands because of that.

Mr Betts: Let us be absolutely clear about something. We were given a promise in this House by Ministers when the electrification was unpaused that electrification would happen—to Sheffield, with the whole line complete—by 2023. Is the Minister now rowing back on that commitment or is he prepared to confirm it?

Paul Maynard: I am continuing to stress to Labour Members that we are continuing to develop the electrification proposals. What we are focusing on today is ensuring that we have better quality train services on the inter-city routes by ensuring that the longer distance trains have fewer stopping places south of Kettering. Therefore, we are continuing that development work. I am not going to take lectures from Labour Members about the pace of electrification, given that the Labour party failed to electrify more than 6 miles in its entire time in government. We are electrifying the line from St Pancras to Corby and Kettering to enable faster journeys for commuters on that route, and then we are continuing the development work as planned to ensure that we continue to improve services to Leicester, Nottingham and Sheffield, as we laid out.

Let me stress again that I recognise what my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough has said about the ageing rolling stock on the midland main line, but I remind her that although the HSTs are 40 years old, about three-quarters of the inter-city fleet is made up of the Meridians, which are only 10 years old and are performing relatively well. Through the franchise competition, we will look to improve the rolling stock on the long-distance inter-city services. Across the country, rail passengers today are seeing the fruits of this approach to improving rail services. We need only look at the new stations at Manchester Victoria, Birmingham New Street and elsewhere across the country to see that.

My right hon. Friend also referred to freight, which I just want to touch on because it is very important to consider this in the context of the midland main line. The movement of freight is vital to the economic prosperity of the regions that export and manufacture. Indeed, a number of upgrade projects across the region, such as on the great northern great eastern line, have been specifically designed and delivered to improve freight paths for manufacturers in the region. Investment in transport across the UK—

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way on that specific point?

Paul Maynard: I have a minute left, but I am happy to give way.

Lilian Greenwood: Does the Minister not recognise that electrification also provides the additional capacity and gauge clearance that freight requires? Is that not one of the reasons why electrification on this line is so important?

Paul Maynard: I can only repeat what I keep saying to the hon. Lady, which is that she needs to focus on the fact that we are continuing our development work on the further stages of electrification. This is an incremental process. I am trying to emphasise that we as a Government are seeking to deliver the benefits that will accrue from a range of projects on the line as soon as possible through the new franchising process. I urge her, when she gets the chance—[Interruption.] I ask the hon. Member for Sheffield South East very politely not to interrupt from a sedentary position. I urge hon. Members to look at Hansard tomorrow morning and to read carefully what I have said about what we wish to do with the new franchise. I have already offered to meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues and the Secretary of State to discuss how best we can improve the service to Nottingham, Leicester and Sheffield in the short term while we continue to improve and deliver on the electrification process alongside that by continuing the development work. I have been clear about that today, and I am happy to make it clear to the hon. Gentleman again in any meeting that we might subsequently have.

Our enhancements are already being delivered, and we will be running an additional passenger train per hour on the midland main line into St Pancras as well as opening up additional capacity for crucial freight services. This will provide much-needed extra capacity for passenger services on the stops from Kettering and Corby and other stations into London used by regular commuters into London, as well as allowing a reduction in journey times for passengers travelling from Sheffield and Nottingham via Derby and Loughborough into London.

I always welcome fact-filled debates and submissions from Members on both sides of the House. I thank them for their attention today, and I look forward to discussing this in more detail in the weeks to come.

10.31 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7))
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): The safety of operating nuclear reactors in the UK is regulated by the independent Office for Nuclear Regulation, which is satisfied that Hunterston B is safe to operate. The issues referred to by the hon. Gentleman are addressed transparently in the ONR’s most recent annual report to Parliament. The ONR will continue to oversee these issues closely and will permit a nuclear plant to operate only if it is satisfied that it is safe.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. As he may know, the issue of the anomalies and inconsistencies associated with the Areva components has been the subject of an independent review by the ONR. The ONR has made it perfectly clear that learning from the EPR under construction in Flamanville must be taken into account in the manufacture of components to be used at Hinkley Point C.

Innovation

1. Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): If he will discuss with the operators of the Hunterston B power station the reported fractures in the keyways of that power station.

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hunterston B Power Station

Mr Hurd: I congratulate, through my hon. Friend, the innovators in his constituency on an outstanding achievement. Let me reassure him that the Government are determined to make sure, both through the industrial strategy and tools such as the innovations audits, that we are better informed and better equipped to support innovation across the country.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The steel industry is very much an industry of the future, and innovation is part of creating that future. What are the Government doing to support research and development in the steel industry, and a metals and materials catapult?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. We had an excellent debate last week about the future for steel, and I hope I made clear to him the determination of Ministers to support the sector in moving from a story of survival to one of growth. Innovation will clearly be a very important part of that, building on the quality of British steel. As in that debate, I assure him that in the capabilities review that we are funding and accelerating, that issue will be addressed.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I know that the Minister has previously flown over The Wrekin in a Squirrel—that is a helicopter—and has complimented Shropshire. May I invite him back to the Marches local enterprise partnership, which covers Shropshire and Herefordshire? What part will LEPs play in making sure that we engage and trade with Europe?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Friend for reminding me about a helicopter trip that had slipped my memory. I am sure relevant Ministers would be happy to make the visit at his invitation. He raises a fundamental point, and on the development of the industrial strategy, the Secretary of State could not have been clearer about the importance placed on LEPs and of Ministers engaging with them to understand fully the priorities and needs in each area of the country.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Secretary of State said on “The Andrew Marr Show” that innovation is about attracting foreign investment was in part about skills and training. Will there be a level playing field across the regions and the nations of the United Kingdom? Is his Department having talks with the devolved Administrations?
Mr Hurd: I assure the hon. Gentleman that in developing the industrial strategy, the development of skills and upgrading our skills base across the country must be fundamental to success, and we will of course maintain a high level of engagement with devolved Administrations.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): In North Cornwall, we have a company called Water Powered Technologies that builds hydroelectric pumps, which enable businesses to generate electricity through renewable means and, of course, support the local economy in Bude. Does my hon. Friend agree that the hydroelectric sector should be encouraged more and that we should go further and develop these technologies to help consumers?

Mr Hurd: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that huge potential remains for the UK to generate energy from our natural resources and our water assets. The real test in the future will be how competitive those technologies are against comparable technologies. I am sure that my hon. Friend does not need any lessons from us on the need to be very cost-conscious at this moment in time.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Brexit Britain faces a choice: an industrial strategy that invests in innovation to deliver smart, sustainable and shared growth; or the slashing of wages, rights and corporate responsibilities in a race to the bottom. Sunday’s report from Sheffield Hallam University, “Jobs, Welfare and Austerity”, put the price of the last Tory Government’s disastrous de-industrialisation strategy at £20 billion a year today. Will the Minister stop prevaricating and set out how he will invest in skills, research capacity and infrastructure to stimulate innovation in our great industrial regions?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady has a distinguished record and knowledge of innovation, but I do not recognise the picture she paints. She totally ignores the job creation under the previous Government and that manufacturing productivity has grown three times faster over the past 10 years than the rest of the UK economy. She is right—I have already stated the importance of this—about placing innovation at the heart of our industrial strategy, because it is key to productivity.

Infrastructure Investment

4. Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps is he taking to increase the level of infrastructure investment outside the south-east.

Ian C. Lucas: Global businesses such as Kellogg’s, Airbus, JCB and Toyota have sited themselves in north-east Wales and have prospered, making the area one of the most successful industrial areas in the UK. We would love to see the hon. Gentleman there. Will he bring with him the investment that these businesses deserve for their confidence in north-east Wales as an area?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question and mourn the collegiality of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport now that I have crossed on to the Front Bench. I share his admiration for the work of those companies; I had the great pleasure of visiting Airbus only a week or so ago. I would be delighted to visit his area in due course. The Government support those strategic industries in many different areas.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): In view of the announcement made by the Department for Transport this morning that parts of the west coast main line might not be electrified until 2024, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is essential that each infrastructure project dovetails with another? The third runway at Heathrow might well be built before the west coast main line is fully electrified.

Jesse Norman: Absolutely, the Government have a rigorous assessment process for local content. Most recently, the Hinkley Point C station was subject to provisions for more than 60% local content. If the hon. Lady knows of any instances in which the Government are not following up on this, she is welcome to write to the Department.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds about the west coast main line, may I ask about parts of the Great Western railway that have similarly been deferred this morning, which is not great news for our region? As the Secretary of State develops an industrial strategy for the south-west, will he agree to meet MPs from that region and perhaps support us in changing the mind of the Department for Transport?

Jesse Norman: The Government have a rigorous assessment process for local content. Most recently, the Hinkley Point C station was subject to provisions for more than 60% local content. If the hon. Lady knows of any instances in which the Government are not following up on this, she is welcome to write to the Department.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): Will the Minister outline what discussions about infrastructure investment have taken place with devolved regions and with the Chancellor in advance of the autumn statement?
Jesse Norman: I have had the opportunity to meet both Invest Northern Ireland and the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland, and those conversations continue. I cannot speak for colleagues, but they also have a responsibility for the devolved Administrations.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In last night’s Adjournment debate led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) failed to tell the House that he would honour the Government’s pledge to electrify the midland main line north of Kettering. There is cross-party support for this scheme, which has the best ratio of investment to benefits in the whole country. This is the third question we have had this morning about rail electrification. Will the Minister liaise urgently with the Department for Transport to get these schemes back on track?

Jesse Norman: Of course the Government recognise the concern that has been raised. This is a matter for the Department for Transport, but I have no doubt that it will be attending closely to today’s proceedings.

Counterfeit and Substandard Electrical Goods

5. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking before the Christmas retail period to prevent counterfeit and substandard electrical goods from being sold.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): The Government take consumer protection seriously, and robust legislation requires consumer products to be safe. My Department funds trading standards to prevent high-risk products from entering the UK. This month’s national consumer week, starting on 28 November, will focus consumer awareness on faulty electrical goods, in time for the peak Christmas retail period.

Carolyn Harris: I thank the Minister for that answer. She will be aware that, as chair of the all-party group on home electrical safety, I have a keen interest in faulty, substandard and counterfeit goods. Last year’s hoverboards debacle highlights to us the dangers of internet sales. Will the Minister consider talking to her colleagues in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about introducing measures in the Digital Economy Bill to help prevent such incidents?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She will be aware that there are many other retailers that consumers can trust, and I think I will leave my answer at that.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): We would not want to give the impression that poor-quality goods are bought from small businesses. We know that small businesses do an excellent job, and the Minister is right to make that point. She is right about the impact on consumers, but does she recognise that where there is a failure to follow standards it is often British manufacturers that are undercut by cheap imports from overseas? What does she intend to do as we head forward to ensure that coming out of the EU does not mean that standards slip and British manufacturers are unfairly treated?

Margot James: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that all standards derived from the EU that are considered by the UK Government to be necessary, as the vast majority will be, will continue to be enforced. I can reassure him also that National Trading Standards plays a vital role in cross-boundary enforcement, and the intelligence-led approach prevents many of those products from coming into the country in the first place.

Manufacturing: Leaving the EU

6. Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect of the UK’s decision to leave the EU on the manufacturing sector.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The UK is the ninth largest manufacturing nation in the world. My colleagues and I will continue to engage with UK manufacturing and other sectors to understand their priorities in shaping a successful Brexit and an industrial strategy that is effective in supporting competitiveness.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Nissan’s special deal is, of course, good news for workers there and for that sector, but does the Minister agree that my constituents in the manufacturing sector deserve a similar deal? Will he therefore provide this House with a full list of assurances given to the company and all the details provided to those investigating the potential state aid implications of that deal, so that we can assess the implications of that work for our overall manufacturing sector?

Mr Hurd: We ran through this last week in the statements that the Secretary of State made. The senior Nissan Europe executive Colin Lawther was very clear that the company had received no special deal, and the Secretary of State spelled out clearly the basis of the assurances given—three were about the automotive sector and one was about Brexit and our determination to make sure that in those negotiations we do not undermine the competitiveness of key industries.
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that since the referendum, manufacturing has already had a Brexit dividend as a result of the fall in the value of the pound, which makes our exports much cheaper and imports more expensive, so people who produce stuff in this country have a price advantage already?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The CBI surveys and others are encouraging, but we are determined not to be complacent. Clearly, Brexit raises a number of questions and there are a number of concerns out there in sectors across the economy. It is the responsibility of this Department to engage fully with the sectors to understand their priorities for the negotiations.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Ministers should come to the beating heart of manufacturing in this country in Huddersfield. Throughout the country manufacturers are in turmoil post-Brexit. There is no Government policy and no preparation. We are going to lose markets all over Europe and replace them with nothing.

Mr Hurd: That is a very defeatist statement from someone whom I associate with sunny optimism. It is a priority for the Secretary of State that Ministers get out there and engage with areas and with LEPs to understand their priorities fully. The hon. Gentleman is too defeatist about the competitiveness of British manufacturing.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): As Britain leaves the European Union, the high-value manufacturing catapult centres will play a key role in protecting innovation in the manufacturing sector. Will the Minister continue to support these centres, so that we protect our competitiveness in the future?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the catapult centres. We are extremely proud of them and we gave a manifesto commitment to continue to support them. They play a fundamental role in our vision of an innovation-led economy.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): UK goods and foods can compete on quality and cost with any in the world, but freight charging can remove the cost-quality advantage. Will Ministers carry out an assessment of freight charging in other countries for the export of manufactured goods and what advantage that would give to Northern Ireland and other regions?

Mr Hurd: The Department is and will continue to be rigorous in engaging with sectors across the economy to understand the issues of competitiveness and to understand where playing fields can be levelled, so that that can inform the negotiating strategy and the industrial strategy.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): An end to uncertainty for Nissan workers is deeply welcome, but there are millions of workers who want to know if they, too, have a future, and there are thousands of employers who are holding back from investment decisions, as the Engineering Employers Federation’s survey has demonstrated, until they, too, know the future. Will the Government act to end uncertainty, spelling out precisely how they will defend British manufacturing interests, otherwise it will be workers and their companies who will pay the price in Brexit Britain?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. Of course, as a west midlands MP, he sits at the heart of a region that is being very dynamic and organised in expressing its determination to compete aggressively. Let me reassure him. I recognise the uncertainty—Brexit does create tremendous uncertainty and we need to recognise that—but it is the responsibility of the Government, and my Department in particular, to liaise closely with sectors across the economy and the regions to understand their priorities and inform the negotiating strategy.

Innovation and Research: Science

7. Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to encourage innovation and research in science; and if he will make a statement.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government are committed to making the UK the best place for science research and innovation. To achieve that, as my right hon. Friend knows, we are investing £30 billion over the course of this Parliament. We are also strengthening our research and innovation system by creating a new body, UK Research and Innovation.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Minister for that reply. In March the former Life Sciences Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), visited the Charnwood campus in Loughborough, the former AstraZeneca site, and invited it to become the country’s first life sciences opportunity zone, a hub for innovation and research in science. That bid is now on the Secretary of State’s desk, and I ask him to look on it favourably.

Mr Hurd: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that the Government remain extremely interested in life sciences opportunity zones and that we were extremely impressed by the leadership that Charnwood campus has shown in preparing its bid, which has great potential. I am assured that my colleague, the Minister for Universities and Science, is well aware of the bid and expects to make an announcement shortly.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): So advanced is UK innovation and scientific knowledge that, prior to the referendum, this country made £3.5 billion more in grants for science and innovation than it put into EU funds. That is now all up in the air, and there is despair in some areas of UK science about the disentanglement that Brexit will cause and the threats to integrated innovation and science budgets. What can the Minister say to reassure us? What is the plan?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Lady makes an extremely important point about the funding for science research and innovation in this country. I think that she recognises that the science research budget has been protected in real terms, which is an extremely important commitment. We understand fully the concerns of the science community, which have been expressed to us clearly. Again, it is our responsibility to engage with those concerns and represent
them. I can assure her that it is clear to us that science research and innovation is at the heart of our industrial strategy.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): The Cheshire science corridor, which includes Alderley Park, the AstraZeneca site in Macclesfield and Daresbury, is strongly supported by the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Government support that key initiative and that life sciences will be a vital part of the northern powerhouse?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the leadership he has shown in championing that agenda. He will know from his conversations with the former Life Sciences Minister and the current Secretary of State, who is committed to the agenda, that that remains very important to the Government.

Carbon Monoxide Alarms

8. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What plans has he to make compliance with the BS EN 50291 safety standard mandatory for all carbon monoxide alarms that are placed on the market in the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Carbon monoxide poisoning is a very serious issue. Detectors must be safe, but currently compliance with the standard is not mandatory. I will consider any evidence the hon. Gentleman has and discuss it with colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, who are responsible for the construction products regulations.

John McNally: I thank the Minister for that answer. I know that the Department takes a keen interest in this issue, which is a matter of concern to the whole nation. She will be aware that in November last year the BBC reported on the dangers of substandard carbon monoxide detectors being purchased online, and Which? magazine has recently highlighted the problem as well. Given the potential for loss of life, what extra measures can she take here and now to stop the purchase of substandard detectors in the UK?

Margot James: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I will definitely discuss the matters he raises further with the Department for Communities and Local Government. I am aware of the Which? inspection involving various tests, which found some equipment to be defective. However, last year the Government brought forward the smoke and carbon monoxide alarm regulations, covering private landlords; at least private tenants now have the absolute protection of carbon monoxide alarms being in every room used as living accommodation where solid fuel is used.

Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon Project

9. Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): What his Department’s policy is on the future of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon project.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): We will consider the findings of the independent review of tidal lagoons, due to report by the end of this year, before deciding how to proceed on the proposed Swansea bay tidal lagoon project. We hope that the review will contribute to and help develop the evidence base for that technology. That will ensure, with luck, that all future decisions made regarding tidal lagoon energy are in the best interests of the UK and represent value for money to the consumer.

Mr Williams: I thank the Minister for that response. He knows, I am sure, how important the project is to Swansea bay and Wales, and its potential for very good news for the renewable sector across the UK. Despite the somewhat gloomy timetable—the end of the year, the Minister says—does he anticipate that the Hendry review will give the Government the assurances that they need to deliver their manifesto promise and proceed with a pioneering project that is critical to the south Wales economy and the future of the UK energy mix? In short, can we get on with it?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his helpful clarification at the end. It is widely understood that there is support for the project among many colleagues. The Government have received an early draft, but we await receipt of the final report, which is due by the end of the year. We will give it the careful consideration that such an important issue deserves.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): We have a tremendous opportunity in front of us if we are ambitious to create the world’s first tidal energy industry here in the United Kingdom. Does my hon. Friend agree that key to making this work is recognising that the Swansea project is essentially a pathfinder and that the future lagoons, which will all be larger, will bring down the costs very significantly?

Jesse Norman: Yes, that has been widely suggested. It is fair to say that the issues being addressed by the review are complex and relate to a new and untried technology—potentially, a place-specific technology. The Government will need to look closely at the review’s specific conclusions and how far they can be generalised as part of a wider strategy.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The future of the British steel industry depends on the approval of vital cutting-edge projects such as the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Will the Secretary of State please now call time on the two years of prevarication, commit to a timely and positive decision, and ensure that that decision is included in the autumn statement on 23 November?

Jesse Norman: Of course, in the context of the steel industry, it is important to recognise the commitment that the Government have made to Hinkley Point C—a major industrial commitment of their own. I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point, but we are not going to be railroaded into going beyond the timetable that has already been described. An orderly process is in place, a highly respected former Minister is running the thing, and we will be looking at the issue with the care and consideration that it deserves.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): It is reliable, it is green, it would form an important part of our energy mix—and it would boost the south-west economy to boot: will the Minister support it?
Jesse Norman: I am tempted by my hon. Friend’s rhapsodic language that the hon. Lady uses; to it I can counterpose the boring bureaucracy of due process and proper consideration.

Business Growth Strategy

10. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What steps his Department has taken to develop a long-term strategy for business growth since the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

11. Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP) : What steps his Department has taken to develop a long-term strategy for business growth since the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): We are creating a business environment that supports growth and investment by cutting corporation tax, by increasing the number of apprentices, and by devolving power all across Britain. Our industrial strategy will build on these strengths, and we will work with industry, local leaders, investors, workers and consumers to build the conditions for future success.

Carol Monaghan: In Scotland, skills shortages in key areas have proved challenging when businesses are seeking to grow. The post-study work visa remains an important lever for promoting innovation and growth. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is now time to extend the post-study work visa pilot to include Scottish higher education institutes?

Greg Clark: It is important that we attract the world’s brightest and best students to our fantastic universities, and all of us in the Government have a commitment to that. We have visa arrangements in place so that people can work in graduate jobs after that, and it is important that they should be able to do so.

Stuart C. McDonald: Up to 100,000 jobs across the UK will be at risk if Brexit causes London to lose euro-denominated clearing business. The loss of that clearing business will also mean the loss of much of the financial markets’ infrastructure. What urgent action are the Government taking to stave off these dangers?

Greg Clark: I am glad to hear that question from the hon. Gentleman, because it is true that the success of the financial services is not just about the City of London, but extends across the whole United Kingdom and, of course, Scotland. That is why it is important, in our negotiations, that we achieve the best possible deal to allow financial institutions, wherever they are in this country, to continue to trade freely across the EU.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can I put in a plug for free markets and laissez-faire as the best long-term strategy?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend does not need to make a plug for that. It is free markets and the knowledge that this is a competitive place to do business that accounts for our world-beating status in the G7 at the moment.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Government regularly, and in my view rightly, promote the aviation and automotive sectors as future areas of growth in the UK economy. The world-class oil and gas industry, and particularly the exceptional supply chain, which, while centred in Aberdeen, stretches the length and breadth of the UK, is another area ripe for international development and diversification. When developing his industrial strategy, will the Secretary of State make sure that oil and gas is right at the heart of it?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I have visited Aberdeen already, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and I had a very fruitful conversation with not only the oil and gas industry there, but the Aberdeen chamber of commerce. It is important that this area of great strength for the UK is built on and that we extend those strengths, so that the industry can be competitive in the future.

Callum McCaig: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, and I look forward to progress on that issue. However, whether it is oil and gas, food and drink, or the financial services sector, the attraction and retention of talent, much of which comes from elsewhere in the European Union, is absolutely central to that future. Businesses, I am sure, are saying the same things to me as they are to him. Will he ensure that we protect the status of EU nationals in discussions about leaving the EU?

Greg Clark: Yes. The Prime Minister and my colleagues have been very clear about that. Of course we want people from the European Union who are here to continue to stay, but it is important that this is part of the discussions that we have to make sure that the rights of UK residents overseas are also recognised.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): My right hon. Friend is quite right to address the importance of the oil and gas industry to Scotland, and it is also important to East Anglia. In the North sea, there are significant tax issues, which are making it harder to transfer some assets to new investors due to their near-term exposure to decommissioning. Will he liaise with his colleagues in the Treasury to come forward with proposals in the autumn statement to remove this constraint to much-needed investment?
Greg Clark: My hon. Friend will recognise that, over recent years, there has been considerable progress and agreement between the sector and the Treasury to ensure that we have the best possible tax regime for the UK continental shelf. That will continue, and we will make sure that the regime remains competitive.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Our economy is desperately in need of more long-term strategic thinking, decision making and far less reliance on free markets and the laissez-faire approach that was mentioned earlier; I am grateful for the Secretary of State’s response to his colleague’s comments. Yet for many businesses the long term is currently a “maybe” rather than a certainty, as the uncertainty arising from Brexit places investment and survival in grave doubt. Will the Secretary of State give all companies the Nissan treatment and say how he will support all our businesses and industries through Brexit?

Greg Clark: I am disappointed with that question. Perhaps it was rewritten by Seumas Milne when the hon. Gentleman was not looking—that might account for it. He knows very well that I will be vigorous and active right across the economy in promoting Britain as a good and competitive place to do business. That is our responsibility in government, and no one will discharge it with more vigour than me.

Small Businesses

12. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase opportunities for the development of small businesses. [907126]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): We are committed to creating the best environment for small businesses to start and grow. The British Business Bank has provided £3.2 billion of finance to over 51,000 small businesses. The doubling of the small business rate relief will mean that 600,000 small and medium-sized enterprises will pay no rates at all.

Mark Pawsey: The Minister will be pleased to hear from Rugby’s local chamber of commerce that our businesses are doing well—so well, in fact, that there is a shortage of industrial accommodation, especially smaller units, and that is holding back start-ups and small businesses wanting to grow. Can any steps be taken to encourage property developers to provide more accommodation for this important sector?

Margot James: My hon. Friend works tirelessly for businesses in Rugby, and it is great to hear about their growth. I urge him to get in touch with the Coventry and Warwickshire LEP. When I visited it in September, I was advised that the Coventry and Warwickshire growth hub is providing support to local businesses that are expanding and looking to move premises.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): According to the Federation of Small Businesses, of those small businesses that export, 82% export to other EU member states. What plan does the Minister have to support small businesses through Brexit?

Margot James: According to the World Bank, the UK is now ranked first in the G7 and seventh out of 190 countries for ease of doing business, and that includes trade and exports, whether to the EU or outside the EU. We achieved that status while belonging to the EU, and I have no doubt that the Government are doing all they can to ensure that we will retain that status as we transition to a new relationship with the EU.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): On Small Business Saturday, I will launch my third annual small business competition in Penwortham. May I invite the Minister to join me on that day? What is the Department doing to promote Small Business Saturday?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for her plans to get involved in Small Business Saturday on the first Saturday of December. My Department will support Small Business Saturday with events across the country to which hon. Members are invited. In particular, they should contact their LEPs to see what is going on locally and join the hon. Lady, and all of us, in visiting a small business on the first Saturday in December.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): In the United States, 23% of federal Government direct spending is with small businesses; in this country, the like-for-like direct comparison is just under 11%. Is it not time that we learned from President Obama’s success in government? If we did, we would improve quality and value for money for the taxpayer, support growth for small firms and help rebalance the economy. That is what I call a plan.

Margot James: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to invest more in support for SMEs, and that is precisely what we intend to do in my Department.

Business Growth: North of England

14. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the growth of businesses in the north of England. [907128]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our investments in the northern powerhouse continue to support the growth of businesses in the north and are helping to build an economy that works for all.

Kevin Hollinrake: Work on Yorkshire’s largest economic project—a potash mine on the North York Moors—and the drilling of the UK’s first shale gas well since 2011 are both planned to commence early in 2017, but much of the associated traffic will travel down a single lane of the A64. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and representatives from the Department for Transport and the Treasury to see how we can make sure we have the necessary infrastructure upgrades to support those key economic developments?

Greg Clark: It would be a pleasure to meet my hon. Friend. One of the reasons why we have created the local enterprise partnerships and the growth deals is to
make sure that the investment in infrastructure can go alongside economic development, and that is a big step forward.

19. [907136] Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Businesses in the north-west of England have expressed to me their concern about Ofgem’s announcement that local generators will no longer receive embedded benefits, which reflect their local generation and transmission. There has been no consultation on these proposals. Will the Secretary of State undertake to consult local businesses before any changes are introduced?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows that when it comes to energy, it is very important that we have regard to the costs that are incurred by consumers, whether they are private residential consumers or businesses. That is why these decisions have to be taken to contain the costs that would be on bills.

Clean and Reliable Energy

15. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure the increased use of clean and reliable energy sources.

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): The Government are committed to upgrading our energy infrastructure to make sure it is reliable, affordable and increasingly clean. The phasing out of coal and our commitment to new nuclear and new renewables through the next round of contract for difference auctions are key milestones in the energy transition that is under way.

Edward Argar: Tidal power represents one of the cleanest and most reliable types of green renewable energy. I am sorry to bring the Minister back to this topic, but may I again press him, due process notwithstanding, to make his decision on the future of the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project as swiftly as possible?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his persistence in pressing this point. I have nothing to add to the bureaucratic prose that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), has placed so elegantly on the record. We will look at the matter seriously.

Mr Speaker: The Chair of the Select Committee, no less: Mr Iain Wright.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): The UK has slipped to 14th place in Ernst and Young’s renewable energy country attractiveness index. It is our lowest ever placing, behind the likes of Chile and Morocco. EY states that various Government actions, as well as Brexit, “have dealt a blow to the country’s already floundering renewable energy sector and its attractiveness in the eyes of investors.”

I know that the Minister, who is committed to this issue, will be concerned about that. What steps are the Government actively taking and what steps will be taken soon to secure energy confidence and investment to ensure that this promising and vital sector can flourish?

Mr Hurd: It is good to see the hon. Gentleman back safe and sound from his visit to Sports Direct.

I refute the point that the hon. Gentleman makes; it is worth recognising that the average annual investment in renewables has more than doubled in the past five years, with an average of £9 billion invested each year in UK-based renewables. We have made extraordinary strides in building renewable capacity in this country under this Government, and we expect to announce further steps shortly.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Another source of clean renewable energy is geothermal and Cornwall is the best place in the country for its development. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the Government’s support for the development of geothermal in Cornwall, and—even better—will he come and visit?

Mr Hurd: I know my hon. Friend. Friend to be a great champion of his area and of innovation there. Cornwall has interesting assets in relation to geothermal. I have written to him, but I can place on record here that the answer is yes.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): On clean energy, we are close to the first anniversary of the announcement by the Secretary of State’s predecessor that all unabated coal generation would close by 2025 and that a consultation on that closure would be launched in spring 2016. As we can see, it is not spring any more, and no consultation appears to be in sight. Is that because the Department is reconsidering his predecessor’s commitment, or because the Department has not got around to writing the consultation yet?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman will not have to wait much longer for the answer to that question. The Government are committed to the transition from coal to clean energy. In fact, he will know that this year is the first in which we will generate more electricity from renewable energy than we do from coal.

Topical Questions

T1. [907138] Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): In the first 100 days since the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy was created, we have made substantial progress across all our responsibilities. We have confirmed Hinkley Point C, the first new nuclear power station for a generation. We have seen British engineering praised following Nissan’s decision to produce the Qashqai and the X-Trail at its Sunderland plant. We have ratified the Paris agreement on climate change to keep the global temperature rise to below 2° C. With the national minimum wage increasing and the number of UK businesses at a record high, this Department is investing in our long-term industrial growth in an economy that works for everyone.

Stuart Andrew: This week, a delegation from the University of Leeds is focusing on encouraging research partnerships with businesses and academics in India, as part of the Prime Minister’s visit. Will my right hon.
Friend join me in commending Leeds University and businesses in the city for helping to build a reputation for the city as an excellent centre for learning and innovation?

Greg Clark: I will indeed join my hon. Friend in congratulating the University of Leeds. In fact, I initiated this week’s tech summit in India during a visit to India two years ago, so I am delighted that it is taking place. I took a party of vice-chancellors with me on that occasion. He is absolutely right that Leeds plays a formidable part in the scientific excellence of the north.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I can assure you, Mr Speaker, that no walls or media devices have been harmed in the formulation of this question—nor have they ever been.

In the light of the enthusiasm for workers’ rights expressed in yesterday’s debate by the Secretary of State, will he join me in offering his support to delivery riders? These workers are seeking union recognition as part of their fight against bogus self-employment and to secure employment rights, such as sick pay and holiday pay. Will he commit his Government to helping in whatever way they can?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman might have noticed that we have commissioned a review of these new employment practices, which Labour did not do when it was in government. There is perhaps a problem for him in that the review is being led by Matthew Taylor. I do not know whether the former head of the policy unit under Tony Blair counts as a person he trusts with the review; nevertheless, he is engaged with the review and will report to the Government and to the House.

T2. Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Returning to the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon project, does the Minister agree that a decision to proceed, making use of expertise in power generation provided by GE Energy in Rugby, would provide an opportunity for the UK to become a leader in this sector?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): I will not add to what we have already said about the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon, but I want to celebrate—the industrial strategy will celebrate—the work of world-leading companies such as GE Energy in my hon. Friend’s constituency and their capacity to benefit from opportunities arising from low-carbon technologies.

T3. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have always got on very well with the Secretary of State, but may I ask him not to be complacent? I have just been to a meeting of the leaders of Russell Group universities, who are saying that the sector is in meltdown post-Brexit in terms of staff, students, and research and innovation. What is the plan? I am known for asking, “What’s the plan, Stan?” What is his plan to put this right?

Greg Clark: Our universities and scientific institutions continue to be the best in the world. We are opening the Francis Crick Institute this very week, which is an emblem of our leadership in this sector. As the hon. Gentleman will see as we discuss our industrial strategy in the weeks and months ahead, I am determined that reinforcing the position of scientific excellence and innovation will be central to our economy and to how we project the strategy forward.

T6. Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): A key factor in the success of any industrial strategy is the ability of business and industry to access the communications and technical infrastructure they need to succeed. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure such access?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are to maintain and build on our position of excellence, we cannot be complacent about supporting infrastructure, including digital infrastructure. In my view, it needs an upgrade.

T5. Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The digital economy makes a big contribution in the UK, including in east London, with 43% of its exports going to other EU states. How do the Government plan to protect those exports after we have left the EU?

Jesse Norman: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that our digital infrastructure is critical to this country and its long-term economic and industrial strategy. I draw his attention to the report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which I used to chair, on BT’s under-investment in Openreach. If he thinks that there are specific questions to address, we should revisit them after he has seen the industrial strategy.

T7. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): As the UK is now only 60% self-sufficient in food production, what are the Government’s strategies to encourage the next generation to enter farming and help them to invest in future food production, and therefore help to safeguard our food security?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is a vital part of the economy. It is very important that more young people are brought into farming and given the chance to do this extraordinarily interesting and valuable pursuit. This country is highly food secure. The Government support new and young farmers through the increased basic payment scheme and the young farmers scheme. Farmers can also benefit from the basic payment scheme payments and are committed to increasing the number of apprenticeships in food and farming. I cannot resist adding that I hope that people will have a chance, in due course, to study agri-tech at the New Model in Technology and Engineering institute in Herefordshire.

T8. Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Ministers spoke earlier about securing the best possible trade deal for the UK in the context of Brexit, but what evidence does the Secretary of State have that a new UK-EU trade agreement can be completed within two years? Do the Government accept that if such an agreement is not possible, an interim transitional arrangement will be required?

Greg Clark: We first have to make sure, through consultation with business, industry and other groups across the country, that we get our negotiating mandate informed and right. Then we need to begin the negotiations and then we can make those judgments.
Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will publish discussion papers on the industrial strategy as soon as possible and that they will reflect contributions made by Members who took part in the recent debate in the House?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. I thank my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, including members of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, which is doing an inquiry into this. If an industrial strategy is to endure in the long term, it needs to be rooted in as great a consensus as can be achieved around it, and of course that will include contributions from Members of this House, and organisations and individuals outside it. I will engage them in those discussions over the months ahead.

T9. [907146] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Thousands of Marks & Spencer staff will be worried this morning by the announcement of the threat of closure facing 60 branches that have not been identified. In the light of the disgraceful treatment of BHS staff, what more can the Minister do to encourage Marks & Spencer to consult and engage fully with staff trade unions at the earliest opportunity?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Marks & Spencer has a good record of consulting its staff. It has a regional, a local and a national body, and it consults them widely on all its plans for any changes in terms and conditions. I would add that it is rather unfair on Marks & Spencer to put it in the same bracket as BHS.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Many people in Suffolk welcome plans for a major investment in rail. What discussions is the right hon. Gentleman and his Department having with the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU about trade barriers, protectionist dumping by the Chinese and the wider needs of the ceramic industry?

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): I repeat the reassurance that I gave earlier to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead), whom I should have welcomed to his brief. The Government remain committed to renewable energy and will be coming forward shortly with an announcement to prove that.
Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): As the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has highlighted, Ofgem’s review of embedded benefits and grid changes is in danger of having unintended consequences. One of these is the roll-out of energy storage. Will my right hon. Friend agree to look into this particular problem?

Jesse Norman: Yes.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State look urgently at today’s announcement by the Royal Bank of Scotland on its funding of repayments to small businesses? Will he produce a report on the Government’s response and place it in the Library, so that we can see the Government’s view of this approach by RBS?

Greg Clark: I have not seen the report. I will have to consider it and I will then, of course, write to the right hon. Gentleman with my reaction to it.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I commend to the Secretary of State and his team the final report of the Energy and Climate Change Committee, and particularly our recommendations on energy storage and demand-side management. I encourage my right hon. Friend to enact some of those recommendations, so that we can upgrade our energy system.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend provides me with an opportunity to thank all members of that Select Committee for their forensic work during its time in this House. It made very valuable contributions to public policy, and I know that its successor Committee will continue the high standard that it set. I will indeed pay close attention to the recommendations of the final report.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The restoration and renewal of this building will be a multi-billion pound infrastructure project, but all the evidence suggests that at the moment this country does not have the skills to be able to deliver it. I urge the Secretary of State to set up a specific industrial strategy to get more colleges up and down the country engaged in training people for major infrastructure and construction businesses, so that we can make sure that every single one of our constituents has an opportunity to work here?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As we acquire what I hope will be growing order books for UK companies and businesses, we will be able to fulfil them by having a workforce that is trained and skilled to the right level. The hon. Gentleman illustrates that very well.
Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question, I should like to make a brief statement.

As the House will know, one of my priorities as Speaker is to support the development of emerging and developing democracies around the world. I believe that we all have a duty, as parliamentarians, to support and to champion those who are fighting for democracy in what are often difficult and challenging situations. Accordingly, I am pleased to inform the House that I am today launching a new initiative, the Speaker’s Democracy Award. The intention is to allow the House to recognise and celebrate individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the development of democratic societies and institutions across the world. I will be writing to all Members later today with more information about the award, and to invite colleagues to suggest the names of individuals who should be considered for it.

I should like to thank, very warmly, the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) and the hon. Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) for agreeing to serve with me on the Committee that will make the award, as well as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who initially suggested the idea to me. I hope that colleagues will nominate candidates, and thereby support this initiative to recognise those who are doing so much for the cause of democracy.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the planned United Nations vote on the validity of a UN independent expert for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I thank the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for her question, and warmly welcome her reappointment to the Front Bench.

As the House may know, the issue before us concerns the United Nations Human Rights Council and its recent very welcome decision to create the post of independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity, or, in House parlance, what we could call LGBT. The person chosen for that role was Mr Vitit Muntarbhorn, from Thailand. The United Kingdom was successfully re-elected to the Human Rights Council only last month, but we are now having to campaign in New York, where a group of African delegations have challenged the mandate of the independent expert and are trying to reverse the decision and the appointment. I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me an opportunity to explain the steps we are taking, which I am certain will enjoy the support of the whole House.

We are obviously strongly opposed to this attempt to reverse the mandate and to block the final approval of the process—something that should be seen as straightforward and procedural.

Opponents of this important mandate misunderstand its nature, which is proportionate and was properly established by the Human Rights Council. Since Friday night, when we discovered that this was happening, the UK’s entire diplomatic network has been making that point in every capital across the globe. Only this morning, for instance, my noble Friend Baroness Anelay, who is visiting Sri Lanka, secured the agreement of her hosts in Colombo to join us by supporting an amendment tabled by a group of Latin American countries, which were the main proponents of the appointment in the first place.

The Government, and all in the House, believe that the chance to live with dignity, free from violence or discrimination, should never be undermined by a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity. All people are born with equal rights, and should enjoy the protection of the United Nations. Acts of violence against LGBT people take place in all regions of the world, including our own. We condemn such violence and discrimination, and we strongly support the new independent expert in his work. We will resist any and all attempts to block his appointment and his mandate.

Sarah Champion: I thank the Minister for his upfront declaration of the Government’s intent on this matter. It is however frustrating that it took an urgent question to find out the Government’s position.

As the Minister said, in June of this year the UN Human Rights Council adopted an historic resolution mandating the appointment of an independent expert
on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. It effectively created the first ever UN LGBT human rights watchdog. The motion before the UN General Assembly by the African nations today could reverse that decision, aiming to defer consideration of, and action on, this Human Rights Council resolution. The motion seeks to suspend, and potentially get rid of, the UN independent expert on LGBT violence and discrimination.

This motion has a realistic chance of passing, securing votes from the African Group and many of the nations within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. It is crucial that this matter should be raised in the Chamber because it is concrete evidence of the systematic attempt to frustrate the protection and advancement of LGBT human rights internationally.

In many countries persecution based on who people love or are sexually attracted to, or on their gender identity, is extreme. Often, this discrimination and violence is state-sanctioned. According to a UN human rights report last year, at least 76 countries retain laws that criminalise and harass people on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity. This includes fines, torture, hard labour, forced “conversion” therapy, lifelong prison sentences, and the death penalty.

The UK is a tolerant country, yet according to Galop, a UK-based anti-violence LGBT charity, we have seen a 147% increase in hate crimes against LGBT people in July, August, and September of this year, with one in four gay young people having experienced homophobic bullying. I know the Minister is as appalled as I am at these statistics and agrees with me that it is crucial symbolically, politically and practically that the actions of the UK put a stop to this persecution once and for all and that we are strong in our condemnation of this motion. So I ask the Government to take this opportunity to show zero tolerance to violence and discrimination against LGBT people in all its forms and offer a firm commitment to working with our international allies to eradicate violence, hatred and intolerance towards people based on their gender or sexuality.

I specifically ask the Secretary of State to clarify a couple of points. Has the UK’s position been made clear to other member states ahead of the potential vote, specifically the African nations? What work are the Government undertaking to promote LGBT rights abroad both through the UN and in regular interactions with individual nation states? Finally, does the Minister intend to make his view on the Africa Group motion public and will he make a statement following the General Assembly meeting today, to update the House on this matter?

Sir Alan Duncan rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like to think that the House of Commons is public. I think I understand that the hon. Lady would like further elaboration, but I hope we are public here, and I must say that the Minister has not knowingly been understated over the years or inclined to express himself quietly in the background— unlike me.

Sir Alan Duncan: I do not think I dissent from a word the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has said; we are as one, and obviously I have a deep personal interest in this issue. I commend her on raising this matter for the very point Mr Speaker has just made: we are making this public through the House and this is a very useful opportunity for the House to do so. May I also say that the hon. Lady is well-named for the purpose she has adopted today?

This issue has not been publicly aired in great detail already because it has sprung up rather suddenly; it is an emerging issue that requires fast-moving diplomatic effort. It is unusual for something to be decided in the Human Rights Council and then go to the General Assembly with that assembly used as a forum to try to block something. This does not normally happen, and indeed it should not happen in this way.

The hon. Lady asked whether the UK’s view is clear. I think it now is, and the view of a united House of Commons will redouble the view of the Government. We make our view on LGBT issues very clear in all our diplomatic representations overseas. For example, advancing the interests and rights of LGBT people is very much a part of many of our Department for International Development programmes. She asked whether we will make public what happens. I think that this will be followed, although whether it justifies a statement will depend on Mr Speaker. Our views will be very clear, however, and I can assure the House that we will be fighting in every capital in the world to ensure that this decision goes the right way.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): A depressing number of the countries that are likely to vote for this resolution are members of the Commonwealth. Can my right hon. Friend update the house on the potential vote? What further work is the Foreign Office doing to take the Commonwealth countries on the same journey that the rest of the world is on in relation to rights for LGBT people?

Sir Alan Duncan: This is a long and continuing journey of persuasion for many Commonwealth countries, and it is always very disappointing that some of them do rather lag behind on this issue. I can assure my hon. Friend that every single post in our diplomatic network has been issued with clear instructions to make representations to get their country to vote in the right way in the General Assembly, where we expect the decision to take place either today or on Thursday.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): First, may I commend the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing this urgent question? I should also like to commend the Minister for his response. It appears that we have finally found some common ground. The Scottish National party was delighted when the United Nations Human Rights Council delivered its historic vote in June mandating the appointment of an independent expert for the LGBT community. This reaffirmed one of the UN’s key principles that everyone is equal in dignity and in rights. Anyone who truly believes in equality knows that no single equality is more virtuous or more worthy than any other, and I am sure everyone across the Chamber will agree that we must stand up for them all.

We are deeply concerned that this progress has suffered a major setback with the group of African states planning to force a vote today in the General Assembly to revoke the appointment of the independent expert for the
LGBT community. Distressingly, the vote might pass, so the UK Government and the Foreign Secretary must do everything possible and use every possible channel to prevent this loathsome resolution from being approved. The Foreign Secretary’s diplomacy skills are needed now more than ever. The Minister has mentioned Sri Lanka, and perhaps the Prime Minister has secured India’s support during her trip to India. What other international counterparts have the UK Government spoken to ahead of the vote today? What efforts are they making to ensure support for a vote against the resolution? It is clear that the Minister understands that the UK’s action on this matter is critical. Will he assure us that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will leave absolutely no stone unturned in ensuring equality for all?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am pleased and delighted to agree wholly with the hon. Lady. I can assure her that no stone will remain unturned. We are looking at a complete starburst of diplomatic effort to try to corral votes for this purpose in the General Assembly. Indeed, we are starting from an alliance of considerable diplomatic effort. We are proud to be a member of the new equal rights coalition, which is made up of more than 30 states, and we also contribute funds to support LGBT rights projects globally.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I was honoured to be present on behalf of the all-party group on global LGBT rights, which I chair, at September’s high-level United Nations meeting. At that meeting, the Secretary-General applauded the appointment of the independent expert, saying that it was an “historic step”. Is it not the case that so many of the groups that face discrimination across the world regard the stance of the United Nations on this matter as an immense encouragement in the promotion and valuing of human rights, and that the continuing appointment of the independent expert to translate international principles of humanitarian law into practical action and ensure that they are enforced will be immensely important?

Sir Alan Duncan: I wholly agree with my right hon. Friend, whose question gives me the opportunity to say that the chosen person, Mr Vitit Muntarbhorn, is a well-respected human rights campaigner of the highest quality and character. There are absolutely no grounds whatsoever for questioning the choice of him for this purpose.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that LGBT rights are human rights and that, as such, they are indivisible from any of the other human rights that we are so proud that the UN tries to enforce? Will he accept from me the very best wishes of the LGBT community in the battle he now leads within the UN? If this human rights advocate is voted against and taken away from the UN, that will be a huge setback in the fight to make change in the 76 countries that criminalise LGBT people and use the law to oppress them.

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally agree with the hon. Lady and am grateful for her good wishes. I hope that the vision of Members from across the Chamber agreeing on this issue will send out a strong message to any country or person who thinks that they should vote the other way or have an opinion that goes against what we would like to see.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is it not the case that the UN expert is being appointed to protect individuals in many countries from violence based on their sexual orientation? He is not being appointed to promote or to take a particular view on sexual orientation in those countries. It will be a dark day for the United Nations if it turns its face away from somebody who is trying to protect those who should have the same rights that we enjoy in this country.

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The appointment is about protecting principles as he has described. How anyone can wish to challenge that is quite beyond me.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): When I was a Foreign Office Minister, I was told by one leader of a Commonwealth country that I would not be welcome to visit, so we have come quite a long way. I thank the Minister for what he is doing. Is it not time to make our generous aid conditional on respect for all humans’ rights?

Sir Alan Duncan: I obviously speak for the Foreign Office, not the Department for International Development, but I am a former DFID Minister. The issue of conditionality always raises the moral question of stopping money, but that would then harm the impoverished people we are trying to help. It is not as straightforward as the right hon. Gentleman suggests, but I take on board the importance of campaigning strongly and using any budget and expenditure to maximise our influence over this issue.

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister and am glad to hear about the Government’s stance. As someone who was beaten unconscious some years ago because of his sexuality, I know how isolated one can feel after being attacked. Does the Minister agree that this appointment is incredibly important for people across the world who are being persecuted because of their sexuality?

Sir Alan Duncan: Unfortunately, people get persecuted or beaten up for their sexuality in all too many places. That is exactly what we, through our efforts abroad, and the United Nations want to stop. The appointment of this champion—if I may use that word again—is essential. We must ensure that no one is able to block it.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister’s strong statement and the powerful all-party support for what he has said today. I want to ask about a particular Commonwealth country: South Africa. After apartheid, South Africa adopted a constitution that included provisions against discrimination on the grounds of sexuality. What representations are the Government making to South Africa to encourage it to break with other African countries and vote for the amendment from the Latin American and Caribbean countries?
Sir Alan Duncan: My personal regional responsibilities do not include South Africa, so I am not familiar with the exact detail to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but I have no doubt that he is absolutely accurate. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ensure that the responsible Minister writes to the hon. Gentleman.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Apart from certain African countries, how far beyond Africa into the middle east and Asia is this problem evident?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is broader than Africa. Of course, one does not always know everything in advance about how a country will vote. The process needs to be one that secures an assurance that countries will vote the right way. However, the issue obviously does go further and that is why every single diplomatic post where we have an ambassador and representation has been absolutely, clearly and unequivocally instructed to try to persuade their host country to vote the right way in the General Assembly.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister take this opportunity to celebrate the universality of rights relating to sexual orientation and gender identity? Will he press for them to be linked to existing human rights instruments?

Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman always cleverly hides a technicality in his question, but I certainly endorse universality. Such rights are inalienable and do not depend on where someone lives. Human rights are for everybody, regardless of age, location or anything else.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The sad truth is that gay men in particular are still being persecuted in Russia and beaten up by the police. Gay men in Iran are still being executed for their sexuality. Gay men in so many other countries around the world can be arrested or imprisoned simply for holding hands. I therefore entirely endorse everything that the Minister has said today. However, is it not a particular irony for British people that 90% of those who live in Commonwealth nations live in countries where homosexuality is illegal because we, the British, wrote those colonial laws? Is it not time that we took that as an important part of campaign for a better world?

Sir Alan Duncan: Many of those Commonwealth laws are totally out of date, highly inappropriate and should be changed. The Commonwealth system, our diplomatic efforts abroad and, indeed, this House, with all the contacts that individual Members of Parliament have across the world, should all be used to the full for that objective.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Over 400 million people live in countries where being gay is punishable by death, so I strongly welcome what the Minister has said at the Dispatch Box today. I commend the Government’s efforts to defeat the resolution. I want the Minister to consider two issues carefully. First, further to the points of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), what leadership role can the UK Government play within the Commonwealth to try to see further progress for LGBT people living in Commonwealth countries who are victims of rules written up by the British?

Secondly, will the Minister look at the advice that the Foreign Office gives to the Home Office on people seeking asylum in this country? A constituent of mine, Joan Tumwine Ayebare, a lesbian asylum seeker from Uganda, is currently at risk of deportation back to that country. She has been splashed across the front pages of the Ugandan press, and her life and safety would undoubtedly be at risk if she returned, so will he consider the advice and ask his colleagues in the Home Office to review that case in particular?

Sir Alan Duncan: No such representations have been made to the Home Office in the past, but I am sure that they will be. The hon. Gentleman’s question also illustrates another human right: the right to life. It is therefore an essential part of our policy to oppose the death penalty in every single country where we make representations—particularly those in which we have interests and programmes on which we are spending money. The influence of the United Kingdom in the Commonwealth can go only so far in that its members are independent, self-governing countries. It is good that they are part of this broader organisation—the Commonwealth—but we have to use our influence as best we can and do not have complete power over them. Those days have long since gone. They are voluntary members of the Commonwealth, but I assure the House that we always use our best influence wherever we can and will continue to do so.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I concur with the remarks made by several Members about the Commonwealth. Will the Minister say a little more about Russia? In recent days, tweets have been put out by the Russian Foreign Ministry and repeated by Russia’s embassy in this country that are disparaging and derogatory towards gay people—part of a pattern of behaviour by Putin. How confident is the Minister that other countries in Europe are not being influenced by the Putin propaganda that is on our Freeview channels every day and put out through the internet and social media?

Sir Alan Duncan: When a country’s official apparatus adopts such attitudes and uses social media, it takes behaviour to utterly unacceptable new heights. We of course condemn any kind of attacks on gay people, but when they are perpetrated by a country and deliberately, it is even more deplorable than the many other ways in which we see such opinions expressed.
Points of Order

1 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Justice Secretary contacted you to say that she intends to make a statement to this House before recess on the crisis of violence and disorder in our understaffed prisons, in light of the disturbance at Bedford prison, and the murder at, and escapes from, Pentonville prison?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer is: no, I have received no such indication. It is only fair to remind the House, and to point out to others who might not have been aware of the fact in the first place, that there was a statement by the Secretary of State last week—last Thursday, if my memory serves me correctly. It is true enough that there have been further incidences of violence since then, but there has not been a request to make a statement today. Doubtless these matters will be returned to, as appropriate, in due course.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. First, may I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests in my capacity as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group? On 20 October, in business questions, I asked for a debate in Government time on reforms to the civil service compensation scheme. On 21 October, I wrote to the Paymaster General on behalf of the PCS parliamentary group seeking a meeting to discuss that issue. May I also remind you, Mr Speaker, that early-day motion 310 has the signatures of 99 Members of this House who are concerned about this issue? The Government intend today to issue a written statement which seeks automatically to impose changes to the terms and conditions of civil servants via reforms to the civil service compensation scheme. That is being done without the agreement of 98% of public consultation respondents, of whom there were 3,000. Can you inform me whether the Paymaster General will come before the House to make an oral statement on this issue, so that Members who are very concerned about it can raise questions? Or are there other mechanisms by which Members can raise this important issue on behalf of millions of public sector workers who deliver public services?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The short answer to him is that if a Minister wished to make an oral statement to the House, I would have received notification of that intention by now. Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that a Minister is looking to make a statement to the House today. I am familiar with the issue to which the hon. Gentleman alludes. It would not be proper for me to enter into a debate about it. I note the particular facts that he places on the record, but I am aware of counter arguments to which Ministers subscribe. It is only fair to point out that this matter has been the subject of discussion over a considerable period; in other words, it has not suddenly arisen now. It does not seem likely that it will be treated of today by anyone other than the hon. Gentleman, but he has used the parliamentary mechanism open to him to register his concern. Doubtless, given that he is a tenacious terrier, he will return to the subject after he has rested himself.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): He could get another signature.

Mr Speaker: He may, indeed, attract further signatures in the process, as the hon. Gentleman helpfully observes from a sedentary position.
Small and Medium Sized Co-operative Development

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

1.4 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide a dedicated team of civil servants to be set up within the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to act as a champion for co-operatives and—in line with the Prime Minister’s thinking—to examine ways of developing a more inclusive society that works for working people. The proposals in the Bill are small but critical to that approach.

On 3 December we will be celebrating small business Saturday. Let us give small co-operative businesses an additional reason to celebrate by supporting the Bill today.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered,
That Mr Adrian Bailey, Mr Barry Sheerman, Mrs Louise Ellman, Stephen Doughty, Luciana Berger, Mr Gavin Shuker, Mr Gareth Thomas, Anna Turley and Christina Rees present the Bill.

Mr Adrian Bailey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February 2017 and to be printed (Bill 90).

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House notes recent proposals by the Government to expand the role of grammar and faith schools; and calls on the Government to conduct a full assessment of the evidence relating to the effect of grammar schools and faith schools on children's learning.

Today's debate asks the Minister to consider the evidence before making profound changes to education policy that will affect children, their lives, their communities and our prospects as a country for many decades to come. There is a raft of evidence on the impact of grammar schools on the children in them, and on the children outside them. We know that children who get into grammar schools are more than five times less likely to be on free school meals. We know from the Department for Education itself that they are less likely to have special educational needs. We know that children who previously attended independent schools are over-represented in grammar school intakes. For these and many other reasons, we know that grammar schools, as the Government have at times acknowledged, and as the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) eloquently put it in a piece he wrote this morning, are not engines of social mobility.

Most children do not get into grammar schools, and the situation for disadvantaged children in this country is particularly stark. The Government's case, which appears to be based on the notion that an expansion of grammar school places increases parental choice, is pretty flawed and pretty limiting. If someone cannot get into a grammar school, its existence has not given them a choice—it has given them a problem. That the Government have a plan only for some children in this country was revealed pretty well by the Education Minister Lord Nash, who said recently that under the Government's plans parents will have a choice between a highly performing grammar school and a highly performing academy, which may well suit that pupil better."

But where is the choice for children who do not get into those grammar schools?

The Secretary of State recently suggested that university technical colleges might provide an alternative. I welcome her focus on UTCs—I have one in my constituency, in Wigan—and given the recruitment problems many of them have faced, leading to the closure of three, and to two not even opening, and the fact that provision in them, which Sir Michael Wilshaw recently called "patchy", ranges all the way from outstanding to poor, this is an area that deserves her attention. However, her proposal is troubling because, in essence, she is proposing the tripartite system of old, which collapsed last time, for many reasons, including because local authorities could not afford to establish and sustain that system. What in the funding crisis that this Government have created for local authorities makes her think that it would be different this time?

The new plans will create a great cost. We do not yet know, however, how much they will cost. In the consultation paper, the Government set out that they are planning to...
allocate £50 million a year to this experiment in education. This morning, however, when he appeared before the Select Committee on Education, the Minister said that he did not know how many grammar schools might emerge. The Green Paper also suggests that the Department will ask independent schools or universities to set up new schools or sponsor others as part of its bid to get all schools up to standard. How much will that cost? So far, the Government do not know and have not said. At a time when school budgets are under serious pressure in communities around the country, this is simply not good enough.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The hon. Lady talks about the cost of the proposals. Is she aware that grammar schools such as those in Kent and in my constituency tend to get lower per-pupil funding under the funding formula? Even though they receive a relatively low financial settlement, the vast majority are outstanding schools giving an excellent education.

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Lady makes my point for me. Grammar schools tend to receive a lower funding allocation because, as the Minister has admitted, they tend not to take children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the funding formula is skewed to provide additional funding for children from such backgrounds. In 2016, in Britain, we can do better than this.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister who will reply to the debate was a member of the Select Committee when I was the Chair. We looked at this question and we specifically considered Kent, but we had the rule that we should have evidence-based policy. Where is the evidence that people in Kent or outside Kent benefit from an educational system that is split in this horrendous way?

Lisa Nandy: I do not always agree with my hon. Friend on these issues, but I certainly agree with him on that point. The issue of funding and how we spend resources that, as a result of choices made by this Government, are incredibly scarce, is important.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): One way in which funds can be spent appropriately is through faith schools. In Leicester we have St Paul’s Catholic School, the Hindu Krishna Avanti Primary School, the Sikh Falcons Primary School and the Madani Muslim schools. It is important that if parents wish to send their children to faith schools, they are allowed to do so, but such schools should be vehicles for integrating communities; they should not be exclusive, but open.

Lisa Nandy: I agree with my right hon. Friend’s point about integrating communities. This highlights the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). There are many types of school that provide a good education, and provided that they are inclusive, have a broad curriculum and work hard to serve the needs of their community, they do very well by their children. The important thing behind today’s motion is that hon. Members on both sides of the House, most of whom are troubled by the Government’s plans, but some of whom support them, would like the Government to proceed on the basis of evidence, especially as schools face a £600 million black hole since the Government abandoned their Education Bill, leaving councils around the country to pay for educational services without the grants to do so.

In their consultation document, the Government make a number of wide-ranging commitments to support their grammar schools plan, but they have not said yet whether this will be new money from the Treasury, or money taken from a schools budget that is already being cut for the first time in nearly two decades. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who has consistently campaigned against the Government’s proposals, has repeatedly asked for this information; could we finally have it today?

The Secretary of State is apparently consulting on the school funding formula at the same time. The Green Paper says: “We will ensure that the formula rewards those schools that support schools with a higher proportion of lower attaining pupils and those from less wealthy households.” Surely the issue of funding should be resolved first. Surely we should know how big the funding pot is and how the funds will be allocated before we are asked to respond to a consultation and vote on proposals that will have profound consequences for children in this country.

There is also reason to believe that people travel further to attend grammar schools. What assessment have the Government done of the additional cost of transport for children under their proposals? The proposed pot is £50 million a year for new grammar schools, but how much in total do the Government plan to allocate to the whole programme? If adequate funding is not forthcoming, that is another reason why children may be well disadvantaged under the plans.

There are other reasons, based on the evidence, to believe that the proposals will make life worse for children in this country. In their consultation document, the Government rightly identified a group of children whose parents are struggling to get by, but who are not eligible for free school meals. That group is much larger because, as the Minister has admitted, they tend not to the whole programme? If adequate funding is not forthcoming, that is another reason why children may be well disadvantaged under the plans.

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Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting those aspects. I will say a little more about them in a moment, but in the meantime, I pay tribute to her for the work that she has done to make sure that we do not forget about the importance of investing in young people in their early years, not least because one of the great problems with the Government’s proposals is that by the age of 11, disadvantaged pupils are already 10 months behind their peers, and so are less likely to be able to pass that entrance exam and have a fair chance.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The hon. Lady seems to be opposed to the Government consulting on these matters and opposed to choice, which Conservative Members support. What evidence does she have that children in Buckinghamshire are disadvantaged? We have 13 grammar schools, seven of them the lowest-funded schools in the country, and 90% of our schools are good or outstanding. There is no evidence showing anything other than the grammar school system in Buckinghamshire providing a good education right across the board to all children.

Lisa Nandy: The very troubling question for the right hon. Lady is: where is the choice for children who cannot get into the grammar schools? The Education Policy Institute recently produced research that showed that the more highly selective an area, the worse the schools are, disadvantaging everyone. I will happily give way to the right hon. Lady again if she will tell me what she would say to a child stuck in a system where education standards are worse due to the highly selective areas. I will happily give an answer, but I hope that he will have an answer by the time he responds to the debate.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, in my local authority of Trafford we have selective education. We also have high-performing schools, but they do not perform well for every child, and particularly not for the most disadvantaged. Nor does every parent, or indeed the majority of parents, get a choice of school. Most parents, if they put their child forward for the entrance examination for the grammar school, find that their child is not successful and is not admitted. The choice of which school their child goes to is made by the schools, not by the parents.

Lisa Nandy: I suspect that the Minister would reply that the Government want to expand the number of places in grammar schools, so that more children will get in. There is no question but that grammar schools outperform non-selective schools in terms of exam results, but the Government make a great leap in claiming that grammar schools are somehow intrinsically better for the children in them than other similar schools in the area. I want the Minister to consider for a moment that there is evidence to the contrary.

We know that when grammar schools were the norm, working-class children were far more likely to drop out of those schools. The Robbins report revealed that only 2% of children whose parents were semi-skilled or low skilled then went on to university. The Minister’s claim that disadvantaged grammar school pupils are more likely to go on to a Russell Group university, which I have heard him repeat often, is based on research that does not control for prior attainment. He also often mentions the Sutton Trust research. The 2011 report concluded:

“Given their selective intake, grammar schools would appear to be underrepresented among the most successful schools for Oxbridge entry”.

All I am asking the Minister to do is consider the whole range of evidence on this subject and base education policy on it accordingly. This morning before the Education Committee we saw what happens when Ministers do not do that. He was forced to admit that in areas of selection, the impact on children in non-selective schools is mixed. Until now, he has been fond of citing one report by the Sutton Trust, which says that there is no negative effect on children who are not in grammar schools in areas where there is selection, but against that the Education Committee was able to cite Dr Becky Allen, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Education Policy Institute, and the education journalist Chris Cook, who found that the only thing that shifts in areas where
selection is introduced is who does well, not how many do well, and that, put simply, the better-off do well at the expense of the rest.

Policy Exchange set out clearly the stark impact in terms of lost opportunities and earnings for those who do not attend grammar schools, and the Institute for Social and Economic Research says that for girls there was some raised wage potential, but not for boys.

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): The evidence this morning was that there was no negative effect in areas of selection or a slight negative effect of one tenth of a grade in those pupils in non-grammar schools in selective areas. There are other reports that say that the negative effect is slightly higher, but what the hon. Lady is describing and what those reports are describing is the current situation, and it is the situation that prevailed when Labour was in power for 13 years. The consultation document seeks to find a solution to that problem by requiring all new grammar schools that are established and all grammar schools that want to expand to help raise the academic standard in those non-selective schools in those areas—something that her Government did not propose, and her party today are not proposing.

Lisa Nandy: What I am asking the Minister to understand is that this new approach set out in the consultation document is based on no evidence. If he says that we have to discount all the evidence that we have had about the education system thus far, it is incumbent on the Government to prove that this new, expensive approach, which will be highly disruptive to children’s education and to the education system as a whole, will be better for children. This morning at the Education Committee the Minister was forced to admit that there is no evidence that it will be better.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) put to the Minister a simple proposition: there are areas of the country, as we have already heard, where selection still exists. Kent is the one that my hon. Friend mentioned to the Minister when he said that if the Minister is so sure that the new system will work and if he is so keen to explore new ways of working, why does he not pilot it in one area of the country. I ask him please not to inflect an experiment based on such flimsy evidence on millions of children who cannot afford for the Government to fail.

Mr Sheerman: As chair of the advisory board of the Sutton Trust, I get sick to death of Ministers in this Government quoting Sutton Trust research out of context and selectively. They should read the report and see what the Sutton Trust actually says.

Lisa Nandy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I was reflecting this morning when I listened to the evidence session that education policy is always plagued by ideology and by personal experiences. No Government have ever managed to escape from that, but I have never heard a Minister rely as selectively on the evidence base as I heard this morning. What the Government propose to do will have profound consequences for children. I welcome the fact that they are consulting, but I do not welcome the fact that so far, based on everything that I have seen from the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the Minister’s evidence this morning, the Government are not listening.

The consultation paper says that the Government might ask grammar schools to “take a proportion of pupils from lower income households. This would ensure that selective education is not reserved for those with the means to move into the catchment area or pay for tuition to pass the test”.

That highlights a very real problem and it is a very strong statement. Can the Minister tell us what he means by it? Many free schools introduced in the previous Parliament by Ministers in the Government in which he served claimed to be inclusive, because the proportion of children on free school meals that they took was similar to the national average. However, a closer look at what those free schools were doing revealed that many, such as the West London free school, were admitting as high a proportion of children on free school meals as the national average, but fewer children on free school meals than in the local community. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government are committed to schools that reflect their neighbourhoods and, if so, whether he means by that statement in the consultation document that schools will reflect the levels of disadvantage and diversity in their own communities?

The plans for a more inclusive intake get thinner by the minute. As I said earlier, by the age of 11 disadvantaged children are 10 months behind their peers. Does the Minister have any evidence that asking grammar schools to work with primary schools, which seems to be the big idea to address the issue, will eradicate that difference? How quickly does he think that will happen? More troubling is the finding from the Education Policy Institute that the more selective an area, the fewer the benefits to children in grammar schools. A wealth of evidence already exists. When that is assessed against the Government’s stated goals, it shows their plans to be deeply, deeply flawed.

The consultation paper makes no mention of the impact on society. It is not that long since the Conservatives had a party leader who appealed to their one-nation tradition. Surely no Government of that one-nation stripe would seek to deny children and young people in this country the opportunity to get to know one another. Surely the goal of an education system is to give every child the opportunity to fulfil their potential, both academically and socially, and to allow children to gain social enlightenment, not just social advantage, and live a larger, richer, deeper life as a consequence.

Instead, this Government appear to be set on a path that will pit children against one another and make losers of us all. The tragedy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) has highlighted so often, is that there are real problems in the education system. Attracting and retaining teachers remains one of our biggest challenges. The National Audit Office report highlighted a shocking rise in the number of teacher vacancies between 2011 and 2014. In the face of this, it is baffling why the Government are rushing headlong down a road that will make the situation worse. A poll for The Times Educational Supplement found that more than half of teachers would not work in a grammar school. Three quarters of teachers and headteachers are opposed to these plans. Why does the Minister think he knows better than all of them?

It would make more sense if the Government said, “Look, we’ve considered every option for dealing with some of the problems in our schools system. We can’t find anything else that works, so this is something that
we are prepared to try”, but I saw recently that the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) had asked the Government whether they had considered the merits of streaming children in comprehensive schools, rather than pursuing the grammar schools route. The answer came back that they had not. This is the worst sort of dogma, of which we have seen too much in education policy over the years. Worse than that, it will cost the nation dearly.

There is no other country in the world that is proceeding in the direction of trying to segregate children over and over again. Poland, for example, which has delayed selection in recent years to improve its results, has seen a boost in maths, reading and science as a result. Finland used to be a favourite of Education Ministers. When I served on the Education Committee, we used to hear a lot from the former Education Secretary about how brilliant Finland was. We went to have a look for ourselves. It is one of the least selective countries in the world.

Many counties are now trying to end the divide between technical, vocational and academic education, recognising that in the decades to come most of us will need a combination of all three. The hon. Member for Stroud and I visited Germany a few years ago to look at its education system. As Sir Michael Wilshaw recently pointed out, Germany has had a similar model for most of the post-war years and is now attempting to disassemble it, because of worries about its effects both on students and on the country’s productivity, not to mention international rankings.

In the coming years, we will succeed less for what we know, and more for how we use that knowledge. The system of education that this Government are pursuing was not fit for the economy of the 1950s, let alone that of the 2020s and a world in which Britain stands outside the European Union, and we urgently need to address our growing skills gap.

This morning, the Minister told the Education Committee that those who shout the loudest in opposition to his plans are doing the least to address the problems we face. Let me say to him now, on behalf of everybody who cares about children’s education in this country, that that is profoundly offensive. Let me ask him first to put the interests of children above party politics. Will he acknowledge that the previous Labour Government put significant funding into the education system, bringing us up to the European average after years of our schools being terribly and harmfully neglected? As a result, we saw a 31% rise in the proportion of children and young people getting good GCSEs, and I know that because I was working with them in the voluntary sector at the time. The difference in those years was stark: there were more teachers, better buildings, and IT facilities in schools, often for the first time.

One of the things we learnt in those years in government is that frequent interference in the education system can be incredibly damaging; it can undermine the morale of teachers and school leaders and children’s achievement. Perhaps the Government could learn from what Labour got wrong in office, but they should please also learn from what we got right.

If we are to try to end the dogma, let us think about how we learn from the best schools. This morning, the Minister said that grammar schools are very good—I have heard him say that repeatedly—but just for once could he admit that some comprehensive schools in this country are very good, too? The Education Policy Institute said in September:

“If you compare high attaining pupils in grammar schools with similar pupils who attend high quality non selective schools, there are five times as many high quality non selective schools as there are grammar schools.”

Sir Michael Wilshaw said this weekend:

“The latest research shows that the best comprehensives are doing better than grammar schools for the most able children.”

Why are the Government not praising them and looking to them?

I will tell Members why I think that is such a great problem. As Estelle Morris, the former Education Secretary, pointed out last month:

“Many selective schools do well by the children they choose, and of course they should contribute to education beyond their own doors. But does their success with bright, motivated young people from supportive home backgrounds give them the skills and experience to turn round schools with large numbers of struggling and disaffected children?”

The answer lies on Ministers’ own doorsteps, and if they would only take the ideological blinkers off, they would be able to see it for the benefit of children. The Minister recently admitted in a Westminster Hall debate on grammar school funding that grammar schools are, by definition, unlikely to take children who are struggling or on free school meals. Why, then, would they be the major source of expertise on how to help those children succeed?

Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), there are lessons we can learn about what works. The most dramatic improvements in education that we have seen in my adult lifetime came as a result of the London Challenge programme, which brought comprehensive schools together to lift standards for all their children. We replicated that in Greater Manchester, where I live, with great success—so much so that, even when the Government dismantled the scheme, those teachers carried on working together because they said, “If there is a child in any school in Greater Manchester who is not doing well, that is our collective responsibility and we will come together to sort it out.” They understand that collaboration is the key driver of school improvement, not competition, and that, as the OECD has repeatedly proven, strong autonomy coupled with strong accountability are the ingredients of a great education system.

Ministers have rightly pointed to the absurd situation we have at present where in some parts of the country we already have selection, by wealth and house price. I would have more sympathy with that argument if the Government had not pushed through a benefits cap that has socially cleansed large areas of the country and forced tens of thousands of poorer families to move out of inner London, and if they had not introduced a model of free schools in the last Parliament that allowed schools to draw their own catchment areas and exclude poorer areas.

The answer to the Minister’s problem is surely to make every school a good school. The fact that the Government appear to have completely given up on that, in Britain in 2016, is such a pitiful sight for young people in this country. There are far too many—.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, and I appreciate that she is speaking with passion and that the House is listening to what she is saying, but I will point out that, even though we have quite a lot of time this afternoon and there is not an awful lot of pressure, she has now been speaking for over half an hour—it has passed quickly, because she is speaking with such passion. She does not have to finish immediately, but I am sure that she will be drawing her speech to a close soon.

Lisa Nandy: As a matter of fact, Madam Deputy Speaker, I intend to draw to a close, by reminding the Minister that too many children in this country are unable to learn because of overcrowded housing, poverty and family pressures, and by telling him that the education maintenance allowance and Aimhigher, both of which were abolished by his Government, lifted the number of academic children in my constituency who went on to finish college and go to university by 40% in just six short years. Nothing that the Prime Minister, the Education Secretary or the Minister have said so far on the subject leads me to think that those children are their priority. Instead, they are fond of telling us when we object to policies based on such flimsy evidence that these policies are deeply popular.

I say to the Minister that there is a warning from history here. The Crowther report, commissioned by a Conservative Secretary of State in 1959, highlighted the public clamour that had grown up against a competitive element in grammar school selection. By 1964, when the Conservative party lost the general election, grammar schools had become deeply unpopular with three out of four voters, because segregated education is, by definition, divisive. Perhaps that is why the policy was set out not in his party’s manifesto, but in that of the UK Independence party, one of the most divisive forces in the country.

I will bring my remarks to a close, because many hon. Members wish to speak. In trying to divide children in this country, the Government have succeeded in uniting a range of voices, including the teaching unions, the chief inspector of schools, their own mobility tsar, the previous Education Secretary, the former Universities Minister, the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer and a significant number of MPs from all parties in the House. Together, we will ensure that the Government do better than this.

1.47 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me a great opportunity to discuss this issue once again today, because of course the Education Committee was at it this morning for two and a quarter hours. I must say that it is very impressive that both the Committee and the Chamber are busy dealing with the subject in this way. I wish that we were given an opportunity to do the same on matters connected with exiting the European Union, because it would be of great benefit if the Chamber could discuss those in similar detail.

One of the concerns with the whole question of grammar schools—this is proved by what I have just said—is that it is a bit of a distraction from some core requirements of our education policy, one of which, of course, is fairer funding. That was alluded to by the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who is a former member of the Education Committee. We cannot escape the fact that too many schools are suffering because of the unfair system for allocating money, and we have to get that right. I suggest that that is definitely a priority for the Government.

Another priority must be to make sure that all primary school children can make the transition from primary to secondary in a way that lands them well. A good landing requires numeracy, literacy, appropriate life skills and the sense of confidence that comes from having been to a proper and effective primary school.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that there is an interesting contrast in this country? In health, the money follows the patient, but in education the money does not follow the pupil. One of the challenges with the funding formula is that many children get educated in a different local education authority but not at the level of funding they would have received had they remained within their own authority.

Neil Carmichael: I thank my right hon. Friend for that very good point. It is clear that the disparities between authority areas, and therefore schools, is too great for us to be complacent. We must take action.

The third area of alternative priorities is the post-16 sector. Too many people in any year group post-16 are not proficient in numeracy or literacy. According to the OECD, backed up by the World Economic Forum, about 20% of any year group are not comfortable with numeracy and literacy. That is not good enough for a modern economy that aspires to be open and to conquer social mobility and productivity. We have to focus on what matters, so I repeat that the issue of grammar schools is something of a distraction.

Whatever we say about education policy, we must be mindful of two things. First, social immobility in this country is simply too great. The fact is that there are communities with too many young people who are basically trapped, and who stay trapped— that is the difficulty. That is the first issue that we must always think of when considering education. The second point, which is just as relevant, is productivity. If we can have a more productive economy, we will by definition have one with more skills and higher salaries and wages. That is a contribution to social mobility—enabling people to improve and develop. The two things are linked.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that the third issue should also be about social cohesion? Does he share my concern about some of the proposals on faith schools? I recognise the contribution that they make, but can he think of a single reason why the child of an atheist parent like myself should be excluded from a school because of their parents’ lack of faith? Does he also share my concern that 100% selection by faith risks driving communities into further segregation and does nothing to improve social cohesion?

Neil Carmichael: I thank my hon. Friend for that instructive intervention. It goes off the issue of grammar schools, which I was hoping to talk about, but she is right that the issue of faith schools should be addressed. I say two things. First, we must have an inclusive
society; we cannot parcel people up in that sector and say, “That’s you—off you go!” That is not acceptable. We must make sure that our faith schools do not do that and instead are all embracing. It is the outward-looking school, of whatever faith, that will do a good job.

Keith Vaz: I have mentioned successful faith schools in Leicester. My first school was a convent school in Aden, Yemen, and atheist children went to that school. The point made by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) is right: although such schools are faith-based, they need to be able to take people from other faiths. Many members of the Hindu faith attend Catholic St Paul’s school in Leicester. Faith schools can be a powerful force for integration as well as providing faith for those of a certain religion.

Neil Carmichael: One day I will have to get to Leicester, given that it had such a good football team and all the experiences that the right hon. Gentleman has highlighted. It is important for people of faith and atheists to learn about each other. That has to be the guiding light when we are talking about such schools and communities.

The Education Committee held an evidence-check session this morning because we believe in evidence, which must be the cornerstone of policy making. Of course, values matter too.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): My hon. Friend gathered valuable evidence from the excellence that he saw when he visited grammar schools in my constituency. Does he not recognise that that excellence across 163 schools is also valuable evidence from which we need to learn? We need to work out how we can magnify it across the country as a whole.

Neil Carmichael: I certainly did enjoy visiting the school in Salisbury and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to that visit. It was exceptional; we talked about politics and highlighted the great work of a former Member of this House, the right hon. Sir Edward Heath. I was pleased to do that, especially given that we are now discussing Brexit so frequently.

Grammar schools are good schools, but the question we have to ask ourselves all the time is about the heart of the matter. There are 3,500 secondary schools: what do we do about the 3,400 or so schools that we depend on for the vast majority of our teaching?

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): When we heard evidence this morning from Dr Becky Allen, who is the Chair of the Select Committee, she was of the view that selective systems are definitively not a force for social mobility. Does not following the evidence suggest that selection is not the way to go?

Neil Carmichael: I want to formally welcome the hon. Lady to the Education Committee; she spent her first two and a quarter hours with us this morning, and I trust that she will want to repeat the experience on a weekly basis. I am coming on to the evidence, but she is absolutely right: our witnesses were explicit.

We heard from a number of policy experts, academics and representatives from the Department as well as the Minister for School Standards himself. We had a feast of opportunity to probe these issues, and that is what we did. Witnesses told us that grammar schools do well but that schools in their surrounding areas suffer. That is fairly obvious if the best teachers and brightest pupils are pulled away.

One thing that was not properly addressed was the issue of capacity versus scale. We might well want to improve the capacity of schools, but if we do so by simply having more grammar schools, we risk weakening existing grammar schools by pulling pupils away from them. We heard from the Minister that many grammar school pupils are travelling three to four times the distance that they would ordinarily travel if they were going to a local school. That must suggest that the grammar school is picking up pupils from further away than their local area, so the issue of scale becomes relevant.

Professor David Jesson from the University of York said that reintroducing selective education is “perverse”—that might be extreme, but that is what he said. He went on to say that only 3% of grammar school pupils are on free school meals. Now, that is a fact—it is evidence. It may well be that grammar schools can be encouraged, stimulated or whatever to improve that figure, but it has been 3% for several decades. So the question must be, can we really expect it to rise? That is an issue the Minister for School Standards may well want to address in his closing remarks.

Suella Fernandes ( Fareham) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the comments he has made, but I am curious to know what he thought of the evidence we had heard in the Education Committee about comparisons with countries such as the Netherlands, Singapore and Hong Kong. Selection is a very strong part of their education systems, and they dramatically outperform Britain in the programme for international student assessment tables and other international tables when it comes to achievement.

Neil Carmichael: What I did think was slightly amusing was that, again, in this time of Brexit, we were given the example of the Netherlands as a country to emulate, given that we are departing from the European Union and that the Netherlands is a component part of it. I take the point, but it actually rests on another, which is that we have significant cultural differences with those countries—certainly with the other two my hon. Friend rightly mentioned. The issue of whether we can actually transpose their systems, when there is such a cultural difference, would raise a few questions.

Mr Gibb: At this time of Brexit, would my hon. Friend not share my worry that, of those level 5 pupils—those able children—leaving primary school who go to grammar school, 78% achieve the EBacc, including a foreign language, whereas only 52% of those who go to a non-selective school achieve the EBacc?

Neil Carmichael: The Minister is right in what he quotes, but the solution is really to make sure that those schools that are not doing well enough do better—I would have thought that that was elementary.
Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot have a one-size-fits-all approach, because there may be parts of the country—Cheltenham being one—where the comprehensive schools offer fantastic social mobility and fantastic value added? That might not be the case elsewhere, but it certainly is in Cheltenham, so we should intervene only with great care.

Neil Carmichael: I think I can agree with my hon. Friend—he is absolutely right. His constituency neighbours mine, and I obviously know the situation in Gloucestershire extremely well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Neil Carmichael: I am going to take just one more intervention, because I think you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are going to give me a telling-off like the one you really gave the hon. Member for Wigan.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for giving way—he is being very generous. Does he agree that quoting statistics about children who have been selected to go to a selective school to have a selective education is, by definition, not really a measure of the best solution for providing the best education for all children in this country?

Neil Carmichael: Yes, I would agree with that. The hon. Lady, who is also a member of my Select Committee—I will have to pay tribute to the whole lot of the Committee—and I obviously know the situation in Gloucestershire extremely well.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman is right, of course, that pupils who are selected and supported at home and who go to selective schools will, on the whole, do well. However, does he share my concern that, in my borough of Trafford, where we do have selective education, some grammar schools are beginning to see a rise in mental health problems among their students because of the academic pressures placed on those kids? Now, that can happen for a whole range of reasons, but it is certainly something that troubles headteachers in Trafford, and I wonder whether he would like to comment.

Neil Carmichael: I thank the hon. Lady. Lady very much for that interesting intervention. She is right about two things. The first is the specific point about children’s mental health being put under pressure in certain circumstances. However, there is also the wider issue of the mental health of young people, and we need to think carefully about that, because there is evidence that the number of children being affected by mental health issues is rising, and rising too fast. That is something that the Committee, which I note the hon. Lady is not a member of, will consider in due course.

I want to finish this section of my speech, on Professor Jesson’s observation. If grammar schools are introduced as new schools, they really must make a contribution to surrounding schools and feeder schools. One way for us to achieve that—rather than simply saying that we will punish grammar schools because they are not doing something we want to do and that those punishments will include, for example, no right to expand further—is to say that such schools should be part of a multi-academy trust. If they are going to be new schools, and if we insist on having them, they should be absolutely responsible for, and indeed charged with the task of, making sure that the schools around them are really improved through direct action.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chairman of the Select Committee for being so generous in allowing interventions. As I am not going to mention this in my speech in a moment, may I ask whether he is aware of the example of Bright Futures—just one of a number of examples—which emanated from a very good grammar school in the Trafford local authority area? It was then expanded to take on other schools, especially those with a high proportion of disadvantaged children, but it has palpably failed to turn those schools around, because it found that its expertise in dealing with highly able, highly advantaged children is not transferable to some more disadvantaged areas.

Neil Carmichael: I am aware of the goings on in Trafford. The Select Committee went up there to look not at grammar schools or any other schools but at aspects of child protection. However, I did notice what was going on, and I take the hon. Lady’s point.

The Committee noted that the current selective system favours children whose parents can afford to pay for tutoring, and that observation is absolutely right. One witness told us that entrance tests presuppose that a child’s ability is fixed, and we all know, if we have children, that that just is not the case. We have to have a testing system that takes into account the fact that children develop at different ages and in different ways, and one of the many problems with the testing systems we have had in the past is that they do not do that.

The evidence suggests that it would be extremely difficult to create a tutor-proof test, and we explored that in some detail in the Committee this morning. One suggestion is to bump up children on free school meals by a certain number of points to equalise things. That effectively proves that any test can be fixed to achieve any aim, so we have to be really careful about how we shape such a testing process. The Government really have to look at how a test would be shaped and calibrated to achieve the outcomes they suggest they wish to see. That test would be further complicated if the Government would, as they have suggested in the Green Paper, like different age groups to go through it. We could be talking about not just 11-year-olds, but 14-year-olds or 16-year-olds, for example, so different tests might be required for different years, and that is something that will need to be considered.

The Minister told us that the Government are “trying to end the correlation between disadvantaged backgrounds and poor performance...we want to break that link and that is what is driving our reforms.”

We, on the other hand, emphasised that what is important, beyond more choice, is improving outcomes. We have to be very careful about this. Outcomes matter most, and we should be using them to measure the schools system, rather than simply saying, “Aha, there’s plenty of choice.” Choice is a mechanism, not an outcome, and we must
not confuse the two. If we do, we lose sight of what is most important, which is equipping our young people to leave school, leave college and benefit from the opportunities that they ought to be benefiting from.

I asked the Department for Education’s chief scientific adviser about this issue. I always like asking such people questions because they can, in normal circumstances, isolate evidence, have control periods, and get down to what is really making the difference—although one can hardly do that in a school, as he acknowledged. He told us that this policy, “like all policies, requires improvement”.

I thought that was helpful, because it does, but he also acknowledged the consultation process that we are now going through. It is absolutely right that we have a period of consultation on this proposal and on other aspects of the education system.

The Committee heard some powerful evidence from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which was already in the news because of the forecasts connected to Brexit and the implications of falling taxable income. The institute told us something we already know—that the economy is completely different from what it was several decades ago. The sorts of young people we need are not academics and workers but we need them all to have skills. We know that because the evidence shows that we can produce only half the number of engineers we need each and every year and that one of the driving forces of migration has been a shortage of skills in our economy.

We will all be aware of firms or professional bodies in our constituencies that cannot recruit the people that they need. We therefore know that the institute is right.

That is why our education system must reach into every home with excellence. This is about making sure that every school can safely take on a pupil and guarantee them a first-class education. It is not about lifting some pupils out of a system because they are of one type or another, or providing opportunities for all children—excellence everywhere, which is, I think, the title, or at least part of the title, of a White Paper that we have considered. Let me reinforce that point by referring to the work of the OECD, which has already been cited. We know that the OECD likes autonomy, because it has told our Committee so several times, but it is not keen on selectivity. If we value the work that that independent organisation does in making international comparisons—I certainly do—then we should take some account of what it says. It is not particularly complimentary about the idea of having pupil selection, and we should remember that.

As I have said before, we need to have a large number of options for young people at secondary level. I describe that as fluidity—the fluidity for a young person to make the choices that they might want to make as they start thinking about their career options. That is why I am so keen on, for example, university technical colleges. It was terrible that during the ’60s and ’70s only 2% of any year group could get into a technical school. It is necessary to have good secondary schools in groups, so that they can help each other and give young people the opportunity to choose the direction of travel that suits them, on the basis of their aptitudes and ambitions, their knowledge of the economy and their employment opportunities. That is life fulfilment at its best.

It is really important that we link those things to what I said at the beginning about social mobility and economic productivity. Without both those objectives working effectively together and supporting each other, we will not make a success of anything in our country because we will be wasting talent and abandoning people. Instead, we must make sure that we use all our talents and do not leave people behind. That is what the education system should be about, that is why we are having this debate, and why the Minister is wise to have this consultation period. I hope that he responds to some of the points I have made.

2.15 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am very pleased to speak in this debate. It is the first opportunity I have had to speak in an education debate since I resigned from the shadow education brief. Almost a year ago, I led opposition to Government plans to open a so-called annexe of a grammar school in Kent. I cannot quite believe that in 2016 Britain we are seriously contemplating a return to selection at 11, given all the progress in education that we have made over the past 20 years.

Before I get to the meat of this debate, and why I believe that grammar schools will take backwards the agenda of opportunity for everybody that the Prime Minister says she supports, I want to mention social mobility, which the Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), spoke about. Too often, social mobility is thought of in terms of plucking the one or two lucky ones out of disadvantage and taking them to the top—the “council house to the Cabinet table” journey. This understanding is really unhelpful when looking at the deep-seated challenges that our country’s education system faces and the complex policy solutions required to overcome them. Social mobility is, and should be, about people, starting as children, being able to make economic and social progress, unconfined by the disadvantages they begin with and achieving to their full potential.

The barriers to this in Britain today are manifold. In education, as the hon. Gentleman said, the long tail of underachievement and the educational attainment gap between the disadvantaged and their peers, which is now widening, not narrowing, under this Government, should be the focus of public policy, as it has been for the past two decades. A concerted strategy for narrowing the skills gap and the productivity gap would boost social mobility for the many. Breaking down the social barriers in accessing opportunities in work and in life is also key. None of these fundamental and deep-rooted problems is addressed by a policy that focuses entirely on the already high attainers and the already advantaged getting a more elite education. The Prime Minister says that she wants opportunity for everyone and every child to be able to get as far as their talents and hard work will take them. I agree with those aims, as would, I am sure, all of us in this House today, but her means are entirely wrong. Not only would the reintroduction of grammar schools push this agenda backwards and be “retrograde”, as the chief inspector of schools describes it, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) said, the policies and interventions that do work will also go backwards under this Government.

[Neil Carmichael]
Let us now look at both these issues. First, on academic selection and the reintroduction of grammar schools, the evidence is clear, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and others have said. Internationally, the systems in countries that make greater gains for children in the bottom half of the income distribution are comprehensive, not selective. That is why the OECD has concluded that countries with selective education systems perform less well on average than countries with more comprehensive systems. In England, the highest performing boroughs are comprehensive. London, for example, outperforms both selective areas and the national average in its bottom and top results at GCSE. By contrast, the attainment gap is worse than the national average in eight out of nine fully selective areas.

Mr Gibb: May I point out to the hon. Lady that seven London boroughs are either fully or partially selective?

Lucy Powell: These are figures that the House of Commons of Library has produced for me for today on grammar schools and fully selective areas, and the Minister will be aware of them.

In Kent and Medway, poorer children lag behind while richer children move ahead, and the losses at the bottom are much larger than the gains at the top. That pattern is a feature of selective areas in England. Let us compare fully selective Kent with comprehensive London. Just 27% of children eligible for free school meals in Kent achieve five good GCSEs, while the national average is 33% and the figure for London is 45%. I have to ask the Government yet again: why not focus on sharing the good practice of London, rather than spreading the poorer practice of Kent?

Furthermore, disadvantaged children in selective areas do worse for the rest of their lives. The practice of coaching children to pass the 11-plus in selective areas is rife, as we have heard. That is why the proportion of disadvantaged children at grammar schools is so extremely and embarrassingly low—just 2.6% of kids on free school meals attend grammar schools. Overall, grammars admit four to five times as many children who went to independent and prep schools than children who are eligible for free school meals.

That is why Lord David Willetts, the former Conservative Minister, has described grammar schools as an “arms race of private tuition for rich parents”.

Any parent would understand why this is the case. Of course most parents would want their children to go to a school full of clever children where their social networks would be developed, where it is easier to recruit and retain teachers and where success helps to breed further success. However, the majority of their kids will not get in. To suggest that the very existence of grammar schools does not disrupt the wider education system and outcomes for everybody else—the 80% who do not get in—is plain wrong. That is why, in today’s papers, school leaders in Conservative Surrey have said that they are vehemently opposed to grammar schools. They echo the many concerns raised by others about the impact of creaming off the brightest and the best and stigmatising the rest.

We, as policymakers, should be leading the debate. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan has said, we should be shouting from the rooftops about how great many more of today’s schools are. The top-performing comprehensives, which take in many thousands more poorer children than the grammar schools do, are just as good as, if not better than, the best grammars. Those comprehensives offer those things: opportunity, stretch and good outcomes for all children, not just for a few. As I said at the start of my remarks, it is particularly important in today’s world that social networks and community cohesion should be available to everybody, and comprehensives offer those things.

I am really proud of the fact that I went to a local comprehensive school in Manchester. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan attended the same school. But hon. Members should be under no illusion simply because we have made it this far. In the era when we attended that school—Parrs Wood High School—too many children were failed. We had some great teachers, but education was poorly resourced and too many children were allowed to slip through the net.

I am proud that my eldest child now attends the same school. It is a truly comprehensive school, in which 40% of kids are on free school meals, and it achieved its best ever results this year, with 72% of children gaining five A* to C grades in subjects including English and maths. Like many of the best comprehensives, it has a strong gifted and talented programme—pretty much dropped by this Government when they came in—and fluid streaming and setting in many subjects. That is what the best schools do: they stretch all kids as they develop and create a school-wide ethos of success and achievement.

Even though education was not so great in my day, it mattered hugely to my peers and to kids from all backgrounds that they could mix socially and academically, raising aspiration and attainment for everybody. The dozens of Manchester school kids whom I meet every week can see that I went to a local comprehensive school, just as they do. They can see that there is no barrier to what they can achieve. What a damning verdict it would be on our country if we went back to an era when we told four out of every five children at the age of 11 that there was a cap on their potential and that only the grammar school kids could go far.

I could give Members many examples of outstanding secondary schools across Manchester today that are delivering real progress for huge numbers of disadvantaged kids: Wright Robinson College, Trinity High School, Manchester Enterprise Academy and Whalley Range High School—the list could go on. That is why the Education Policy Institute found that the overall improvements in education over the last 20 years, including the sponsored academy programme, have had a much more significant impact on attainment among disadvantaged children than any expansion of grammar schools could possibly have.

We are all sitting here and asking the same question: why are the Government proposing to bring back grammar schools, when the evidence is so clear? One can only assume that the decision is based on ideology and not sound policy. In pursuit of this ideology, Ministers have scrapped together a pretty flimsy Green Paper and cherry-picked a few bits of—sorry for the pun—selective evidence. First, they cling to research that shows that the tiny number of children on free school meals who get into grammar schools do better than those who do not. What a deeply dubious argument. Not only is that tiny number not comparable with the
huge number of children who are not at grammars, but, by definition, those few children are already high attainers at key stage 2. If we look at the top attainers at key stage 2 from all backgrounds, we see that they do just as well at the best comprehensives as they do at grammar schools.

Mr Gibb: The point I was trying to make earlier was that that is not the case. Of the children who leave primary school having achieved level 5 in the key stage 2 SATS, 78% of those who attend grammar schools go on to get the EBacc, but only 52% of those who go to a non-selective school achieve the EBacc. So those children do not achieve as highly in non-selective schools as they do in selective schools.

Lucy Powell: If the Minister is basing an entire, huge change in education public policy on the narrow measure of modern foreign languages at GCSE, good luck to him. As he knows, we cannot compare a tiny number of pupils—I think it is 3,000—who are on free school meals in grammar schools with the tens of thousands of high achieving children on free school meals in other schools. Schools in which three or four children out of 700 are on free school meals face a completely different challenge from that faced by schools such as most of those in my constituency, where 70% or 80% of kids are on free school meals. The challenge for the latter schools in educating children on free school meals is significantly greater. The Minister is not comparing like with like, and he knows it.

Those who are not high achievers at 11—the vast majority of children, who do not get that level 5—do better in comprehensive systems than in selective ones. The Government also argue that by changing the nature of selection and somehow making getting into grammar schools tutor-proof will solve the problems. We have already heard how difficult that is, but I beg to differ in any case. If the Government are pushing forward with this policy on that basis, why not enforce a requirement on today’s grammar schools to take a larger number of children on free school meals? They should do that first and prove their point, if they are so confident of their argument, and then they should come back to the House in two or three years’ time and show us that it is possible to narrow the gap in selective areas.

The Prime Minister’s final straw in justifying the policy was that “it is wrong that we have a system in this country where a law prevents the opening or expansion of good schools.” —[Official Report, 19 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 806.] She seems to see no irony whatsoever in the fact that her Government has banned the opening of good schools by anybody other than a free school sponsor, which has led to the school place crisis and a system that is in utter chaos.

I almost find it depressing that we again have to rehearse these arguments when the overwhelming evidence is clear. The evidence base for policies and interventions that work and that tackle the educational attainment gap has also become much clearer. Let us recap what they are: quality in early years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West said; a deep pool of excellent teachers; and adequate resources targeted at closing the gap and providing opportunity for all. I will look at what is happening in each of those areas under this Government.

For early years, yes, more resources have gone in, as the importance of affordable childcare becomes a political imperative and an economic necessity. I welcome the focus on enabling more parents to work, but the critical issue of quality early education in narrowing the gap has taken a backward step. We know that by the age of five, the developmental gap between disadvantaged children and their peers is already very clear—it is equivalent to at least 15 months—but what is happening today is the opposite of what is needed to close the gap. Remarkably, in many parts of the country, after years of focus by the previous Labour Government and many councils, we have some of the highest-quality early years provision in some of the most deprived communities—the silver bullet of education—through many maintained nursery schools and free places in school nurseries. Yet in an attempt to deliver its pledge of 30 hours free childcare for working parents—by definition, they are more likely to be better off—the Government are prohibiting councils from investing in quality or subsidising places for non-working parents. I could go into many more reasons why the quality of early years provision is going backwards.

As hon. Members have mentioned, there is a growing teacher supply crisis in this country today. Unless urgent action is taken to address this acute problem, any other education policy is meaningless and will fail. We all know that the kids who pay the highest price when teacher supply falls, and therefore quality falls, are those who are least advantaged and least able to help themselves at home.

Finally, on resources, there have been welcome increases in education budgets during the past 20 years. Schools have been able to use additional targeted interventions, such as the pupil premium, to level the playing field in everything from one-to-one tuition and support to paying for uniforms, music lessons and school trips for kids who would not otherwise be able to afford them. However, I know from talking to heads in my area that with the biggest cuts to school budgets in a generation—about 8% during this Parliament—it is exactly such support that is going first.

Any Government who purport to have an interest in educational equality and social mobility must look seriously and quickly at these pressing issues, before we even get to those involving technical education and skills, and access to jobs. Such an agenda would keep any Minister busy, so why, after six months of unnecessary distraction with the forced academisation agenda, which has now been dropped, are Ministers creating yet another unnecessary upheaval in school structures? This time, support for their proposals is even more narrow, the evidence base even more flimsy and the outcomes even more divisive. It is time for the Government to drop these damaging proposals and get back to the task of investing in early years education, addressing the teacher supply crisis and stopping the harmful cuts to school budgets.

2.33 pm

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): I rise to speak on behalf of the Church of England in this important Back-Bench debate. The Church has a long and successful history of educating
children in our country. It provided education before the state did. In fact, it is still the largest provider of education besides the state. It has 4,700 schools, most of which are primaries, with 200 secondary schools. Some 84% of its primary and 74% of its secondary schools are good or outstanding.

Many of the remaining schools are in remote rural locations, although I should point out that there are some excellent rural schools. The challenge of trying to sustain a class for each year group in a remote rural area and the difficulty in attracting teachers there make it hard to achieve higher standards in those schools. The Church is committed to raising standards, and with the help of digital means and remote learning methods, it is possible to bring the best teaching to such schools. The Church has fought to sustain these schools for the sake of social cohesion, where other institutions might by now have given up. I am sure that hon. Members with rural constituencies will immediately identify with the importance of the village school, which, with the parish church, may be the only institutional hub for such communities. That underlines the importance of keeping them sustainable.

I want to scotch the myth that Church schools are forces for segregation. That could not be further from the truth. In fact, most Church schools do not practise selection at all. Where faith-based criteria apply, they are more likely than ever to live near those of a different ethnicity. The Church of England’s policy of being open to all therefore promotes better cohesion and understanding.

The Church sees its role as one of nurturing people to live life to the full, educating young people for hope and aspiration, and to embody an ethos of living well together. We must be getting something right because, after all, Church schools are sought after by people of all faiths and none. In September, the Archbishop of Canterbury said something important about the times we live in:

“Religiously motivated violence and extremism are…presenting a challenge…not seen for a couple of hundred years. In such circumstances, religious literacy is key: understanding the motivations and ideas of those who commit violence is essential, even if we, rightly, condemn it.”

I want to emphasise that the Church of England is firmly committed to delivering outstanding education and promoting academic excellence, and it is more committed than ever to training up creative and innovative school leaders, but it has not yet expressed a formal position on grammar schools. In the interests of transparency, I should declare that I am the product of a grammar school. I will be eternally grateful to the Hertfordshire and Essex Girls’ Grammar School for the excellent start in life that it gave me. At that time, however, there was a binary choice between grammar and secondary modern schools, whereas there is now a much wider range of secondary education.

I could not agree more with what the Chairman of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), said about the potential of university technical colleges. I listened carefully to the speech of the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), who is not in the Chamber at the moment, including her comparison with other comparable advanced industrial economies with selective education. By observation, having been a German language school exchange pupil, I might say that technical education was already a much stronger alternative in that country, which promoted selective education, when I first did a school exchange at the age of 14. We now have university technical colleges in this country.

On the council estate in my constituency—its secondary schools, none of which had previously managed to get more than 20% of their pupils up to five GCSEs, are now all academies—attainment levels have risen to nearly 50%. We very much welcome the fact that we are to have a new academy for engineering. That provides an answer to the Select Committee Chairman’s question about what we are educating today’s children for. With the digital economy upon us, we need to rethink which skills and aptitudes will be needed by the next generation of the workforce if they are not to be digitally disadvantaged.

In an intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, I touched briefly on pupils who cross borders from one education authority area to another. In the Metropolitan Borough of Solihull, we educate more than 8,000 pupils from across our borders with Birmingham and Coventry. That is a force for cohesion and integration. I firmly believe, however, that the money should follow the pupil, as it is only fair that education authorities providing an excellent education to pupils from other education authority areas see the resources that would have been allocated to that pupil had they been educated in their own area.

Returning to faith schools, parents of all faiths and none choose Church of England schools because of the broad and rounded education they provide. I want to finish with a little anecdote that perfectly illustrates the role that Church schools can play in addressing some of the difficult challenges of social cohesion and integration in our society. Every year, I hold a carols-and-mince-pies evening in my home. Last year, I was asked by a young lady of Asian origin doing work experience whether she could bring her mother and sister. I accepted with alacrity, not least because the sister was a professional cook, and hers were the best mince pies by far. That evening, as we stood together around the piano, singing carols, I saw them singing at the top of their voices, and I was really impressed. They turned to me and said, “What did you expect, Caroline? We went to Church school and learned all these carols by heart.”

That is a powerful illustration of the openness of Church schools, and the important contribution that they make to some of the most serious challenges we face. I urge colleagues to remember that, and the secular world to remember that faith schools offer a great deal to people of all faiths and none. Out of courtesy to the House, and because I have now revealed that I enjoy singing, I must inform you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I cannot be here for the winding-up speeches, as the Parliament choir has its dress rehearsal for its autumn concert at 4 o’clock.
Bowdon, in the more prosperous parts of the borough. a much higher percentage of children from Hale and my constituency go to grammar school, compared with wards such as Bucklow-St Martins and Clifford in Trafford’s grammar schools. Those from the poorest postcode lottery, which Ministers have said they want for all our children in Trafford, nor does it deal with the numbers could be even lower now. I have seen some figures subsequently that suggest that four of our children aged 11 are told they are successful in examination that does not reflect the wider context of failure”, on the basis of an inflexible and unsuitable that we should say to young children, “You are a failure”, on the basis of an inflexible and unsuitable examination that does not reflect the wider context of what is going on in children’s lives and what learning ought to be for. If we have a system in which only one in four of our children aged 11 are told they are successful and have potential, we are getting something very wrong. As I say, the selective system does not perform well for all our children in Trafford, nor does it deal with the postcode lottery, which Ministers have said they want to address through their proposals. In Trafford, children from the richest wards are by far the most likely to be in Trafford’s grammar schools. Those from the poorest wards, largely concentrated in my constituency, are the least likely to be in grammar schools. In preparation for this debate, I saw a graph of the numbers, and the curve was startling and shocking: a tiny proportion of children in wards such as Bucklow-St Martins and Clifford in my constituency go to grammar school, compared with a much higher percentage of children from Hale and Bowdon, in the more prosperous parts of the borough.

**John Glen:** I always listen carefully to the hon. Lady, but is the issue not sometimes aspiration and getting applicants from a diverse range of backgrounds? If more from such backgrounds applied, could we not make some progress?

**Kate Green:** I will be very honest with the hon. Gentleman: I do not know. I just feel that a system that says to parents, “Don’t bother putting your child forward because they have no chance of succeeding,” is not a very good system either. What that headteacher told me gives the lie to what he suggests. She said that parents felt under pressure to put their child forward for the assessment even when they knew that they were unlikely to succeed. The disappointment is being compounded by a great deal of wasted effort and pain. He is right about the complexities around who applies and what happens when they do, but there is something very troubling about a graph that shows that only children from the richest parts of the borough have a high chance of entry into grammar schools. I suspect that their having supportive parents, and lots of assets in their home to support their learning through educational toys, reading, educational trips and leisure activities and so on, is the reason why they have a higher chance of getting into grammar schools. I do not negate what he says, but I strongly suspect that it is those wider social factors and family resources that dispose children from the richer parts of the boroughs to have a higher chance of entering grammar schools.

**Lucy Powell:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about her experiences in Trafford, but further to the intervention from the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen), is she aware that the more selective an area—the higher the concentration of grammar schools—the wider the attainment gap? Conservative Members like to argue that if only there were more grammar schools, more poorer children would attend them, but that does not stack up against the evidence.

**Kate Green:** Headteachers in my borough believe that if there were more grammar schools, by definition there would be more secondary modern-equivalent schools, too, and that for every grammar school we create, we will have to create four secondary moderns, unless the ratios of children in grammar and non-grammar schools are to change.

The Minister indicated that there would be a range of different schools available to students, such as technical schools or schools with different specialisms, and I welcome that, but we have had the latter for many years, under the academy system introduced by Labour. I already have specialist sports, science and art academies in my constituency. We do not have to overlay that with academic selection to ensure a different emphasis in the education that children receive, and we must not use division to exacerbate the attainment gap.

I want to speak about a group of children who really lose out in Trafford: children with special educational needs and disabilities, who have not been mentioned much this afternoon. In a written answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on 2 November, the Minister appeared to say that the Government were not tracking the number of SEND children in grammar schools. I am surprised if that is the case. If I misunderstood the thrust of his answer, I would very much welcome his correcting me. I am certainly disturbed if we are not following the engagement of those children and their experience in the selective system.

I can tell the Minister and the House that the numbers of children with special educational needs and disabilities in grammar schools in Trafford are shockingly low. Based on the May 2016 school census figures, we had a grammar school population in my borough of 7,539 children, 224 of whom were receiving SEN support, and just 20 had education, health and care plans or statements in place—just 20 out of more than 7,500 kids. I have seen some figures subsequently that suggest that the numbers could be even lower now.
In practice, therefore, the selective system is clearly not working and not serving SEND children in our borough. The system is not working for them. It does not work for them in a number of different ways. First, for the children and their families, the entrance exam process is very stressful—compounded. I must say, in Trafford by the fact that each grammar school sets its own entrance exam. There is not a common 11-plus across the borough—each school has its own tests—so children sit, and quite often fail, not just one, but two, three or four tests. On top of that, they will have received intensive tutoring in advance of taking those tests, where their parents can afford it, that starts for many children from the age of nine or even younger, putting incredible stress on those families and children in preparation for those tests.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab) rose—

**Kate Green:** I shall give way to the shadow Minister, who is my parliamentary next-door neighbour and also a Trafford MP.

**Mike Kane:** I am grateful to my neighbour, who is making a very powerful speech. Does she agree that the pass and fail line of the children taking all those tests is absolutely arbitrary, because it will depend on how many grammar school places there are in the system for that current year?

**Kate Green:** Of course it will. Perhaps the Minister would like to say whether he wants to see more such grammar school places at the expense of a lowering of this arbitrary bar, or whether he believes that the right thing to do would be to ensure that every school offered a great education to every child, which would be my aspiration, and indeed was exactly what I received in my comprehensive school in the 1970s. I am a little bit surprised that, nearly half a century later, we are having to revisit the success of such schools.

In truth, it is not even selection at age 11 in Trafford; in practice, it is selection for most children at age 10, because the entrance examination is taken at the start of year 6 before many children have reached their 11th birthday. I think that putting little children of 10 years old through that kind of process is really wrong. I feel really uncomfortable about it, and I would like to hear the Minister tell us in his response what analysis the Government have made and what consideration they have given to the pressure that that kind of system puts on young children and their parents.

As I said earlier, selection is not really about parents making a choice; it is choice by the schools, which impacts particularly on children with special educational needs and disabilities. In Trafford, many parents have told me that they believe that grammar schools, deliberately or otherwise, deter or reject their children because they believe that admitting such children would have an adverse effect on their overall school results. The inspection and monitoring systems do not sufficiently incentivise grammar schools to take those children, and where they do take them, there is ample national—not just local—evidence that it is more likely that grammar schools will take SEND children only if they are at the milder end of the SEND spectrum. In other words, that means children who are more likely to be able to develop and improve.

I have heard far too many reports from parents in my constituency of the failure of the system to make adjustments for the way in which SEND pupils take the entrance tests—even if the schools have been alerted to the special needs of the students in advance. For example, a parent told me about her child with a hearing impairment. She had told the school about it and about the need for a quiet environment in which the child could take the test, instead of which the child was put at the front of the hall with about 100 children in it and no sound insulation, and the child struggled to perform. I have heard, too, that the tests fail adequately to recognise the special needs of those with autism or dyslexia. In truth, no matter how well the tests are administered and no matter how responsive they might try to be to the particular needs of children with special needs, the 11-plus system is inherently discriminatory against those special needs children, as indeed the exam board GL Assessment itself confirmed in its research of 2009.

In addition to the exam system, developments in the curriculum also discriminate against some SEND students. We have already heard about the EBacc, which the Minister appeared to regard as a measure of success among students, but in fact that measure does not work well for SEND children, and neither do some of the back-to-basics traditional teaching methods that are now being applied at GCSE in English and maths.

All this means that, in practice, the non-selective schools in Trafford end up taking a disproportionately large number of children with special educational needs. I must say in their defence that those schools do exceptionally well for those children, but it puts those schools under huge pressure and often means that parents cannot get their children into them, even though they are the local schools, because the children with special needs and statements have to take priority for the available places. Those schools also struggle to maintain sixth forms, which means they sometimes struggle to recruit the most academically specialist teachers. In practice, children in those schools are not necessarily getting the chance to have the best education and the best teaching.

It is my firm belief that greater expansion of grammar schools would make a bad situation even worse for SEND children in Trafford. I am therefore particularly concerned that the Green Paper makes no mention of SEND children at all. I specifically raised this matter with the Secretary of State on the very first occasion after the summer recess that we discussed selective education in early September, and she assured me that those children would receive careful consideration by Ministers. They do not make an appearance in the Green Paper at all. Yet, as I hope I have shown this afternoon, all my experience is that the proposals to expand the number of grammar schools will impact most negatively on those children. As the Alliance for Inclusive Education pointed out, 87% of respondents in a recent Nasen survey—this is the body of SEND professionals—said that they, too, believed that the expansion of selection would have a negative impact on those kids.

Ministers owe a very special obligation to those children—a special obligation to ensure that they can fulfil their potential, make the most of their education, and be included and educated alongside other kids. The Trafford experience shows that the opposite is true.
The result is that we are failing to protect the rights and interests of disabled children, and it is endemic to the selective system to fail to do so. I would argue that it is as well as our obligation to serve the best interests of every child.

If the Green Paper and the Government really want schools that work for SEND students, here are some of the things that I would like Ministers to look at that I believe will work. They should ensure that there is a special educational needs co-ordinator and a dedicated SEND champion on every school leadership team. They should ensure that there are strong, firm processes for school-to-school knowledge exchange and opportunities for children in special needs schools to share some of their learning with children in mainstream schools. They should ensure that all SEND children receive the best-quality teaching and look at how school funding can incentivise teachers to be in schools to educate those kids. Overall, they should look at the resources, the inspection regime and the incentives for schools to give special attention to the needs of children with special needs and disabilities.

That is what I would have liked the Green Paper to concentrate on, and it is what I would like to see Ministers concentrate on now. I hope that the Minister will say this afternoon that he is prepared to consider my having the Government to rethink and re-prioritising away from these damaging and divisive proposals, which do very little for a very large number of children in my constituency and which have the potential to do considerable harm to more children right around the country.

2.59 pm

John Pugh (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on providing the stimulus for the debate. The House will possibly be pleased to learn that I have not a great deal to add to her forensic introductory analysis, but let me begin with some obvious admissions. There are excellent grammar schools, and no doubt we could all name some. Grammar schools, like all good schools, do a fair amount for social mobility, and it is probably not wise to dismantle a successfully functioning grammar school.

None of that, however, amounts to a defence of the grammar school system—a system that undeniable separates children at the age of 11 according to simple exam performance, which is taken as a proxy for their innate ability and potential. It is a very poor proxy, based on very poor and dated research conducted back in the 1950s. It is no sort of proxy for innate ability or potential, which is often discovered much later in a child's career. It is also—as we heard from the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) a few moments ago—a slightly arbitrary procedure, because whether a child passes or fails depends on whether there are grammar school places in the area and whether there are sufficient places. I passed my 11-plus, but when I arrived at my grammar school, I was placed firmly in the D stream. I wonder what would have happened had there only been a three-form entry. The House would probably not be burdened with my remarks here and now, and indeed my whole future might have been quite different.

It is not socially desirable to separate children into passes and failures at the age of 11. The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) has just described emotively how bad it can be: after all, those children will have to mix with each other at some point later in life. However, it is not educationally sensible either.

My first job after I left university with a philosophy degree was teaching English at a secondary modern school. It was a good secondary modern school: it had streaming and uniforms, and much of the paraphernalia that good schools are supposed to have. After a year, it amalgamated with Bootle Grammar School—Bootle being a very deprived area—and became a comprehensive. I then became the form teacher of a mixed class, half ex-grammar school boys and half secondary modern school pupils. Six months on, it was impossible to tell who had started in the secondary modern and who had started in the grammar school, in terms of attainment, ability and attitude, and in many other respects. A year earlier, however, their destiny, their curriculum, their status, their feelings about themselves, their aspirations, their whole future—and how they were regarded—would have been markedly different.

In those days, most secondary modern school pupils in Bootle left without taking any public exams, and without aspirations; but at that stage—the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) made this point—they had jobs to go to. They could work on the docks; they could work as labourers. There were car factories around. Unskilled work was available in abundance.

I subsequently went to teach at a Catholic high school, also in Bootle. It was a former grammar school which had amalgamated with a secondary modern, St Joan of Arc, and no single pupil in its entire history had ever taken a public exam apart from the Bootle school leaving certificate, which has limited cachet nowadays. When pupils left, most of them got jobs on the docks. We know that jobs of that sort have gone, and gone for good, but there are still too many white working-class kids, boys and girls, with low aspirations and low attainment, who are likely to fail any 11-plus that is put in their way as an obstacle.

That is the problem, and the Minister knows it is the problem. It is a big economic problem for our country, and it is a big problem of ours that has been identified internationally. It is what is known as the tail. It is a huge problem, and we have had enormous difficulty in addressing it. I should like the Minister to tell me how grammar schools help to deal with it. How does plucking the brightest children out of comprehensives help? How can grammar schools solve the problem of the tail?

We have never really had a problem with making clever kids cleverer; our problem is with raising the average and closing the gap. The grammar school/secondary modern model only really worked in a world in which a basic education gave a job for life. That is no longer the case, and as far as I can see, education policy can no longer be based on nostalgia. It must be based firmly on evidence, and there is no evidence in favour of the Government’s current proposals.
3.4 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) on securing the debate, which is very timely, and on her impassioned speech.

Labour is obviously committed to an education system for everyone, not just a select few, and we will oppose this regressive policy of grammar school expansion every step of the way. The Prime Minister spoke about delivering for everyone, but what matters is what she does, and her actions reveal the Government’s true colours: working in the interests of the few while everyone else is left behind; in one breath talking of creating a “great meritocracy”; and in the next announcing a return to grammar schools.

However, it is not just Opposition Members who oppose the policy. Grammar schools will not improve the lives of the many. As the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh) has just pointed out, it is not desirable to fail children at the age of 11. Even the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, said that rejecting the stale old grammars debate was a “key test” of whether the Conservative party was fit for government. He described the debate as “backward looking”, “completely delusional”, and “an electoral albatross”. He rightly pointed out that parents wanted us to do something about the standards in many of the 3,000 secondary schools, rather than tying ourselves in knots over the return of grammar schools.

The chief inspector of schools, Michael Wilshaw, has said:

“The notion that the poor stand to benefit from the return of grammar schools strikes me as quite palpable tosh and nonsense—and is very clearly refuted by the London experience.”

A number of Members have alluded to that experience today. The implementation of the London challenge fund revolutionised education in the capital, but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, other schemes, such as Greater Manchester’s, were cut in 2010 as a result of austerity measures.

The Conservative Chair of the Education Select Committee, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), who spoke so well today, told Radio 4’s “The Westminster Hour” recently:

“We have serious issues about social mobility, in particular white working-class young people”

—that, too, was mentioned by the hon. Member for Southport—

“and I don’t think that having more grammar schools is going to help them.”

Lord Willetts, the former Universities Minister, who is now the chair of the think-tank the Resolution Foundation, said that he had not changed his views since the Conservatives were in opposition and that the evidence suggested that they had failed to help disadvantaged children.

Fewer than 3% of children on free school meals attend grammar schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) spoke eloquently about social mobility in that context. Only today, as we have heard, every headteacher in Surrey signed a letter to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State opposing the expansion of grammar schools. The Government, however, are simply not listening, even though there is no evidence to support the policy.

I mentioned austerity a little earlier. According to the National Union of Teachers and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, England’s schools are experiencing the largest real-terms funding cuts for more than a generation. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan, schools face unprecedented pressures, and, as we heard from the hon. Member for Stroud, the Government have yet to announce when they will consult on the fair funding formula. In real terms, schools will lose a huge amount of money, rising to £2.5 billion a year by 2020, and 92% of schools will have their funding cut. The average cut for primary schools will be £96,500, and the average cut for secondary schools will be £290,000. The average loss per primary school pupil will be £401, and the average loss per secondary school pupil will be £365. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that school budgets will have fallen by 8% over the course of this Parliament. The budget was protected only in cash terms, rather than in real terms, so the schools budget is at the mercy of rising pressures, pupil numbers and the impact of inflation on true value.

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech on the issues facing schools today. On the budget, is he aware of the impact of the issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) about fewer children now being in receipt of free school meals and therefore the pupil premium? As a result, the budgetary pressures are greatest on schools in the most deprived areas, and the families themselves are often no better off despite not requiring free school meals and the pupil premium.

Mike Kane: That is an excellent point. Schools in poorer areas are certainly feeling the budgetary pressures. Traditionally, we had a system of subsidiarity in education funding, but this Government are trying to pull that away. On top of the figures I have just given, schools are now worried about being further punished in the fair funding formula that the Government have yet to consult on.

The freedom to practise faith and to educate children in a faith—or not—of their choosing is one of the cornerstones of the free and diverse democratic society we enjoy. The right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) made a strong defence of faith and faith schools in our system. The grammar school row has been a distraction from the lifting of the 50% cap rule on faith schools. This policy was brought in by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). One of his first acts as Education Secretary was to require all new schools of a religious character to be open to admitting 50% of pupils from outside their faith. The measure was aimed primarily at Muslim schools, but paradoxically it had almost no impact on them. The right hon. Lady alluded to this point when she talked about the situation in Blackburn. This measure did, however, prevent the expansion of other faith schools, which has led to real shortages and a lack of choice in many parts of the country. The policy has been an abject failure. Governments must consider more sensible approaches to integration, such as establishing effective twinning arrangements off with schools of different faiths, considering setting up mixed-faith academy trusts, and considering that a member of a different faith or none can sit on a governing body.
Dame Caroline Spelman: The point I was trying to make is that social geography is what determines the profile of the pupils drawn from the catchment, and there are fundamental reasons in society why particular groups tend to live in particular areas, often not unrelated to the cost of housing. But the Church of England’s open-to-all policy should mean that pupils of all faiths and none have access to the school that is nearest to them.

Mike Kane: Faith schools also generally draw from a wider catchment area, which means they often draw pupils from a poorer subsection of society. Over 80% of them are doing well or outstandingly well, so it is no wonder that parents currently want to send their children to them. I take on board the right hon. Lady’s point, however.

Labour wants the best for all our children. As a teacher during the previous Labour Government, I saw the roofs fixed or the schools rebuilt, I saw class sizes go down and attainment go up, and I saw unparalleled investment in our early years. But under this Government, we have a black hole in education funding. As pointed out in the eloquent speech of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), there was no mention in the Green Paper of special educational needs. We have a crisis in teacher recruitment, and yet too often, parents do not have the choice of a good school place for their child. In 65 local authorities, fewer than half of children have access to a good or outstanding secondary school within three miles of their home. For these pupils, the chance of getting the best education depends not on talent or hard work, but on where they live and how much money their parents have.

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The focus of the Government under this Administration and the previous one has been on driving up standards in schools, so that every child receives the education they need to reach their potential. Thanks to the hard work of hundreds of thousands of teachers and the reforms we have introduced over the past six years, our school system has improved dramatically. The Government have reformed the primary curriculum, so that it is on a par with the best in the world. Evidence-based teaching practice such as “maths mastery” and “systematic synthetic phonics” is revolutionising the way primary pupils are taught maths and how to read. This year, as a result of our reforms, 147,000 more year 1 pupils are on-track to becoming fluent readers than in 2012.

Lucy Powell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I am happy to give way the shadow shadow Secretary of State.

Lucy Powell: The Minister is highly amusing. On a more serious point, I am sure I will disagree with much in his speech, but I have to take issue with him if he is coming to this House to talk about this year’s SATs results. Is he pleased that after the chaos and confusion he has caused in this year’s SATs, at key stage 2 we saw a drop in the proportion of those meeting national expectations from over 80% to just 53%? Is he happy with that appalling drop in results?

Mr Gibb: The standards are significantly higher, and schools are raising their game and adapting to the new significantly higher standards. Some 66% of primary school pupils reach the expected standard in the reading tests and 70% reach the expected standard in maths. The hon. Lady is right that the combined reading, writing and maths result came to 53% but that is for the first year of the significantly more demanding SATs, based on a significantly more demanding national curriculum that puts our school system on a par with the best education systems in the world. That is the way to prepare young people for life in modern Britain and life in a globalised competitive world.

Lucy Powell: Many parents and teachers listening will be aghast at that. I give the Minister one more opportunity to apologise to teachers and parents for the fact that the Government did not embed those changes properly and did not give enough time to teachers and that the poor kids who have just left year 6 have now been branded as not reaching the national expectation. There is no difference from the children or the teaching of the year before, but because of the difference he personally has made, those results have dropped by 30%. Will he apologise for that?

Mr Gibb: But the children are better educated as a consequence of a national curriculum that is more demanding and that requires children to become fluent readers and to understand grammar, punctuation and spelling, and to do long division and long multiplication instead of chunking and the grid method. Children will leave primary school better educated—more fluent readers and more fluent in arithmetic—as a consequence of our reforms.

These reforms do take time to embed, however. We published that new curriculum in 2013, and it became law in September 2014, but of course it will take some schools longer than others to adapt to it. But one thing I am sure of is that teachers up and down this country are conscientious; they are working hard and are responding very well to a brilliant, more demanding new curriculum.
In secondary education, we have ended grade inflation and empowered teachers and headteachers to deal with poor behaviour. We have also removed GCSE equivalents and prioritised the teaching of core academic subjects so that more children are taught the knowledge they need to flourish. But we need to do more. There are still more than 1 million children in schools that are not good enough, and that is why we are consulting on a range of measures to look at more ways to increase the number of good school places. We want to tap into the knowledge and expertise of this country’s world-leading universities and independent schools. We want to remove the restrictive regulations that are preventing more children from going to a high-quality faith school. We also want to end the ban on opening new grammar schools.

Faith schools make up around a third of all mainstream schools in England. As the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said, the Church has 4,700 schools. Faith schools are more likely than non-faith schools to be rated as good or outstanding, with 89% of primary faith schools reaching those standards. The current rule, designed to promote inclusion by limiting the proportion of pupils that oversubscribed new faith free schools can admit on the basis of faith, has not worked to combat segregation. Worse, this burdensome regulation has become a barrier to some faith groups opening new schools. Most markedly, it is preventing the establishment of new Catholic schools.

The absurdity of the current rule is exposed when we consider that Catholic schools are more ethnically diverse than other faith schools, more likely to be located in deprived communities and more likely to be rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. There is growing demand for them in this country. If this restrictive regulation is removed, the Catholic Church hopes to open up to 100 new schools in a similar timeframe.

With this greater freedom will come strict rules to ensure that every new faith school operates in a way that supports British values. We will also explore ways to use the school system to promote greater integration within our society, such as requiring new faith schools to establish twinning arrangements with other schools not of their faith. The Government are also consulting on lifting the ban on more grammar school places being created. Ofsted rates 99% of grammar school places as good or better, and 82% are rated outstanding. In a school system where over a million pupils are not getting the education they need and deserve, it cannot be right to prevent more good and outstanding selective school places from being created.

Lucy Powell: On that point, will the Minister look at the ban imposed by his Government on good and outstanding local authority schools opening new schools? Will he also ensure that maintained nursery schools—98% of which are also good or outstanding—can open new schools? That, too, has been banned by his Government.

Mr Gibb: We want a diverse education system. At the moment, 40% of secondary schools and nearly 80% of primary schools are still run by local authorities. We want to open that up to create a more diverse system of education with more providers coming in. That includes providers such as the West London Free School, which the Opposition have severely criticised. It is providing very high-quality education. There are other examples of such a diverse system bringing in new providers, establishing parent groups and enabling teachers to establish their own schools. This is raising academic standards right across the system. We are proposing to scrap the ban on new grammar schools and to allow them to open where parents want them, with strict conditions to ensure that they improve standards for pupils across the school system.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister will be aware that Torbay has retained some grammar schools as part of its schools mix. In the past, Torquay Academy, which was close to Torquay Boys’ Grammar School, was not doing particularly well. However, following the establishment of a multi-academy trust and a partnership with the grammar school, the academy was for the first time rated as good by Ofsted in all categories earlier this year and, last month, it was for the first time listed in the top five schools in the west country. It is now providing outstanding education for its pupils, and I hope that the Minister will join me in congratulating Steve Margetts and his team. Does he agree that this proves definitively that there is no conflict in having good grammar schools and good other schools for everyone else?

Mr Gibb: I could not have put it any better. That is a classic example of a grammar school working with a non-selective school to raise the standards in both schools, and it is working extremely well. We want to see that replicated up and down the country, and that is what we are consulting on in our proposals.

Under our proposals, existing grammar schools and new grammar schools would be allowed to open only if they met strict conditions designed to ensure that increased numbers of less-well-off pupils have access to a selective education. The hon. Member for Wigan asked for evidence that the proposals would work. We know that selective schools are almost 50% more popular with parents than non-selective schools, based on the preferences expressed in the secondary school application process. The most recent GCSE figures show that pupils at grammar schools make significantly more progress, relative to their similarly able peers in comprehensives, with a progress 8 score in aggregate of plus 0.33, compared with the national average of nought. The results are even starker for pupils from less affluent backgrounds. Disadvantaged pupils from grammar schools are almost twice as likely to go to a top Russell Group university than their wealthier peers who attend comprehensive schools, and they are more than three times as likely to attend one of these prestigious universities as their comprehensively educated peers from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

According to the Educational Policy Institute report, pupils at grammar schools achieve a third of a grade per subject higher than those at non-grammar schools, and 78% of highly able children—those who achieve level 5 at the end of primary school—who go to a grammar school achieve the EBacc, compared with 52% of highly able pupils who go to a comprehensive school. If we look at the Oxbridge entrance—Kate Green rose...
Mr Gibb: I will give way to the hon. Lady when I have finished responding to the hon. Member for Wigan’s points.

One in five of the state school-educated students at Oxford between 2012 and 2014 were from grammar schools. In Cambridge in 2015, 682 students came from the comprehensive sector and 589 from grammar schools, so almost as many students from the state sector came from 163 grammar schools as came from 2,800 comprehensive schools. Disadvantaged pupils are, as I have said, twice as likely to go to a Russell Group university.

The hon. Member for Wigan also asked me to praise some non-selective schools, and I am happy to do so. At the King Solomon Academy, 95% achieved five good GCSEs including English and maths. At the West London Free School, which she does not like, 37% qualify for the pupil premium and 46% achieve the EBacc. She also asked about capital spending. The 2015 spending review allocated £23 billion to all capital funding, including capital funding for 500 new free schools by 2020. I should add that none of that capital will be spent on schools without classroom walls, which the last Labour Government built in Knowsley and elsewhere. Those schools are now struggling to put those walls back at great expense.

Kate Green: A few moments ago, the Minister said that no new grammar school would be allowed to open without it accepting a certain proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Trafford, around 3% of children in grammar schools are on free school meals, compared with a borough-wide average of 11% or 12%. Will the Minister say whether existing grammar schools in Trafford will also be required to lift the proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds on their rolls? If not, why not?

Mr Gibb: If the hon. Lady had read the consultation document, she would have seen that page 28 states that we will require “existing selective schools to engage in outreach activity… We therefore propose to require all selective schools to have in place strategies to ensure fair access.”

We want to extend the requirements to existing schools which, incidentally, is something that no Labour Member urged their Government to do over 13 years. This Government, however, are seeking to take measures to ensure that all grammar schools that want to expand and all new grammar schools do more to widen their social intake.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) mentioned alternative priorities for the Government. During his speech today and during the Select Committee hearings, he hinted that his alternative priority was in non-selective schools, so that they are ready for secondary education.

Neil Carmichael: I just want to clarify one priority. It is not Brexit; it is ensuring that we make the best job of Brexit—there is a big difference. My other priority was primary schools and ensuring that they are all good and effective. The Minister reminded the House that 80% of primary schools are still in the custody, so to speak, of local authorities, so will he be thinking about ensuring that new grammar schools have links with those primary schools, some of which are where the biggest problems exist?

Mr Gibb: We have made extremely good progress in raising academic standards in primary schools in reading and mathematics with the knowledge-based primary curriculum. However, one of the conditions on which we are consulting is for new grammar schools to have relationships with feeder primary schools and to establish new feeder primary schools as part and parcel of the objective of widening the social intake into expanded, existing and new grammar schools.

Mike Kane: Will the Minister assure the House that no school will lose out as a result of the fair funding formula?

Mr Gibb: We have consulted on the principles that will drive the national funding formula. We had many responses to that consultation and we are working through them. We will say more in due course about the weighting that attaches to those different principles. We will then have another consultation and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will make his views known at that stage.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) raised the issue of children with special educational needs and disabilities. She will know that all schools must make admission decisions over those with special educational needs and disabilities fairly. When a child with SEND meets a school’s admission criteria of a selective school over academic ability, that will allow them to access the benefits of education at that school in just the same way as any other pupil. As I have said, we will expect selective schools to support non-selective schools and we will be looking to them to be engines of academic and social achievement for all pupils, whatever their background, wherever they are from and whatever their ability. Such support will benefit pupils with SEND in non-selective schools.

Two years ago, we made fundamental changes to how the SEND support system worked for families—the biggest change in a generation—putting children and young people with SEND at the heart of the process and ensuring that they are supported all the way through to adulthood. Since then, 74,200 young people have been given personalised education, health and care plans.
Lucy Powell: The Minister is using the flimsiest of evidence of how already high-attaining children have managed to break through all the barriers to get themselves to a grammar school in the first place—only 3,000 children in the entire country are on free school meals at a grammar school—to expand the policy. It is the most dubious use of evidence I have ever seen. He has not answered a single point raised by any Opposition Member about the wealth of evidence about selective systems as a whole and the widening attainment gap that they create. Bright Futures is a selective academy trust in Manchester that has palpably failed to transfer any good practice to Cedar Mount Academy, the other school that it was given in Manchester. When will the Government do something about that?

Mr Gibb: On that last point, I will write to the hon. Lady. There is nothing flimsy about the evidence that says that progress made in grammar schools is plus 0.33, which is way above the zero figure nationally. We want a higher proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and from low-income families to be going into grammar schools and selective education—that is our objective. That was never the objective of, or what was delivered by, the last Labour Government. We intend to address that issue; we acknowledge it and are taking action to deal with it. As well as the Oxford and Cambridge evidence, the other evidence I have cited compares level 5 pupils at grammar schools and at comprehensive schools; I am talking about all pupils, not just pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and those in the grammar schools are significantly outperforming those others. [Interruption.] It is a pity to interrupt the diatribe made by the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) from a sedentary position, but may I just conclude by saying that this policy is not about returning to the binary system of the 1950s and 1960s, where the alternative to the grammar school was a secondary modern where pupils often did not even sit exams or take qualifications? Our reforms to the education system over the past six years have meant that 85% of schools are now good or outstanding, but we want 100% of schools to be that. We want areas of the country with poor academic results—for example, Blackpool, where just 9.2% of pupils achieve the English baccalaureate; Knowsley, where the figure is 10.4%; Middlesbrough, where it is 10.4%; Isle of Wight, where it is 13.3% and Hartlepool, where it is 13.7%—to be matching areas such as Southwark, where the figure is 35.6%. York, whose figure is 35%, and selective areas such as Sutton, where 45.8% achieve this. We want all those areas to achieve even higher levels of EBacc attainment, but the lowest-performing areas are our concern. Establishing new selective schools and new high-performing faith schools will help drive up academic standards in those areas. It cannot be right that in 65 local districts fewer than half of the secondary school age pupils are within 3 miles of a good secondary school. It cannot be right that there are still 1.25 million pupils in schools that are simply not good enough.

The motion asks this House to note the Government’s proposals to expand the role of grammar and faith schools, as set out in our consultation document “Schools that work for everyone”, and “calls on the Government to conduct a full assessment of the evidence”. That is what we have done; that is what we continue to do; and that is what we will do as we consider all the responses to the consultation document when that consultation closes on 12 December. Hon. Members should be under no misapprehension: this Government are determined to ensure that every child has the quality of education that helps them fulfil their potential. That is the drive behind all our reforms over the past six years, and it is the objective behind the proposals to end the ban on new grammar schools and the restrictions on new good school places in our faith schools.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I call Lisa Nandy. You have two minutes in which to wind up.

3.38 pm

Lisa Nandy: All this motion did was ask the Minister to consider the evidence before us and to pause for a moment and reflect before setting this country on a path that will damage children’s life chances and the economic prospects of this country as a whole. Instead, throughout this debate, and especially in his closing remarks, he has given this House the strong impression that he will have to be dragged kicking and screaming before he confronts the reality of what the evidence tells us about children’s life chances and the educational system in this country. He has done absolutely nothing during this debate to tell us how much the Government intend to spend on these reforms and what impact there will be on the schools budget overall and, therefore, on children who do not attend grammar schools.

The Minister barely mentioned the serious issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) raised about special educational needs. The point she was making to the Minister, based on experience of having seen this in her area, was that discrimination against those children is intrinsic to the system that he is proposing. He continued to cite evidence that was at best flimsy and at worst deliberately misleading. The Russell Group evidence that he cited ignores any issue around prior attainment, and he selectively quoted the Education Policy Institute. He holds up the EBacc as a measure of educational success and he ignored the evidence on Oxbridge admissions. This is a Minister who is looking for evidence to inform his policy.

I asked the Minister finally to acknowledge for the first time that comprehensive schools around this country are good schools that have something to offer their pupils and pupils in other schools. Instead, his answer was insulting to the majority of teachers and the majority of parents, and therefore to the majority of children. He will have learned in today’s debate that many of us on both sides of the House do not agree with him. We will seek to ensure that the Government do not proceed with these utterly divisive, disgraceful plans.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes recent proposals by the Government to expand the role of grammar and faith schools; and calls on the Government to conduct a full assessment of the evidence relating to the effect of grammar schools and faith schools on children’s learning.
Veterans and Service Personnel

3.41 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel.

I hope that after a clearly rancorous and divisive debate, we might find more common ground as, in the season of remembrance, we consider the issues facing a new generation of veterans and service personnel across our country. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and colleagues from across the House for supporting the application for this timely opportunity to discuss these issues as we approach Remembrance Sunday. In particular, I thank the Royal British Legion for inspiring me to apply for the debate through its remarkable campaign to rethink remembrance, which I shall come on to shortly.

I am proud of the steps taken by successive Westminster Governments, as well as devolved Governments and local government, and the efforts of so many charities up and down the country to support veterans and service personnel. There are many areas in which we could do better and do more, and I will talk about some of those, but we also need to recognise the successes. In particular, I note the previous Labour Government’s efforts on the veterans badge, which was an important symbol of recognition to many veterans. I note the efforts of the Co-operative party, of which I am a member, to establish a military credit union to support people and avoid their getting into debt. We can cite many other examples, but it is important in such debates that we recognise that there is concern, at all levels and in all parts of government, to ensure that we do right by our service personnel and their families, wherever and whenever they served.

I have had the pleasure of meeting representatives, and seeing at first hand the work, of the Royal British Legion, SSAFA, Help for Heroes and many other charities, small and large, up and down the country, including in my constituency. Penarth pier pavilion has named a room in its fantastic new facilities on the pier in honour of 617 Squadron; Guy Gibson was famously a resident of Penarth. That room is being used for fellowship and by charities to support veterans and former service personnel living in Penarth.

Another innovative step is the work of Pizza Pronto, a pizza service in Cardiff Bay and Penarth set up by former personnel: Kevin Halborg and Simeon Rabaiotti. Kevin is an ex-commando and takes great pride every year in ensuring that Pizza Pronto is covered with poppies in honour of remembrance. The funds that he raises from that go to the work of the legion and other charities and to work supporting personnel who might have served alongside him, or might have served decades before. They do fantastic work.

For many people, the image that springs to mind when they hear about such work, particularly that of the legion, is the iconic poppy. I have my poppy on today, and my wristband, too. The poppy is distributed during the poppy appeal in late October and early November. We also see iconic scenes of poppies falling at the festival of remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall: I had the privilege of attending that two years ago.

The Royal British Legion makes it clear that although its role as the nation’s custodian of remembrance, and especially the ceremonies of remembrance, is important, its work and the work of other charities does not stop there. The legion’s Live On theme has made it clear that its focus is as much on the here and now, and on working to improve the lives of veterans and serving members of the armed forces—and their families, crucially—in every way imaginable. I have seen that work locally and nationally, whether the handy vans that can make quick repairs to veterans’ homes, or the excellent new pop-in centres. A pop-in centre is available to my constituents. It is in Cardiff city centre, not my constituency, but I have had the pleasure of visiting it and seeing the face-to-face support that is offered in new and innovative ways. The legion’s promise “To the memory of the fallen and the future of the living” sums up very aptly what it and others are trying to do.

I have been on my own journeys of remembrance this year, remembering the great conflicts of the past. Thanks to the efforts of the hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), I was able to travel with other members of the all-party group for the armed forces to Normandy. We visited Southwick House before we travelled over. In Normandy, we saw some of the beaches where that generation of incredibly brave men and women from not just Britain, but across the Commonwealth, the United States, France and other countries fought to defend our freedoms and defeat the tyranny of Nazi Germany.

I also visited the Somme this year. I took my own trip; I wanted to see some of the locations, particularly on the 100th anniversary. I visited Mametz wood, so famous for the sacrifice of Welsh troops who fought so bravely there. I walked into the wood and saw many moving tributes, often left by descendants and family members of those who had lost their lives or been terribly injured there. I travelled to Beaumont-Hamel, the site of terrible losses by the Newfoundland regiment on the first day of the Somme. I travelled up to Pozières on the Albert-Bapaume road, where George Butterworth, the famous composer of “A Shropshire Lad” and “The Banks of Green Willow” lost his life 100 years before the very day that I visited. In a small mark of tribute, I played his beautiful, stunning and moving music as I travelled through that iconic French countryside that had been scarred so brutally 100 years before.

I attended the RAF Battle of Britain memorial in Penarth, which is an annual event. We had a brilliant turnout from the air cadets and service charities, particularly the local branches of the Royal Air Forces Association and others, recognising the role that people from our community had played in the battle for our freedoms.

We paid tribute recently to Members of this House—our predecessors—who lost their life. My predecessor as MP for parts of Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan, Lord Ninian Crichton-Stuart, lost his life when he was in his early 30s in 1945 in the battle of Loos. He is commemorated here on a wall and on the memorial as we enter through St Stephen’s.

I attended a merchant navy memorial service in Cardiff Bay to recognise the sacrifice of mariners not only in our Royal Navy but in the merchant navy. Mariners came from around the world: their heritages were wide and varied. We have a strong community of people from Somaliland and Yemen in my constituency, many
of whom served our country bravely during both world wars. Their names were commemorated at that inter-faith service; there were representatives from the Muslim, Jewish and Hindu religions and from different Christian denominations, all paying their respects to those who fell.

I thought about my own family. I have written about this and spoken about it in the House before, but I thought about my great-grandfather Peter Marsh, who served in the King’s Own Scottish Borderers, we believe at the Somme. He returned from world war one having been gassed, and was traumatised for the rest of his life. My grandfather James Smith fought in the battle of Arnhem and also in the battle of Sicily. He was taken as a prisoner of war after he landed in a Horsa glider. He was shot running across the fields and was taken to Stalag 5B in Germany.

I also discovered a new story, which exposed for me the amazing role that women played in both world wars in keeping this country going through its darkest hours. My great-grandmother Hannah Marsh, Peter Marsh’s wife, served in a secret ordnance factory in the area of Gretna and Eastriggs. There is a museum there called the Devil’s Porridge. A former cotton worker from Wigan, she had gone up there with her sister and had been involved in producing the armaments that were needed in world war one. The women were exposed to great risk while mixing vats of nitroglycerine and other chemicals, and their skin was often stained yellow or green by those processes. The remarkable role that women played in active service and behind the scenes in both world wars must never be forgotten.

As the Royal British Legion said this year, we need to rethink remembrance. Although we must and will always recognise the sacrifice of the world war generations, we also need to think about those who served in conflicts since world war two. The legion has put out four very moving 60-second films featuring the experiences of a younger generation of armed forces members. In each film, a story of conflict or injury is narrated by a second world war veteran aged between 88 and 97, in military dress, some proudly wearing their berets and medals. At the end it is revealed that the stories belong not to the speaker, but to a younger veteran or member of the armed forces aged between 29 and 34. Those films have been released to emphasise the commonality in the experiences of veterans from age to age. The legion is urging people to support the poppy appeal this year in aid of younger veterans as well as older ones.

Let me relate a couple of the stories. Roy Miller, 92, a Navy veteran from Wallington in London, narrates the experiences of Stewart Harris, 32, who served in 1st Battalion the Welsh Guards for 13 years. Stewart Harris got remarkable help from ABF The Soldiers’ Charity when his family was burgled in 2014. He suffered brain damage and was left blind in his right eye and partially deaf after the Mastiff vehicle in which he was travelling was hit by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan in 2012. He suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and said, his words being spoken by the older veteran, “I was so low. I was shouting at the kids, getting angry at my wife. I begged her to leave me. I felt alone, helpless. I was taught that soldiers don’t discuss feelings.”

Royal Navy veteran Marsie Taylor, 97, from London, reads the story of Corporal Ben Poku, 34, also from London, who is still serving; he works as a nurse on the neuro rehabilitation ward at Headley Court. Geoffrey Pattinson, 92, a sergeant with 9th Battalion the Parachute Regiment during the second world war, shares the experience of Sam Jack, 29, from Stansted in Essex, who served for five years in the Army with 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal), like my cousin Kevin. Sam Jack was shot by friendly fire in 2009 while on patrol in Afghanistan. His story is narrated by the older veteran: “I can’t remember my injury. One minute my mates were all there, the next I’m in hospital. I couldn’t speak, couldn’t move.”

Royal Navy veteran Jim Radford, 88, from London, thought to be Britain’s youngest D-day veteran, narrates what happened to Anna Pollock, 34, from Catterick in north Yorkshire. She is a former medic in the Royal Air Force who completed two tours of Iraq but has been left heavily reliant on a wheelchair following a sudden bleed on her spine. She says, in words read by Mr Radford, “I love the feeling of being strong. I’m not weak, I’m a warrior. I’ll never stop mourning the person I used to be, but I’m beginning to like the person I’ve become.”

Those are all very powerful stories, and I encourage anyone who has not watched the films to do so and to share them widely. They speak to the link between generations and the shared experiences.

The campaign is needed because one of the legion’s surveys showed that most adults associate remembrance, the poppy, and the Royal British Legion’s work with the two world wars and elderly veterans. Just over a third of those surveyed identified remembrance with thinking about those who are currently serving or who have recently left the forces.

I have done my own work with the legion locally, which gave me an insight into the experiences of veterans of more recent conflicts. I took part in a programme called Journey into the Legion, in which we spent a year looking at the legion’s four central activities—representation, comradeship, remembrance and welfare. I vividly remember during that year meeting two legion beneficiaries, Neil Adams and Dave Ireland. Neil served in the Royal Marines from 2005 to 2012 and saw active service in Afghanistan and numerous worldwide deployments. After leaving the Marines he took up a career in personal training and fitness and was trying to set up his own business. He received valuable support from the legion and other charitable trusts to buy equipment for his business and get going, taking the first step in civilian life and success in business.

Dave Ireland served with the Queen’s Dragoon Guards from 1988 to 1993. After service he worked in the telecoms industry, but he ended up being supported by the legion with essential housing goods and financial advice after he got into difficulties. He said:

“The Legion does vital work in so many ways and people need to recognise the broad range of work they do. The Legion was there for me when I needed a helping hand more than ever, and because of that, I am now looking forward and getting on with my life.”

Most memorably, I met a gentleman called Andy Davies, who served as an RAF technician at St Athan. It is a location I know well, because my father was a councillor there and my mum taught in the local school—indeed, they had had contact with Andy when he was still serving there. For him to come and tell me his story at the remembrance ceremony in the field of poppies at Cardiff castle was incredibly moving. He told me that
when he had known my parents he was doing well in his RAF career; he had a family and a home, and everything was going well. He then told me how he was made redundant when the various maintenance units were shut down in 2006. He descended into chronic alcoholism, ended up sleeping rough and lost his family. He was even in prison for a period. Thanks to the support of SSAFA and the legion, he got into rehabilitation and got sober. He has taken incredible steps in his life. It was a really moving story.

For Andy to have not only made that incredible journey, but been able to talk about it to other people showed the utmost bravery. That courage was already clear from his service history, but it was also clear when he told his story. He spoke powerfully about the challenges he had faced, for example in relation to benefits, housing and accessing services. I encounter many such cases in my work as a constituency MP, as I am sure many other colleagues do.

Andy told me about some of the other issues he had faced. He told me that identification is crucial:

“From time to time I call into the local service providers. They say, ‘Hello Andy. Were you a squaddie?’ I will tell...that is like asking a Canadian which state in the U.S. they are from! I am conscious that squaddies are very proud of the cap badge they wore, so in order to preserve dignity and self-respect the language of ex-service personnel needs to be properly understood, particularly if they are struggling.”

He had been an RAF serviceman. We can all see the types of mistakes that could cause.

We need to be aware of the scale of the challenge we face. How many of us are really familiar with the numbers regarding the most recent veterans? Kings College London and Help for Heroes have produced research showing that between 1991 and 2014, some 757,805 regulars served in the British armed forces; 235,187 were deployed on one or more major operations, and an estimated 36,506 were medically discharged. They have done an extensive study, and estimate that at least 66,000 ex-regulars—this does not include the issues for reservists—need or will need support with physical or mental health issues, let alone other issues. They told me that they have upwards of 9,000 people taking part in their fellowship groups, and over 800 taking part in their Hidden Wounds programme, which deals with anxiety issues, particularly lower-level anxiety. Referrals to Combat Stress are up by 71%.

There are many other statistics that we could go through to identify the scale of the challenge that we will face in the coming years. Help for Heroes really wanted to impress on me the importance of the right services being available to people. There is a tendency to focus on higher-profile conditions, particularly PTSD—Combat Stress and others do amazing work with people in those circumstances—but it is important that people with lower-level anxiety get the support that they need.

We also need to think about the needs of different generations, and the differences between people who did national service, and those who served in the cold war, the British Army of the Rhine, the Falklands, Northern Ireland, Germany, the Balkans, and the more recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. We also need to think about attitudes. The Help for Heroes study showed that 82% of respondents think that British troops and veterans need more support when they return home, and 75% think that veterans are forgotten once they return home. However, only 7% of the public knew how many troops actually served in Afghanistan, and less than 1% knew how many troops served in Iraq to the nearest 20,000. Less than 3%—this is quite shocking—knew that British troops are currently posted to over 80 countries globally. Only 5% knew how many conflicts the UK has been involved in since the Falklands war.

Those are among the issues that have led the Royal British Legion to come up with their campaign, and that led me to secure this debate. We need to rethink the profile of the veterans and service personnel in our country, and the scale of, and differences in, their experiences and needs, whether in health, housing, support on engagement with benefits and tax services, or getting into employment.

Younger veterans face particular issues. How are we ensuring, for example, that services are signposted properly through digital methods? The Government are setting up a new website, one-stop shop and one-stop phone line—great. But are we thinking about how younger people who have recently left the forces are engaging, through social media, online apps and so on? My experience with local veterans is that they often struggle to find the right sort of advice and progress.

I am sure that other colleagues will want to go into detail on some of the specific issues, but I want to make one last point. It is shame that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), is not here today. He has his own distinguished service record, and he and the Minister had an extensive exchange the other day about specific issues. The hon. Gentleman raised some really important points about the plethora of charities and different organisations.

The one point that I would like to open the debate with is how we can work better to co-ordinate and build partnerships and relationships. There are many good examples at local government level. Vale of Glamorgan has set up a community covenant and great work is also taking place in Cardiff. There is more great work in Cumbria, Lancashire and other places, but progress is too patchy. The armed forces covenant report from last year points out what the services charities say. We have to consider how we can better co-ordinate the different services, particularly when faced with the scale of the challenge and the needs and diversity of people who will need our support for the years to come.

It is crucial that we rethink remembrance, not out of disrespect for the generations before—they will always have our respect and gratitude for what they did for us—but because we need to think about the challenges facing the younger generation. I hope this debate will take some steps towards eliminating some of those issues.

4.2 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate, which is so important in this important week. It is a great opportunity to stand up and talk about our exceptional armed forces—the personnel and their families, who quietly support them all. Our forces have the best training in the world. We are renowned; other nations come to Britain to be part of what we do here.
What I find extraordinary in the work that I am doing with the Armed Forces Parliamentary Trust is the depth of patriotism in every single member of the armed forces as they put themselves in harm’s way on our behalf. Their families quietly support that wish. Members of the armed forces are very happy to go and do exciting and dangerous things too, but fundamentally there is an extraordinary patriotism and belief in our great nation. The Royal British Legion’s work, which the hon. Gentleman highlighted so well, shows a profound respect for the patriotism, effort and risk that these individuals take on our behalf.

The key point is that every member of our serving armed forces will become a veteran; that is a self-evident truth in many ways, although we do not necessarily think about it. The fact that nearly three quarters of a million members of our communities have served in the armed forces since 1991 is extraordinary. Having set up the all-party group on the armed forces covenant when I arrived in the House last year, I am a huge fan of the fact that the former Prime Minister set into law the belief that the covenant should be a total commitment for the nation as a whole to embrace, to ensure that our military family suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service to our nation.

I begin by asking about how we are doing. This is a journey; to go from a standing start to creating a legislative framework, and moving forward in supporting those serving, and their families and veterans of all ages, is a long and complex thing. I pay enormous tribute to the Ministry of Defence, which drove forward the challenge set by the Prime Minister to put the covenant into law. Some really interesting work has been going on over the last six years to do that.

I have RAF Boulmer and the Otterburn Ranges in my patch, so I see a lot of young men and women doing training of all sorts. One of the key challenges I have found is that our serving personnel and their families have no voice, and that is part of the contract they make when they take the Queen’s shilling and stand at the frontline on our behalf. It is so important that we in this House can be their voice, because they want to serve, and their families quietly support that wish. Their families understand the sacrifices they make for the nation as a whole to embrace, to ensure that our military family suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service to our nation.

I want to mention just a couple of charities I do a lot of work with. One, which I have recently become a patron of, is called Forward Assist. It is based in Northumberland, and it is run by an amazing man called Tony Wright, who is a former Royal Marine. He explained to me how he views the journey of those who serve, and his explanation sticks in my mind—if I could do cartoons, I would turn it into one. He said that we go out and seek young men and women to become members of our armed forces—they are the sheep, and we pick the sheep from the flock that is our nation. We then turn them into wolves; that is quite a harsh statement, but that is what we do—we take them and we train them to the nth degree to become incredibly honed fighters, able to defend us with all the tools we provide them with. They then go out and fight, and they live in teams—in packs, as wolves do—fighting for us and taking on the enemy.

However, when they leave the armed forces, what do they do? They become a veteran. What is that? What we need them to become is sheepdogs. We will never turn wolves back into sheep, but if we get things right, we might just turn them into sheepdogs. The sheepdog is one of the farmer’s most important tools and a critical part of looking after the community. The challenge we have is to ensure that, as members of our armed forces become veterans and return to civilian life, we give them the tools to become sheepdogs and to lose the wolf—to park that as part of their history—so that they can live a full life as civilians, channelling their skills in new ways, and they have such extraordinary skills.

Forward Assist, this wonderful small charity in Northumberland, has developed a programme that ensures that, as these people—quite a lot of them are young men and women—come out, they maintain team activities. One of the key problems is that they live in teams—that is how they fight as military personnel—and they never work alone. However, they then come away from that environment, and ensuring that they maintain those relationships restores their confidence as they get to grips with civilian life.

We have to help veterans understand what their skills are. They have a very different view of the extraordinary talents they are given as they are trained to the nth degree, and they need to understand what those can be worth in the civilian world. So many do not value themselves, and we clearly have to challenge that. We have to ensure that we support the charities and organisations that help to empower these men and women to get into the modern workplace.

We also have to help veterans to get to grips with what one might call day-to-day life challenges. When people who have lived in an institutional framework as part of the armed forces, and who have been focused entirely on the defence of the realm, come back, they have to deal with a lot of stuff that they have not dealt with during that time. Those are critical things, which so many of our charities help these people to do, and we need to make sure that charities are able to do that.

Another charity that is a wonderful representation of how those who have served bring their talents to our communities is a small charity called Challenger Troop, which is run by Simon Dean. His team of veterans take the military ethos of discipline, self-belief, personal motivation and challenge and go into deprived communities. They take groups of children out into the big outdoors. Many of these children have never been beyond their small community, and he empowers them to discover who they can be. He tests them and pushes them to their limits, and that revolutionises the vision they have of what the world might offer them. It is extraordinary to watch the charity’s staff do that and to hear how they talk about the challenge of helping those in our communities who have probably had little, if any, contact with the military to discover just how far they can go and to do what they thought they could not do. It is extraordinary to watch what the Royal Marines would call “commando morale”, when at the point when someone thinks they cannot go any further, they keep going and find that they can do something extraordinary. That has been brought to our most deprived communities and children who otherwise would not have such opportunities.
A very small charity called PTSD Resolution does, in a baby way, what Combat Stress does, working individually with those who need psychological support to bring them through what can be a very traumatic side-effect of having dealt with these incredibly stressful environments, and quietly making sure that they can be supported. They may hold down really good jobs, but sometimes it becomes too hard. We have seen that this weekend with fireworks, which can often trigger PTSD-recurrent behaviour. It is extraordinary to know that there are people out there who understand and quietly provide that support, so that we ensure that the wolves can be sheepdogs, doing amazing jobs while sometimes feeling that parts of them have been damaged by their service.

As the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said, the big charities do extraordinary work across the board. They have been in the system for 100 years, looking after veterans from 1918 right through to now. We all support them at this time of year, and it is important that we make sure that people support them all year round.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is telling us about lots of laudable charities that are doing excellent work with veterans, but does she agree that the state has a role in supporting them fully rather than leaving it entirely to the charity sector?

Mrs Trevelyan: The hon. Lady makes an absolutely critical point. This is about the great question of what the covenant might become—how, as a nation, as a Government, and as Departments we might consider the best way to take it right through our nation’s consciousness, so that we not only feel that it is a good thing but it becomes a reality across the board. Then, wherever serving personnel who come back into civilian life and their families live, the communities they return to understand, respect and support them, and can value and make best use of the extraordinary talents that they have brought back.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady is making some important points. Does she agree that one of the ways in which the Government could do more would be in ensuring the consistency of data on veterans? Many of us have been campaigning for the “Count them in” campaign to ensure that there is a question on the census, but there are also issues about what is included on the service leavers form—for example, it has signposts to only two charities and not to others. There are things we could be doing a lot better to understand who needs our support, where they are, and how we can get to them.

Mrs Trevelyan: I absolutely agree. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are working hard to see whether we can get the Cabinet Office to ensure that we have the census marker, because that will give us a starting point from which we can tackle the question of how big our military family is and how we are making sure that we look after them.

We all want our armed forces to be there when we need them, but in—thank goodness—times of peace here at home, we do not think that much about them, as the statistics prove, horribly and truly. In reality, though, our armed forces are not sitting about in barracks with nothing to do, or on the dockside twiddling their thumbs. Our Navy is absolutely at full stretch across the oceans and under our seas, our Air Force is fully engaged in the fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, and our Army is going through an extensive re-basing programme as troops return from Germany and we prepare for ongoing NATO operations in the face of uncertain times ahead.

I have serious concerns about the impact of the current levels of undermanning on families and on the retention of our highly trained personnel whom we cannot easily replace once lost. I worry that we are putting too great a strain on the offer to our serving personnel. As one recent veteran said to me only last week, “Redundancies, pay restraint, pensions slashed, new pay model, CAAS, FAM, and now future base closures. What a way to boost morale!” With the impact on the next generation of personnel as we recruit and want to retain them, it is critical that we understand what it looks like from the inside and how we can support those who are serving now, because they will be our future veterans and we need to make sure that we surround them with the right package to ensure that they will be able to serve for as long as they choose and we can hope to keep them.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate. Along with the new generation of service personnel, there will be a new generation of children, young people and young carers of veterans who are profoundly impacted by pre-deployment, deployment and reintegration. Does the hon. Lady agree that in existing policy documents, particularly around health and social care, we need to revisit the idea of the broader family supporting the veteran back into community and civilian life?

Mrs Trevelyan: I agree. It is absolutely critical that we look at a whole-family approach to military family support, and there is a lot more work to do. We have a small charity in Northumberland that supports the children of military family carers. The charity is working with some support from the Department, on how we can understand that better and provide support in a more holistic way, with the hope of achieving a more constructive outcome.

Although there was much in the statement yesterday from the Secretary of State about better use of MOD estate assets and the technical side of things, we must actively start to value in a financial way—I speak as a chartered accountant, and I apologise if that lowers the tone—our armed forces personnel. They are our human capital. Our armed forces are often thought of as big tanks, shiny ships and fast jets, but none of that works without the humans making it work. Human capital is a critical military asset. People are vital to the whole process, and without them we have no armed forces. We do not value our military personnel as an asset. They are listed in MOD accounts as an overhead, and that fundamental mindset is a huge challenge. I challenge the Department regularly, as the Minister knows, to think differently. To assess, for instance, retention risk—how to keep our finest when we really need them—we need to look holistically across the MOD, on a value-for-money basis, at how we value those individuals.
The Minister is a great advocate of our personnel and veterans at a personal level, but I urge him to encourage the Department to adopt a more holistic perspective on how we invest in our human capital: the men and women of our Army, our Navy, our Air Force and our Royal Marines. Those people have spouses and children, without whose silent commitment and loyalty to our nation’s protection we would not have the world-class armed forces that we are all so proud of and grateful for.

I had the unexpected privilege of attending the submariners’ remembrance parade last Sunday. I still do not know why it happens the weekend before Remembrance Day, rather than on the main weekend; that must be one of the mysteries of submariners. It was an extraordinary privilege to meet an enormous number of men who had served—they were all men, although there are a few women who are serving now—in what is known as the silent service. That remarkable group of people, with whom I have previously had very little to do, have spent decades under our seas quietly and continuously looking after us, protecting us and keeping an eye on our enemies. They continue to do so day in, day out.

It is so important that the nation understands that this is a continuum. People are putting their lives on the line for us every day and every night. People such as the Northumberland Fusiliers who died in the third-to-last week of the war in 1918, for whom I am going to lay a wreath this Friday in Tezze in northern Italy, and William Chapman, whose grandson still lives in Berwick-upon-Tweed and has asked me to lay a special wreath for his family, were extraordinary men whom we must always remember. But today there are people serving across the globe—British men and women who are putting their lives on the line, and whose families are quietly waiting at home, supporting them. As we remember those who serve today and those who have gone before, we must never forget.

4.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to make a contribution to this debate, which is close to my heart and to the hearts of all of us in this Chamber. It is pertinent that the debate comes at this time of year. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on setting the scene so well. I think he speaks almost as fast as I do.

This is the time of year when we see the poppy stands again. We are all wearing our poppies, and we are very much aware of the time of year. For the past few years, I have been anxious to see what new pins are available. The Royal British Legion usually brings out a new wee badge, and regimental associations do likewise. This is the time of year when we remember those who paid the ultimate sacrifice by giving their lives for the protection of Queen and country, and the families who have been left behind to grieve for them. It is always important to keep that foremost in our minds at this time of year. Every year, there are fewer veterans from the second world war. In the Royal British Legion, of which I am a member, we notice every year that some of the old soldiers have passed on. We miss them because they made a valuable contribution not just in uniform and on service, but in the Royal British Legion.

This is also the time of year when we remember those who have given their lives since the second world war—that is the thrust of this debate—in wars in the Falklands, Iraq and Afghanistan and, of course, those who have lost their lives to terrorism in Northern Ireland. It is poignant that today is the 29th anniversary of the Enniskillen bombing, when the IRA directly attacked a number of service personnel and civilians. It is always good to remember such events. There have been many other atrocities in Northern Ireland, such as those at the Abercorn restaurant, on the Shankill Road and at La Mon restaurant. Theatrocity at Ballydugan is pertinent to me, because three of the four Ulster Defence Regiment men who were murdered were friends of mine.

There was also the bombing in Ballykelly. I see that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is in his place. As he knows, we are all very fond of him in this House. We thank him for his contribution in uniform and for what he did during his time in Northern Ireland. The peace process today owes a lot to people like him. We thank him and several other hon. Members—I see them sitting in the Chamber—for their contribution in uniform and for helping us in Northern Ireland to move, through a peaceful process, to a new beginning. I say that in all sincerity, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I want to put on the record that we wish to thank him in person.

This is the time of year when we show respect for those who have died, those who were left with irreversible physical and mental injuries, and the families who have had to live a life that would never be the same again. This is therefore an apt time to discuss and raise awareness about our new generation of veterans.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth mentioned his visit to the Somme. In my former role as mayor of Ards Borough Council back in 1990-91, I was very privileged to go to the Somme. I will never forget the sacrifice of the 36th (Ulster) Division, or indeed the sacrifice of all those who gave their lives. We feel very close to the 36th (Ulster) Division. In this the centenary year of the battle, we certainly remember their sacrifice at the Somme.

I recall clearly the youth of those who died. Some young boys said they were 18 when they were only 14. When you go around the gravestones, if you have had the opportunity to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will see their ages and clearly understand that these young boys thought it would be over by Christmas, but it was not. We are very conscious of that. There would not have been a home in Newtownards that was not affected by the loss of the youth at the battle of the Somme in 1916.

I am an ex-soldier. I served in the Ulster Defence Regiment for three years, in what I suppose was an anti-terrorism role and for 11 and a half years in part-time service in the Royal Artillery—14 and a half years in service. Some of my greatest experiences, other than the births of my sons, have been while wearing uniform. The births of my sons were obviously the best experiences of my whole life, although not for my wife; they were good experiences for her as well, but more painful ones.

I like to think that wearing that uniform has, in a way, shaped who I am today. I saw things and experienced things that are difficult to deal with, so I can easily understand that mental health support is needed by those in service if they are to make the transition back to civvy street. I will speak about that for a few minutes, but because we must always note that what happens to a soldier is not always physical. They may be mentally...
and emotionally affected, with the trauma remaining in their brain. There is no doubt that service shapes those who serve; the question we must ask, however, is: how are people being shaped today? How are those who leave our armed forces today being shaped by what they have experienced, and how are we supporting their outcomes? That is what the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth said in his introduction and it is what we seek to address today.

I have been an avid supporter of better mental health support for our troops, and I have worked hard for organisations such as SSAFA. I have been very privileged these past few years to hold a coffee morning—September or October is our coffee month—to raise money. This year, the people of Newtownards gave generously and committed some £5,500. Some of that was down to donations, of course, but at the end of the day, the people of Ards and the local district ensured that the £5,500 was there for SSAFA, so that it, in turn, could help those in need—those who have served in uniform but now find life very difficult. I understand that over the past seven years, £25,000 has been raised through those coffee mornings, which is good work.

What better organisation can there be than Help for Heroes? We all recognise its work in our constituencies and across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I have also been a supporter of Beyond the Battlefield, a project that seeks to make mental and physical health facilities available to veterans, not just in my area but across Northern Ireland. According to recent reports, those facilities are needed now more than ever before. The former Minister, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), when she visited Northern Ireland, had an opportunity to meet them, and I must say that they were impressed by her commitment to and interest in veterans’ issues. I recognise, too, the commitment of the Minister here today but just wanted to put on the record my thanks to the right hon. Lady for making that time available. It left a lasting impression among the soldiers, and it was good to be reassured that at every ministerial level in the House and at home every effort was being made to address these issues. I also just wanted to highlight the work of Beyond the Battlefield.

A few weeks ago, a BBC radio documentary highlighted the fact that 100 Army veterans in Northern Ireland had tried to take their own lives—that can only be described as epidemic levels. We need to recognise the enormity of what is happening. It is particularly tragic because the regimental associations, the health services, the MOD and the charities were not aware of those soldiers; they were under the radar. I asked about this in an Adjournment debate a fortnight or so ago, when the Minister was in his place, but it is good to put it on the record again, with a bit more detail, rather than in an intervention. There are serious issues in Northern Ireland when it comes to addressing the issue of soldiers and personnel who have served and come back with terrible memories from Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. We need to address those issues at every level.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): To my mind, one of the greatest tragedies is the loss of regimental headquarters, which are increasingly being cut, as a result of which people do not know about veterans and they just disappear.

The more regimental headquarters there are, the more likely we are to know about people who others might not pick up. This is a big tragedy.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. I greatly respect the Minister and look forward to his response, but there is an anomaly here: there are those who are under the radar and slipping by. Whether it is because the regimental associations are not aware of them, or because those with the responsibility are not there, they are being forgotten about. We need to address the underbelly of those who are missed by the charities and others.

The MOD has responded, but has it responded hard enough? I say, with the utmost respect for the Minister, that I do not believe that it has done so fully. The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham has perhaps highlighted that point in his intervention, as I have. It is my duty in the House to say that with all sincerity.

After bringing up this issue in my role on the Defence Select Committee—some Committee members are in the Chamber—it was determined that a sub-committee would be set up to collect evidence on the mental health of our troops. The Committee members have kindly asked me to chair that sub-committee, which will take place in April 2017.

What are we looking for in Northern Ireland? We are looking for a rehabilitation centre. I have sought a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), who is a former soldier. He has agreed to meet us and representatives of Beyond the Battlefield in Newtownards to discuss these matters. We need to ensure better co-ordination between the Ministry of Defence and the health service, so that they work better and closer together. If they are to work in tandem, it has to be a family—a marriage—with two organisations working hand in hand to ensure that we look after all those people. We need to make sure, too, that the counsellors and those who work in the health service have an understanding of what it is like to have severe trauma, so that they are able to give them the advice they need.

When these people present themselves at the NHS, we need to remember that they have often been through the utmost, most severe and horrible trauma. They sometimes find themselves facing someone at the other end of the desk who will say, “Well, what’s wrong with you?” There has to be training so that people understand how these traumas work and what post-traumatic stress disorder means.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is speaking very persuasively, as he always does, about this matter. Does he agree that there is a role for charities to support the NHS and that Combat Stress in particular offers an extremely impressive level of care that we cannot expect the NHS to match, because of the specialism required to deal with military personnel suffering from mental health issues?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman hits the nail on the head. That is the sort of co-ordination that we need to have with the MOD, the NHS, charities and so forth. If we can all work together better, we can achieve a whole lot more and collectively address those issues.
I had the chance to meet some of these servicemen. At the age I am, when I see a young man who has served in uniform, I can sometimes remember him being born. That is a fact of life. I am thinking of one man who came back from Afghanistan with serious head injuries. He was one of those people from Northern Ireland who had suffered greatly. I shall not mention his name—it would not be fair to do so—but his marriage is over and he is only just about holding on to a job. He is severely ill. Anyone who met him would know right away that there was something wrong with him—he just gives the appearance of someone who is not well.

I am conscious of where we are. The facts are stark and heart-breaking. One of our servicemen or women commits suicide almost every two weeks, and nearly 400 members of our troops killed themselves between 1995 and 2014. Those most likely to take their lives are male single soldiers aged 20 to 24, who comprise a quarter of deaths. Almost half hanged themselves, while 21% died of gunshot or explosive injuries. Others killed themselves by poisoning, suffocation, throwing themselves off buildings or from stabbing and cutting. In 2012, it emerged that the number of British soldiers and veterans committing suicide had outstripped the number that had died fighting in battle. What awful statistics they are to have to report in this House. That year, 21 soldiers killed themselves and 29 veterans committed suicide. That compared with 44 troops who died in Afghanistan, 40 of them in action. Today, veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq and the Falklands or even further back have their memories and their nightmares to deal with every day.

In the past 12 months, more than 100 British Gulf war heroes have asked for help from the charity Combat Stress, which the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) referred to in his intervention. Some 25 years after the end of the conflict, they are still fighting the wars. In a further possible indication that the true scale of the mental trauma caused by Afghanistan and Iraq is only starting to emerge, the number of claims rose by 35% in the last year, from 429 to 580.

The armed forces covenant is one that we are most concerned about. In responding to me in Parliament yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster) said that the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland has achieved some 93% of its commitment. Let me say this gently to the Minister—we have a role to play in addressing that 7% shortfall. It was 93% in the last Session of Parliament, so we have not advanced at all. The 93% figure means a shortfall of 7%, and we need to address that. The Government, and the Ministry of Defence in particular, are doing many good things, including the armed forces compensation scheme and the armed forces pension scheme. Support can be drawn from the Government and go directly to the people who need it. The Northern Ireland regional disablement service specialises in the rehabilitation of patients, including veterans, who have experienced the amputation of a limb or limbs. We must ensure that we address issues relating to both mental and physical health. I thank the Government for what they have done, but I think that the regional disablement service could do more to address the issues affecting those who have fought in both Afghanistan and Iraq, including amputees and people with brain injuries.

Money has been set aside in Northern Ireland and, I believe, on the UK mainland to upgrade memorials throughout the land. That is a good thing, because it means that many people will be able to attend services at 11 am this Sunday with memorials that are clean and have been upgraded. The War Graves Commission does fantastic work in my constituency, involving both the forgotten graves of those who gave their lives in the first world war and whose families have passed on, and those who lie in far-off lands and whose families cannot visit their graves. We should never forget the families. We have been referring directly to the soldiers, but we should also remember the mums and dads, the wives and husbands, and the children.

There are indications that the true scale of the mental trauma caused by Afghanistan and Iraq is larger than we think. Where do we go from here? We must ensure that help is not simply out there if people search for it, but is there before they ask. We must ensure that every veteran has a place to go where they are able to talk—or not; whichever it is that they need. They may want to chat, or they may not. Sometimes they will just need someone to be close to them.

I have been a major supporter of the Beyond the Battlefield project in Newtownards, as well as other charities such as SSAFA and Help for Heroes. Our commitment should not end when the plane comes in and brings our men safely home; our commitment to our troops must equal their commitment to us. It must be more than a vision statement; it must be a reality. The new generation of veterans are no less deserving than others of complete support and help. When we say that we will remember them, that must be a promise and not simply a phrase.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who shared many wise words with us. His comments on the sacrifice made by the men of Ulster back in 1916 on the first day of the Somme were particularly poignant. Earlier this year, I was pleased to visit Belfast City Hall and see the original of the famous painting commemorating those who went over the top. Those men had all volunteered.
Kevin Foster:

of course; everyone at the Somme was a volunteer—nobody had been conscripted into the forces at that point. We will all of course be reflecting on the impact of their sacrifice on politics immediately following the war and for many years after. There are memorials across Belfast to the many hundreds who did not return, and they prompted me to reflect on the impact that would have had on communities, with so many young men signing up, going away as groups of friends, and then never coming back. That, for me, is the most poignant aspect of all this.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this debate. It was a pleasure to hear his application at the Backbench Business Committee and I am glad we have been able to find such an opportune time for this debate, as we are in the centenary period, we are about to commemorate the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, and in two years we will be marking the actual centenary of that moment. This year’s event will follow the centenaries of the Somme and the Battle of Jutland. One of the things brought home to me by attending the 100th anniversary marking both those battles held at Paimpton war memorial was how close together they were. I think of the families having just finished receiving the telegrams to let them know who had died at the Battle of Jutland—with a particular impact in south Devon, given its naval tradition—only then a few weeks later to start getting the first notifications of those who had been killed in the Battle of the Somme. Sometimes it is difficult to comprehend just how close together these events were—the bloodiest day for the Royal Navy and the bloodiest day for the British Army, just a few months apart—and the impact that must have had.

That helped inspire the idea of wanting to remember these events as more than just a series of battles and episodes in military history, but also as involving individuals. That is why we have the process of remembrance, which has now started and which, for me, very much originates from those communities. I looked at the newspapers at the time, including some local papers, which at the start of the war had thought it would be good to commemorate those who had given their lives for their country and to put them on their front page. Some newspapers in the summer of 1916 were just a tablet of names, which made me think of the impact all this must have had.

It is easy to think about these events as acts of historical memory—of black-and-white films of battles from the first and second world wars—but it is right that we focus on veterans. Many in Torbay proudly wear their veterans badge. To be fair, it was the last Labour Government who brought that in, and many take huge pride in being able to go around on a day-to-day basis and say they have served their country in that way.

One of the most interesting people I met in my first steps into politics was a veteran called ‘Johnny’ Johnson and his wife. He was a former chairman of Torbay Conservative Association and former Torbay councillor, but most famously of all the last surviving British Dambuster. He was such an unassuming man and a true hero in every sense; he would never want to dwell on what he did, but was only too happy to do so. I first met him when I was doing a project for my A-level history course. I talked to him about the raid and got the sense of not just the sacrifice he made, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) commented on, the impact on the family. His wife was in the women’s air force at the time and they had no knowledge of what their husbands were doing. One of Johnny’s comrades had been disciplined for ringing his girlfriend up to say, “I won’t be able to make it tonight.” He asked in his defence, “What should I have done? We had arranged to meet at the cinema; she would have stood there for an hour.” The response was, “You should have let her stand there for an hour and the next time you saw her said, ‘There’s a war on’ and left it at that.”

Stephen Doughty:

I had not realised that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency had a connection with the Dambusters, just as mine does. I mentioned Guy Gibson earlier. Sadly, we recently also lost Eileen Younghusband, who famously served in the filter room on the night of the Dambusters raids. She had a distinguished career in the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force and beyond, and she told her stories with great vigour. We are very sorry to have lost her recently.

Kevin Foster:

To finish my story about Johnny, I want to mention his reaction to the campaign to get him knighted. A lot of us probably feel that that would have been an appropriate honour, but his reaction was typical of the unassuming gentleman he was. Basically, he said, “Why me?” He felt that he would rather be remembered along with the rest of his comrades. He had faced so much danger, he lost many comrades, and he was among the first to sign up to do his bit for king and country and defeat Adolf Hitler. It is wonderful to think about the past and to remember the huge sacrifices that have enabled us to have a free Parliament here today.

I want to pay tribute to the work done by the Royal British Legion, which was also touched on by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth. Its Rethinking Remembrance campaign is a thought-provoking project in which second world war veterans read out experiences that sound as though they are from the 1940s until, at the very end, we realise that they are experiences from Afghanistan, Iraq or the Gulf war. They are the experiences of people who are the same age as me, and that certainly cut through to me. I suspect that it will have the same effect on many others.

I took part in an event earlier this year in Paimpton entitled the “22 for 22”. I am sure that many other Members took part in such events as well. The idea was to do 22 push-ups to mark the shocking statistic—it is an American statistic—that 22 US veterans take their own lives every day. We think of the controversy of the losses on the battlefield in Vietnam in the 1960s, but even today, 22 veterans will take their own life. A chap called Rich McDonald is a resident of Torquay and a constituent of mine. He is a veteran of tours in Northern Ireland and of the Gulf war, and he arranged what he described as a “press-up spectacular” for a few of us at the local leisure centre. It was designed to get us together to mark the campaign. It was all very interesting and enjoyable to show our solidarity, but I do not think he will mind me saying that he then shared his own story of how the non-physical impact of his service nearly defeated
him not long ago. It was great to see him not only helping veterans but trying to get the message out to people that if they have a problem, they must tell someone by going one of the veterans charities involved. He was prepared to use his own experiences to show how valuable those charities had been to him.

When considering the work done around remembrance, it is only right for me to pay tribute to the two very active branches of the Royal British Legion in Torbay. The Paignton branch has long-serving stalwarts in Kevin Jeffery and Major Ron Goodwin—better known as Major Ron—and its new poppy appeal organiser, Nigel Monks.

Bob Stewart: Major Ron Goodwin was the regimental sergeant major of my battalion and a very great man. It is delightful to hear my hon. Friend mention Ronnie, sergeant major of my battalion and a very great man. It be safe.

The veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf war and young Members of Parliament today.

The veterans as being a bit older—if one is younger—but one. It was particularly poignant. We naturally think of dreams had all been lost in the maelstrom of world war. They did not go on to have families and that their hopes and than I was. What really struck me was that these people had all lost their lives in world war one, volunteers—from what was a small rural community at the time. They had all lost their lives in world war one, revealing to me that there was a wall of 94 names—virtually all Jolliffe. As we stood there as a group, it occurred to

Europe. It was arranged by a local lady called Meg

famous remark about the lights going out all across—of war being declared in Europe, which led to the

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. Yes, Major Ron is quite a figure in Torbay. I understand that he was quite a figure in the military as well, although there was someone that he had to try to keep in order—I am just trying to remember the name of that particular serving officer. Who might it have been? Perhaps my hon. and gallant Friend can tell me afterwards. Major Ron has certainly been a great figure in remembrance in the Bay, and in supporting the Royal British Legion branch and enabling it to help others today.

Sometimes we think that the poppy appeal is just about injured veterans from particular wars, but it is not. It is about giving support to the whole family that has been affected, perhaps by helping the son or daughter of a serviceman or woman to achieve a dream, or simply by dealing with more practical day-to-day needs if someone has fallen on hard times. That is why we should all rightly be proud to wear our poppies today.

One of the most thought-provoking things that I attended before being elected to this House was in St Marychurch on the 100th anniversary—to the minute—of war being declared in Europe, which led to the famous remark about the lights going out all across Europe. It was arranged by a local lady called Meg Jolliffe. As we stood there as a group, it occurred to me that there was a wall of 94 names—virtually all volunteers—from what was a small rural community at the time. They had all lost their lives in world war one, and every person named on the memorial was younger than I was. What really struck me was that these people did not go on to have families and that their hopes and dreams had all been lost in the maelstrom of world war one. It was particularly poignant. We naturally think of veterans as being a bit older—if one is younger—but the majority of people who lost their lives in those conflicts were younger than many of us who are considered young Members of Parliament today.

It is good that we are focusing on how we support the veterans of Iraq, Afghanistan, the Gulf war and ongoing deployments. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed, I have taken part in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, which included a survival night in a tent with six commandos. For those who are wondering, we were all assured that we would be safe.

Mrs Trevelyan: Just for clarity, my hon. Friend and I had the great honour of sharing a tent in minus 23°C conditions 3° north of the Arctic circle with a group of 19-year-old Royal Marines—pretty much the same age as my son. They were extraordinarily gentlemanly and none of them commented on whether my hon. Friend or I snored.

Mr Speaker: It is always useful to have a bit of additional information.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for that thought-provoking intervention, which will go down in the annals of Hansard. The point was about being out there and seeing what people volunteer to do on our behalf. Accusations are sometimes made about MPs’ foreign travel, but when I told people about signing myself up for a trip to go camping in northern Norway in the middle of winter, it was not seen as particularly glamorous trip.

While maintaining our military traditions, it is also right to ensure that we give people the tools they need to fight in today’s conflicts. Having grown up in Plymouth, I know that there will be some significant feelings about yesterday’s announcement on the Royal Citadel. However, it was one would want to go to war with a 350-year-old rifle, so it is right to ensure that we have not only modern equipment and vehicles, but modern facilities where our troops can train. Some places will have much associated history, but the priority must be to create a 21st-century battle force. We would not give horses to the cavalry to charge into battle on because of tradition. There will be some sad decisions to make as parts of history come to an end, but it is right that the MOD focuses on the modern equipment and facilities that our soldiers need.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for such a useful intervention. I agree that it would not be right or appropriate for Ministers to sit around deciding exactly
which question is on the census and what areas it goes into, but it is right that we are raising this issue in this House. I welcome the comments he has made, adding his voice on those points. I hope the national statistician is taking them seriously and will bear them in mind when making the final decisions.

In conclusion, I am always clear that wearing a poppy and remembering those who have given their lives is not about glorifying what happened, adding a gloss to warfare or lessening its reality. It is not about showing particular support for one conflict or another, although I suspect that some are far less controversial than others, including those in more recent years. It is about fundamentally remembering the sacrifice made by people who have gone away from their families and their homes to serve this country and who have lost their lives or sustained the injury that meant they lost opportunity in their lives—that can be both physical and mental. It is also about remembering what Robert E. Lee famously said:

"It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it."

In the remembrance season, that quote has added resonance.

4.57 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today’s debate, and I thank the mover of the motion, because it is timely to debate this as we mark the contribution of our armed forces and veterans and the debt of gratitude that we owe them. I want to highlight some of the things being done in Scotland to support veterans and touch on some of the issues that they face and the action being taken. I am sure that these issues will be familiar to Members from across the Chamber and across the UK. I hope that the positive experience in Scotland in recent years can provide the rest of the UK with ideas for developing policy in this area; the same happens in the other direction, too.

In common with the UK Government and other devolved Administrations, the Scottish Government have sought to ensure appropriate assistance and support for veterans in Scotland. Their stated ambition is to make Scotland the destination of choice for those leaving service, and to advance that, they have become the first devolved Administration to have a dedicated Veterans Minister. That has been part of a ministerial portfolio since 2012, when Keith Brown was appointed Minister with responsibility for veterans. Although other parts of the portfolio have changed, Keith still has the veterans portfolio as part of his own. That sent a significant message about the importance placed on supporting our veterans.

As an additional step, Scotland appointed a Scottish Veterans Commissioner, who researches and reports to the Scottish Government to inform policy properly and identify areas where further support is needed. The commissioner has operational independence, dedicated funding and a wide remit to improve outcomes for all veterans. The office is intended to be progressive, pushing at the barriers that prevent service leavers and veterans from realising their full potential, shifting thinking about veterans and forging a new image of them as tremendous assets to Scotland’s economy and communities. The areas that the commissioner’s work has focused on so far have included the transition from service and housing information for veterans. I know that those are important issues in other parts of the country, too.

Forthcoming priorities will include skills and education, and healthcare provision. Although these issues undoubtedly affect veterans across the UK, there is recognition that Scotland is different from other parts of the UK in its demography, legislation, administration and culture, so it is important that an approach is taken that fits what happens in Scotland.

The commissioner’s work has aimed to develop partnership working; it encourages people and organisations to step out of professional silos, combine their efforts and work together towards a common goal, in the interests of both veterans and the communities of which they are part. The commissioner’s work has also sought to recognise the many benefits that veterans and their families bring to our communities and workplaces, to stop people seeing these individuals through the prism of need and obligation and to ensure that we recognise them far more for their strengths and qualities and their contribution to Scotland.

In 2012, the Minister for Transport and Veterans commissioned the report “Our Commitments”, setting out the Scottish Government’s strategic direction and complementing the values of the armed forces covenant. In February this year, the Scottish Government published “Renewing Our Commitments”, a review of progress that considered what further areas of work were required.

More than £1 million has been committed to projects and organisations supporting veterans, including £830,000 through the Scottish Veterans Fund. The armed forces and veterans champions network has been established and includes senior representatives from NHS boards, the 32 local authorities in Scotland, Police Scotland and other bodies advocating support for the armed forces community through the public sector. The Scottish Government have also announced that, from April 2017, they will exempt war pensions for veterans and guaranteed income payments under the armed forces compensation scheme from consideration in assessments for care charges, to provide further tangible support to Scotland’s veteran community.

Scotland has made notable progress on specialist healthcare provision and mental healthcare. For example, Scotland has a state-of-the-art national specialist prosthetics service, which was announced in June 2013 and became fully operational in April 2014. The centre works through a single multidisciplinary team across two specialist centres in Edinburgh and Glasgow, with links to other limb-fitting centres in Aberdeen, Inverness and Dundee.

Another important element of health provision is supporting veterans in the area of mental health. In 2015, in partnership with NHS Scotland and Combat Stress, the Scottish Government committed more than £3.6 million in funding over three years for specialist mental health services for veterans resident in Scotland at the Hollybush House Combat Stress facility in Ayr. This will fund a range of specialist clinical rehabilitation and social and welfare support at the facility. The evidence-based treatment programme includes an intensive post-traumatic stress disorder programme, a trans-diagnostic programme, and stabilisation and anger management programmes. The Scottish Government
have provided £1.8 million to establish and support the Veterans First Point, a one-stop shop for help and assistance for veterans and their families living in Lothian. It includes a clinical mental health service, and it is hoped that the pilot can be rolled out to other areas. Over the past year, work has taken place in 10 health board areas across Scotland to help each local area to establish key partnerships, identify premises, plan requirements and recruit and select staff.

Bob Stewart: Are these centres run by the Government or by charities, subsidised by the Government?

Steven Paterson: The ones that I am talking about are run by 10 of the health boards in Scotland. They are funded by Government but run at the NHS level, and these are things we should definitely build on. There is work to come on Tayside to advance that.

Housing for veterans is of central concern to the Scottish Government, as I am sure it is across the rest of the UK, and a number of actions have been taken recently to provide support in this regard. For example, it is now easier for veterans to qualify for council and housing association housing because of legislative changes to the way that veterans can establish a local connection when being assessed for housing need. The Scottish Government have also extended priority access for service personnel and veterans to the low-cost initiative for first-time buyers—a shared equity scheme—and has abolished means-testing for disabled veterans who need adaptations to their houses. A number of interventions have also been made to ensure the construction of dedicated housing for veterans in Edinburgh, Carnoustie, Inverness, Motherwell and Wishaw. Scottish Veterans Residences provides valuable housing support services to vulnerable ex-service personnel; it has facilities in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee.

On education, the Scottish Government, local authorities, schools and the armed forces in Scotland work closely together to make sure that children and young people in service families benefit from the same standard of and access to education as any other child in their area. Changes made by the UK Ministry of Defence on basing—which is in the news after yesterday’s announcements, one of which affects my constituency—have an impact on service personnel, their families and schools because of the movement of personnel that is often part of being in the armed forces. The Scottish Government set up the Scottish service children’s strategic working group to focus on the challenges faced by children and young people in service families, share best practice and make support available. They also encourage and support applications to the Ministry of Defence educational support fund. Her Majesty’s inspectors are finding that a great deal of good work is being done to ensure that children and young people in service families are not disadvantaged in their education, and it is important that that continues.

Employment and skills are important areas for veterans and their families. Veterans are a great asset to the private and public sectors in Scotland, as I am sure they are across the UK. A growing number of employers are actively targeting veterans to fill their skills gaps. To facilitate this, in September 2015 the Scottish Government provided an additional £1.3 million to the Community Jobs Scotland pilot scheme to develop and deliver 100 additional CJS places, including places for up to 50 early leavers from the armed forces. Moving forward to 2016-17, ex-service personnel are now part of the core of people who are eligible to apply for the scheme’s 700 places.

Former service personnel aged 16 to 24 have been identified as a priority group eligible for support under Scotland’s employer recruitment incentive. The scheme offers employers funding over the course of the first 12 months of employment, which can be supplemented by a £500 payment if the employer pays the participant the living wage. That responds to the demands of employers by delivering a consistent and simple recruitment incentive that ensures that employing young people remains attractive to employers.

From April 2017, employment services for long-term unemployed people are being devolved to Scotland, and the Scottish Government aim to provide targeted employment services that meet the needs of unemployed people, including ex-service personnel. They will support ongoing collaborative, investigative working between the Scottish Qualifications Authority and the Ministry of Defence on accrediting military skills, so that those leaving the forces are in a better position to apply for jobs and are recognised by employers. That may be worthy of attention elsewhere in the UK. Perhaps the Minister could say something about accrediting skills learned in the armed forces, so that employers can see those skills when veterans apply for jobs.

In conclusion, Scotland has a long and proud military tradition, and we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our armed forces, veterans and their families for their service and sacrifice. This time of year, as we commemorate previous generations of servicemen and women, is also an opportune time to consider today’s veterans and service personnel and their place in society. When personnel make the transition to civilian life, they sometimes need additional support; occasionally, they require specific help accessing public and support services that most people take for granted. The Scottish Government are committed to ensuring that our veterans do not find themselves at a disadvantage and receive appropriate support that shows how we value them and their service.

5.7 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this important debate. It is notable that, although it has been sparsely attended, we have had contributions from every part of the United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) spoke for England; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke for Northern Ireland; the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth spoke for Wales; and my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) spoke on behalf of Scotland. I have deliberately not mentioned the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) because frankly we have still not accepted that we have lost you for good.

As we have heard so many times this afternoon, our veterans are an asset to our society and they deserve our sincerest thanks, our fullest support and our deepest respect. With Remembrance Sunday fast approaching, it is right to take this opportunity to consider today’s veterans and serving personnel as well as to remember those who have gone before them. It is right that today
veterans are so highly regarded by their fellow citizens and that Governments of all the nations of the United Kingdom continually seek to improve the care on offer to those who have served their country and those who have suffered terribly as a consequence.

It is also right that we work tirelessly to ensure that our veterans are cared for properly, but let us be honest: we still have a long way to go before we get it absolutely right for those who have served in our armed forces. The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed made an important point about the funding of veterans care. I am reminded of the slogan “Justice before Charity”, which was coined at the end of the first world war by the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers. The federation, which was among the founders of the Royal British Legion, was a veterans campaign group which even founded a short-lived political party, the Silver Badge party, named after the small silver lapel pin that was given to each of those who served in the great war and on which were engraved the words “For Services Rendered”.

The Silver Badge party, under the banner “Every man once before any man twice”, fielded candidates in the 1918 general election on a platform of representing the political interests of former service personnel. Although it is no longer a campaigning political party, what it stood for—“Every man once before any man twice” and particularly “Justice before Charity”—remains just as true and as relevant to the debate today about our veterans as it was 100 years ago.

As I said previously, although we have come a long way, we are not there yet and I hope that the sometimes complex needs of those who have served are never seen as a burden on our resources, but rather viewed as a responsibility that we willingly accept in return for the sacrifice that they have made. We must never relegate that responsibility for veterans care entirely to the charitable sector, which, although it raises hundreds of millions of pounds and does wonderful work, cannot become the primary source of assistance.

We are all too well aware of the statistics and we have heard many of them this afternoon—40% of veterans report having health or welfare issues, with a growing emphasis on the need for long-term care. According to research by King’s College London, an estimated 60,000 of our veterans who served between 1991 and 2014 will need support for mental health issues. Although mental health and other health issues are critical, the range of concerns facing our veterans extends to financial, employment, social and housing issues, and the need for relationship support. Worryingly, the research showed that a number of our veterans, when interviewed, called into question the commitment of the armed forces to supporting their transition and that of their families back to civilian life.

It is fitting that on this occasion, when we pause to commemorate service personnel, particularly those who have fallen in the past 100 years, we commit ourselves to honouring them by looking after today’s service men and women in the manner that they deserve. I have no doubt that every Member across this House wishes to provide the very best care for our veterans and their families, and I am sure we would be willing to learn from the example of others. Without going into too much detail, I point to the Danish model of veteran care, which provides continuous and comprehensive support for veterans and their families. That support is viewed as the responsibility not just of one Department, but of all Departments, and its success is examined and is evaluated every two years.

When creating the document “Our Commitments” in 2012, the Scottish Government looked to the Danish model and the comprehensive strategy that supports service personnel during and after their service. That document sets out the Scottish Government’s approach to our armed forces. Much of what it contained is already enshrined in the armed forces covenant.

Scotland has a large and vibrant armed forces community, encompassing both regular and reserve personnel and their families. In 2014, Poppy Scotland estimated the size of the community to be 530,000—in excess of half a million—including dependants. That is almost 10% of the Scottish population. Many were born in Scotland and, having enjoyed a fulfilling military career, have returned home, but more and more people who grew up elsewhere are choosing to make Scotland their home in retirement. I am delighted that many decide to settle in my constituency of Argyll and Bute, where they are very welcome indeed.

Approximately 1,800 men and women end their service career each year in Scotland. Most find the transition to civilian life straightforward and take it in their stride, but some find it a far greater challenge. To ease that transition, in 2014 Scotland’s First Minister—my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond)—appointed Mr Eric Fraser to serve as the first Scottish Veterans Commissioner. In establishing that unique role, Scotland has blazed a trail for the rest of the UK to follow. The commissioner, who is a Royal Navy veteran with 37 years’ experience, has operational independence, dedicated funding and a wide remit to improve outcomes for veterans. He has published a strategy and a work plan and already submitted two detailed reports, on transition arrangements and housing.

He has extensive and regular engagement with the Scottish Government.

The Scottish Government have also introduced an armed forces advocate and created a comprehensive network of armed forces and veterans champions who are represented in the Scottish Government, local authorities, NHS boards and Police Scotland, among many other bodies, thereby embedding support for the armed forces community throughout the whole Scottish public sector.

The vast majority of people leaving the services settle into civilian life in Scotland with little effort. However, a small number experience difficulty accessing services and therefore require additional support tailored to their specific needs. The overriding principle of the Scottish Government’s approach to caring for our veterans is that no one should suffer any disadvantage as a result of military service.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, and I very much welcome the Scottish Government’s efforts on behalf of veterans, many of whom are English, Welsh and Irish, and many of whom retire to his constituency, as he has said. Does he not recognise, however, that this is not just a Government role; many charities and individuals have a role to play?
For example, Mrs Pam Bates and Mr Carl Lewis in my constituency do an awful lot for local veterans in Kent. That individual effort is just as important as the Government effort of which he speaks.

Brendan O’Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Indeed, I have met one of his constituents—one of Britain’s finest—who is doing fabulous work. I commend the work that those people do. The point I was making is that the state must not abdicate its responsibility. I fully support the wonderful work that charities do, but we have to recognise that the care of our veterans is first and foremost the responsibility of the state.

The Scottish Government have fully embraced the responsibility to assist serving and former personnel and their families, both in the Scottish national health service, where a financial commitment has been made, and in housing, education and employment needs. We recognise that military service fosters leadership, organisational skills, resilience and specialist skills such as medical training and technical expertise. Veterans and their families are a great asset for the private sector, and a growing number of employers are actively targeting veterans and their families to fill the skills gap.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Government published an updated version of the document called “Renewing Our Commitments” in which they reaffirmed what they had said in 2012: making good jobs, affordable homes and excellent public services a priority for our veteran community. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling said, Scotland’s ambition is to be the destination of choice for those leaving military employment and seeking a fulfilling life, while wanting to make an important contribution to society. Scotland values our armed forces community as a true asset, and we renew our commitment to support them and pledge to make our country the most attractive destination for those leaving the armed forces.

As we approach Remembrance Day, it is absolutely right that we stop and pay tribute to those who have served and remember those who have fallen. But let us also look to the future. In doing so, let us be guided by the words of 100 years ago from the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers, whose demand of politicians back then would be echoed by veterans today: it wanted justice before charity. She spoke movingly of her own experiences, having seen the fine work done by many charities. She reminded us, too, of the current engagement of our armed forces, the stress caused by under-manning and the dreadful effect on morale of redundancies and base closures.

The hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), chair of the all-party group on the armed forces covenant, stressed how important it is for MPs to speak up for servicemen and women, as they cannot speak up for themselves. She spoke movingly of her own experiences, having seen the fine work done by many charities. She reminded us, too, of the current engagement of our armed forces, the stress caused by under-manning and the dreadful effect on morale of redundancies and base closures.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded us poignantly of those who were killed or injured in Northern Ireland. He paid tribute to the work done by charities and talked of the high number of veterans who have taken or tried to take their own lives. He mentioned the problem of veterans who are under the radar and not known to the authorities or to charities.

The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) told us the wonderful tale of Johnny the Dambuster and paid tribute to the excellent work of the Royal British Legion. He mentioned his participation in the “22 for 22” challenge. I took the lazy way out: I just abseiled for Combat Stress, which is an awful lot easier than doing 22 press-ups. Many hon. Members have contributed to charities that are working hard for our veterans, and we appreciate the work being done.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) described the specific provision for veterans in Scotland and stressed the need to recognise the strengths and qualities of veterans and the contribution that they can make to society, rather than seeing only problems. He also discussed the importance of working outside traditional silos.

Remembrance time is when we remember all those in our armed forces who have made the ultimate sacrifice, giving their lives in service to our country. Later this week, people from all walks of life—young and old—will turn out for events across the country to pay their respects. For many people, the image they have of veterans is one of elderly servicemen and women at the Cenotaph or the local war memorial—an image that has been reinforced in the past two years by the events that have, quite properly, been held to commemorate the first world war.

This week is an especially poignant time for families and friends who are still living with the loss of loved ones. I was very privileged last week to attend a special service to unveil and dedicate a new memorial in Llanelli in readiness for Remembrance Day. The memorial commemorates the 15 brave servicemen from Llanelli killed in eight conflicts since the end of the second world war, including those killed most recently: Lance Corporal Ryan Francis, killed in Iraq, and Lance Corporal David Dennis and Corporal Jamie Kirkpatrick, killed...
in Afghanistan. On behalf of us all, I would like to thank all those who have worked hard and given generously to ensure that we have a fitting and lasting memorial in Llanelli to those brave men.

I very much welcome the decision by the Royal British Legion to choose rethinking remembrance as its theme for this year’s Remembrance Day, reminding us that the poppy appeal is about not only commemorating those who died many years ago but remembering our modern-day veterans, showing our gratitude for their service and ensuring that the armed forces covenant really does deliver prompt access to the quality services they need.

It is important that our perceptions and priorities move with the times. In our parents’ generation, practically everyone personally knew a family member, friend or neighbour who had served in the armed forces. However, nowadays, not everyone knows serving members of the armed forces or veterans personally, so their perceptions may be more heavily influenced by what they see in the media. It is vital that, as we discuss the provision of the best possible services for our veterans, we do not let our focus on some of the problems lead to negative stereotyping. Many ex-servicemen and women adapt very well to civilian life; they use the skills they have acquired in the forces, or they develop new ones, and they settle well into workplaces and communities.

Regardless of whether veterans have any particular difficulties, all of them should have prompt access to appropriate services. The aim should be to provide a smooth transition and to deal with concerns before they develop into problems. When Labour was in government, we did much to pave the way for the introduction of the armed forces covenant. The first military covenant was published in 2000, and it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Alan Johnson) who, as Health Secretary, ensured that veterans got priority treatment on the NHS. It is encouraging that there has been such enthusiastic recognition of the armed forces community covenant by many local authorities and local service boards, but application and outcomes are very variable.

In Labour’s 2015 manifesto, we recognised the need for the covenant to be strengthened. One action we proposed was to create a veterans’ register to make certain that our veterans receive proper support on leaving service. We therefore support the Royal British Legion’s “Count them in” campaign, as I understand Members on both sides of the House do, to have a question on the next census to identify veterans. That would be a simple way of acquiring an additional source of information, which would tell us about the veterans living in our communities and allow public services better to meet their needs.

Service leavers and older veterans could be given more encouragement to mention the fact that they are veterans. There may be many reasons why they do not self-identify: it simply does not occur to them, they do not wish to be pushy, or they feel there is some form of stigma attached. Therefore, identification needs to be done proactively, through a scripted question. One starting point highlighted in the best practice guide is the way that some local authorities have included a question about veterans on some of their forms to help them collate data on veterans. What consideration have the Government given to developing that into a standard format on a number of forms—for example, questions on GP registration forms or local authority forms?

It is simply not enough for the Government to say that the community covenant has been embraced by various public bodies. The will is there, but how effective is it in practice? It can be tempting sometimes just to visit those who are taking the lead and who are proud to show us what they are doing, whereas the focus needs to be on ensuring that there is effective practice everywhere.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend’s point about data—it is one that I made myself—is important, not least in the light of the comments from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about people who have fallen through the gaps, often with tragic consequences, in Northern Ireland, and what charities have told me about the difficulties they have in re-acquiring relationships with veterans because of that lack of information and data. Does she agree that we need to make a lot more effort to ensure that there is a consistent approach across the UK and across all services?

Nia Griffith: We do indeed need a much more consistent approach to the whole use of data, as the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) said. Consistency of services is absolutely critical.

It is no easy matter when dealing with the many varied ways in which our public services are organised, with different systems of local government, health trusts and clinical commissioning groups—and that is just in England, never mind in other parts of the UK. We should not forget, either, that many of these public bodies are also under considerable strain as they face cutbacks and increased demand. The Minister may point to the annual report and to the best practice guide, but these alone will not drive change and improve outcomes, so what strategies are the Government proposing to ensure that service providers—health boards, local authorities and so on—are implementing the armed forces covenant effectively? Are veterans being effectively identified and helped? Has the Minister developed ways to measure not only the experience of veterans and their families, but what is being done and whether it is effective? The challenge is to find how to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the covenant in ways that are effective but not too burdensome or bureaucratic.

There is a need to enable the Government to identify and rectify areas of weakness and to inform future policy. What progress is the Minister making in this respect? The forces charity, SSAFA, has reported that forces families are still facing real challenges when accessing housing or school places for their children. It is therefore clear that the Government need to do more to make councils aware of the local needs of forces communities. What consideration have the Government given to finding a consistent way of measuring and monitoring what is actually happening and the experience of veterans and their families?

Half the ex-service community has a long-term illness or disability, and it is therefore essential that the MOD ensures that all veterans get access to the healthcare they need—and likewise for mental health conditions. While most members of the forces community have good mental health, there is a higher prevalence of
conditions such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in the forces, particularly among groups such as reservists and early service leavers. Under the armed forces covenant, the forces community should receive priority healthcare where their condition relates to their service, but as the health service in England becomes more fragmented and there is growing pressure on the NHS budget, what monitoring are the Government doing to ensure that our service members and veterans get the help they need?

Mark Lancaster: I am taken by the hon. Lady’s comment that there is a higher prevalence of mental health problems among our veterans. Could she possibly point to the evidence that supports that?

Nia Griffith: I think we all recognise that there are certain problems that may not have been identified, and perhaps people are reticent in coming forward. As the Minister suggests, many other people who are not veterans suffer from mental health problems as well.

The employment gap is not one of the four areas covered by the covenant—housing, health, education and inquests—although it is very much linked to the first three. However, there is help from some firms who are signed up to the corporate covenant. We should be very concerned that only 80% of service leavers are employed six months after leaving the armed forces. A lot more needs to be done to understand why that is and to remedy it. These are people of working age who have skills and experience, and who have recently been in employment, so the figure of 20% not in employment is far too high. Job centres do not run specific programmes for service leavers, but nevertheless, those seeking employment should have access to the usual support. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues from the Department for Work and Pensions to improve outcomes for service leavers? Is appropriate information about service leavers collected and analysed, and what analysis has been done of the effectiveness of the support given to those who were made redundant? Has anything been done to upskill jobcentre advisers to deal specifically with service leavers? Are those advisers fully aware of the skills that service leavers have, and are they matching those skills to appropriate job opportunities and interviews?

Service leavers bring with them a whole range of skills: the job skills that they acquire, the personal qualities that they learn. What are the Government doing to promote the advantages of employing ex-service personnel among employers who are not signed up to the corporate covenant?

Will the Government look at practical ways of helping veterans to access employment, such as the veterans interview programme, which Jim Murphy piloted, in which companies voluntarily guarantee to interview jobseeking ex-forces personnel? It is very worrying to hear anecdotal evidence that some employers seem to be prejudiced against service leavers, perhaps because of negative stereotyping. It is extremely important that we tackle any negative stereotypes, and I would like to ask the Minister what we are doing in this respect.

Mark Lancaster: With the greatest respect to the hon. Lady—I am certainly not seeking to pick a fight—she talks about negative stereotyping, having just a moment ago talked about veterans having a higher prevalence of mental health problems. Although I asked her to demonstrate the evidence that veterans have a higher prevalence of mental health problems, she is yet to provide any. I have not seen any such evidence, but she runs the risk in her open speech of promoting stereotypes about veterans having problems, having just criticised such stereotypes.

Nia Griffith: The point is that I prefaced my speech by saying clearly that, while we may be focusing on problems today, we should think as well of the good side of veterans and ex-servicemen and women, and the very many positive qualities that they can bring to employment and to their communities.

Before the last general election, Labour made a manifesto commitment to outlaw discrimination against the armed forces, because it is completely unacceptable for any service member or veteran to be denied a job interview or access to public services because they have been in the forces. Indeed, it goes against a core principle of the armed forces covenant, namely that our forces community should suffer no disadvantage. Sadly, that is not reflected in the experiences of some service members and veterans.

Research by the Local Government Association recently showed that nearly 40% of those who had served in the forces felt that their service left them disadvantaged. We have all heard of completely unacceptable examples of service members being turned away from shops or restaurants because they were wearing uniform. Will the Government look again at outlawing discrimination against our forces community?

I turn to the worrying news that we had today that the Government have identified a £438 million shortfall in funding for the armed forces pension and compensation scheme. Can the Minister explain how that substantial error occurred in the estimates and give us categorical assurances that the money will be found to provide this vital support for our veterans?

Ahead of Remembrance Sunday, we remember all those who have served and we honour their sacrifice. We also need to see firm action from the Government to ensure that our veterans and our forces community receive all the support that they are entitled to.

5.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to reply to what has been an excellent and mainly consensual debate. This is certainly not a subject on which we would wish to find division across the House, but it is absolutely right that we should debate it.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate. He could not have chosen a more poignant time to discuss a new generation of veterans and service personnel than the week in which we mark Remembrance Day, and the issues that he raises are of huge significance. He really set the tone for the debate with his passionate account of the contribution that service personnel, including many of his own family members, have made to this nation over many years. I especially want to underline his acknowledgement of the often-overlooked contribution that women have made during the world wars and other conflicts.
Equally, we have had some fantastic contributions by other hon. Members, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who has rapidly established herself in this House as a true champion for the armed forces in the various pieces of work that she is undertaking. I regularly have exchanges with her, and I welcome her challenges to Government about increasing support for our service personnel. I absolutely agree and I am ever mindful that our service personnel are the single greatest asset in our armed forces.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is an equally passionate supporter of our armed forces. I thank him for his 13 and a half years’ service.

**Jim Shannon:** Fourteen and a half years.

**Mark Lancaster:** I apologise. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his 14 and a half years’ service, even if most of it was in the Royal Artillery. He will understand that comment from a sapper and take it in the good spirit in which it is intended. I acknowledge his commitment to veterans in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman is particularly concerned about mental health. I will turn to that in a moment, but it is worth putting on the record that a bespoke aftercare package is in place in Northern Ireland to support former members of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Rangers, and their dependants and widows. It consists of welfare teams across Northern Ireland that offer vocational resettlement training, medical support and a benevolent fund. In August 2015, we agreed that the Ulster Defence Regiment and Royal Irish aftercare service should continue to exist and continue to be funded. Although the circumstances leading to its inception have markedly changed, the need is still evident and the demand on its services is being met effectively. This is in addition to the services available to all veterans, including the Veterans Welfare Service, which has welfare representatives based across the UK, and service and ex-service charities, such as the Army Benevolent Fund, the Soldiers Charity, the armed forces charity SSAFA and Combat Stress.

The hon. Gentleman said a few words about the armed forces compensation scheme. He may well be aware that the quinquennial—five-yearly—review of that scheme is currently under way, and I hope that its report will be made available in late spring. That demonstrates that the scheme is constantly under review.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) demonstrated his support for our veterans, and indeed for the work of the Royal British Legion and other service charities in his constituency. He talked about the poignant moment while visiting various war memorials when he realised the age of many of those who had died. That is exactly the experience I had when I visited the Somme to see my great-uncle’s grave. I was hit by the shock of realising that he was just 19 years old when he died. I went there as a young man, but I was already seven years his senior. Such experiences very much dispel the image of veterans as being from a much older age cohort. That is not the case, and I will turn to that—it is very much the theme of this debate—in a moment.

I thought the hon. Member for Stirling (Steven Paterson) gave an equally excellent description of the ways in which the Scottish Government are addressing veterans’ issues north of the border. Despite our political differences, I have a very good working relationship with Keith Brown. I have spoken to him this week, and I will meet him again shortly. Such a cross-border relationship is absolutely vital, because we all recognise that veterans move around within the United Kingdom.

This is a broad-ranging topic, and it is at such moments that I realise what an honour it is to do this job. I mean that not only as a Member of Parliament, since we are all honoured to be in the House, but, given that I joined the Army almost 28 years ago—I remind the House that I still serve in the Army Reserve—as a Minister in a Department in which I have a passionate interest, as I hope hon. Members recognise, I am not yet a veteran, but my time will come, as it does to all of us who are servicemen, so I will start by discussing veterans.

There is a misconception that veterans are older people. In the popular mind, they are people who fought in the great conflicts of the mid-20th century—the second world war, the Korea campaign and the Suez crisis of 60 years ago. However, veterans are of course from a younger generation. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) served in a much more recent conflict in Bosnia. Such a picture is only partial: it omits the 220,000 personnel who served during a period of 13 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it fails to take account of the fact that some of our veterans will have served only for a very short period.

It is vital that we think carefully about this younger generation, lest we fail to give them the specific support they need. That concern is reflected in the Royal British Legion’s excellent Rethink Remembrance campaign. As the campaign reminds us, society as a whole has a responsibility to help all those who lay their lives on the line for the needs of this nation, especially as so many of our service veterans utilise public and private sector support across our devolved Administrations. At the same time, we believe that the MOD can play a critical role in joining the dots and ensuring that the right support goes to the right place at the right time. We are using the covenant as our mechanism to make this happen.

First, we are helping out on health and housing. The Government have channelled £13 million from the LIBOR fund into supporting mental health in the armed forces community. Meanwhile, NHS England is currently piloting a veterans trauma network, providing a safety net for those with lifelong healthcare needs who are returning to civilian life. Furthermore, as has been explained, NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government have put £1.2 million into providing specialist mental health services for veterans in Scotland.

**Nia Griffith:** I refer the Minister to figures from the Royal British Legion pointing out that, whereas the general population has a 6% incidence of depression, the figure for veterans is 10%. Will he therefore withdraw his earlier comments?

**Mark Lancaster:** Forgive me, but my comments were asked for in evidence. If that is the evidence the hon. Lady is providing, I look forward to seeing it, but of course there are many sources of evidence. I am concerned
about the general point: we need to be careful in the
House not to paint a particular picture of our veterans
as a cohort in our society. There have been some disturbing
newspaper articles recently suggesting that employers
should not be employing veterans. We should be careful
in the House not to fall into a trap—I would not dream
of accusing the hon. Lady. Of doing so—but rather to
spend as much time as possible talking up our veterans
community and dispelling some of the myths. Otherwise,
we could fall into an awful trap.

Questions were raised earlier about the ability to
track our veterans. The health service might be one area
where we have that opportunity. Work is ongoing to
ensure that the electronic record system used in defence
medical services matches that used in the national health
service and—I would imagine—NHS Health Scotland
as well, so that there can be a seamless transition of our
service personnel’s records once they move out of the
armed forces. Effectively having a marker on those
records might be one way to begin that process of helping
to track veterans.

On housing, the Department for Communities and
Local Government has extended the period within which
ex-service personnel and surviving partners are given
priority for Government-funded shared ownership schemes
from 12 to 24 months after service, and we have allocated
£40 million of LIBOR funding to projects that provide
veterans’ accommodation. When it comes to both health
and housing, we are using the Cabinet Office-chaired
covenant reference group to link up health, DCLG,
local government authorities and the devolved
Administrations, so that covenant principles, particularly
with regard to veterans’ access to healthcare and social
housing, are applied consistently and correctly across
the United Kingdom. I hope that that addresses one of
the questions from the hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia
Griffith).

On employment, which was raised by several hon.
Members, we are working with business to offer ex-service
personnel job support. Our career transition partnership
provides one-to-one guidance, training and employment
opportunities to about 15,000 service leavers. Its success
rate is significant: 85% find a job within six months of
leaving the armed forces, compared to a 73% employment
rate in the rest of the UK population. So our ex-service
personnel are achieving a better employment rate
than the average in the UK. All personnel—without
exception—are eligible for this support. Furthermore,
the employment support available to our service leavers
through the CTP continues for two years after their
date of discharge.

Separately, we are using the covenant to raise awareness
of the benefits of hiring service personnel. Where else
can business get highly skilled, highly motivated team
players with leadership attributes tested in the most
challenging of environments? Already, more than 1,200
businesses have signed the covenant and are offering
veterans everything from skills training to guaranteed
interviews.

We know, however, that we need to do more—we all
absolutely accept that. With the end of the era of
enduring campaigns and the drawdown from Germany
to its conclusion, we can expect the numbers of
veterans to increase in the short term. So we are making
sure support is in place by using £2 million from our
annual £10 million covenant fund to set up the veterans
gateway. This will be a single point of contact, open
24 hours a day, that can give veterans the advice they
need, wherever they are located.

Finally, we are keen to learn more about all those
veterans who fail to make a smooth transition to civilian
life. We need to know who they are, so that we can help
them. As the Royal British Legion points out in its
‘Count them in’ campaign, and as my hon. Friend the
Member for Torbay said, after the 2011 census, we
knew more about the Jedi population of the UK—or
indeed about the fact that Rushmore in Hampshire has
the highest concentration of Buddhists—than about
those who have served in our armed forces. That is
ridiculous, but true. So I am working closely with the
Office for National Statistics and the chief statistician
to include a question on veterans in the national census.
As I mentioned earlier, we do not have the power to
force Mr Pullinger to do that, but I hope that he is
listening to this debate and gets the very clear message
that it is this House’s will that that question be included
on the next census.

Mrs Trevelyan: Does the Minister agree that it is not
only the veterans that we need to identify, but their
direct families as well? The covenant is very clear that it
supports the families against disadvantage and that it is
important to identify the spouses and the children who
will carry forward that military family—they need to be
identified forever.

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend makes a powerful
and reasonable point, and I will ensure that it is conveyed.
The more we do to show that veterans are well looked
after, the more we will encourage a future generation of
soldiers, sailors and airmen and women to come through
our doors.

That brings me to the second element of this debate.
In the years to come, our armed forces will face an
increasing challenge to recruit the people in the face of
increased competition from companies that offer more
money and more flexible ways of working.

That is why we are determined to transform the
MOD into a modern force that does not provide its
people only with modern equipment, but with better
accommodation, better terms and conditions and even
greater flexibility. We fully recognise that the current
offer that we make to our servicemen and women is not
keeping pace with modern needs, which is why we are
committed to changing and improving it better to reflect
the realities of today’s society.

Stephen Doughty: On that very theme, I was delighted
recently to attend the PinkNews awards, where the
British Army was awarded the public sector employer
of the year award for its work, particularly on the Army
LGBT forum. Does the Minister agree that we have a
particular issue with older LGBT veterans who were
not perhaps treated the way they should have been in
the past and that we need to do more to right that
wrong and show a good example as we go forward, just
as the Army is doing today?

Mark Lancaster: That is a very fair point, and I pay
tribute to the hon. Gentleman who, as I recall, has been
a champion for such people in the past. That work will
continue.
The new employment model represents a significant update to the offer, providing support to service personnel who want to buy their own homes; promoting greater domestic stability and lifestyle choice for service personnel and families; and delivering simpler and more transparent systems for pay and accommodation grading—but the challenges placed on defence and the needs of our people continue to evolve. In SDSR 2015, we committed to build on the foundations of the new employment model to ensure that the future offer remains competitive and sustainable. We have grouped this under the armed forces people programme.

For example, we are now looking to see how we can make life easier, where possible, for those struggling to meet their full military commitment. With the flexible engagement system, we will be able to offer service personnel the opportunity to work part-time and, when needed, protect individuals from deployments. This means that we can reduce liability for deployment for a period, so 27-year-old Sergeant Jenkins, for example, can support his pregnant wife and spend more time with his young family in those important early childhood years.

We know that the provision of affordable, good-quality accommodation is also central to our offer to service personnel. Yet again, though, we recognise that the current accommodation model does not always support how service personnel might choose to live, forcing some to opt out of subsidised accommodation or compromise on family life. The future offer will look to provide current service personnel with more choice of housing and help to meet their aspirations for home ownership—regardless of age, rank or relationship status.

That is just a glance at what we are doing. Let me reassure the House that the armed forces people programme will deliver real improvement, developing a future offer that will promote diversity and individual choice, support flexibility and take account of personal circumstances. Above all, it will continue to evolve, reflecting changing needs and aspirations. In short, it will be more effective for our people and more efficient for defence.

Kevin Foster: Is not a change taking place in our requirements for the armed forces? The Navy is desperately short of engineers, but we should also bear it in mind that someone whom we send to deal with an event in the cyber environment will be a very different sort of person from someone whom we send with rifle and pack into the frontline. Is that not an important reason for us to change the employment model and ensure that people know they are exactly the sort of people whom we need in our armed forces?

Mark Lancaster: My hon. Friend is right, and we are considering a variety of options to ensure that we can attract a greater variety of people. One of the biggest challenges that we face is the fact that, historically, we have been a bottom-fed organisation which people join either as private soldiers or as junior officers, although many of the skill sets that we need are possessed by people who have developed them outside the armed forces. We are considering carefully the possibility of some form of lateral entry to take account of that.

The issues raised by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth are topical, pertinent and increasingly important. Support for a new generation of veterans and service personnel will be critical in the coming years, and the Government will continue to honour their covenant responsibilities. However, I began by saying that we all have a duty to serve those who serve us, and it is our job as Members of Parliament to keep reminding local authorities and businesses in our own constituencies of the needs of a new generation of ex-servicemen and women. Only then can we guarantee our heroes the fair treatment that their service deserves.

I am sure that this weekend Members will be returning to their constituencies to commemorate Remembrance Sunday, but for my own part, I shall not. I shall be travelling nearly as far south as it is possible to travel when I go to the Falkland islands to join the Falkland islanders, because I think it equally right for us to support them on that important day.

I thank all Members for taking part in the debate. Today’s attendance is heartening and sends a clear message to our service personnel that they have the support of the House of Commons.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Stephen Doughty to wind up the debate, very briefly.

5.57 pm

Stephen Doughty: I thank all Members—including those with distinguished service histories, not least the Minister—for their powerful contributions. I am glad that the House has discussed a series of issues affecting the new generation of veterans and their families. We discussed the most serious examples in detail, but we also discussed a range of issues—including the transition to civilian life and access to housing and employment—which I think are just as important as some of the much more serious cases of which we are all aware. It is vital that we remember the present generation as well as previous generations, which is why the Royal British Legion campaign is so crucial.

Public perceptions of veterans and their families clearly present a challenge, and—this is particularly important—so do the perception of veterans and their families of whether we as a country are continuing to do our duty for them as they did their duty for us. Reports such as the SSAFA report, published in July, which stated that four in 10 veterans who contacted the charity believed that they had been disadvantaged by their military service when it came to housing or employment, must be of concern to us all and serve as a stark reminder of the challenges that are out there.

I hope that all of us, when we stand at our cenotaphs and memorials on Remembrance Sunday, will not just say “We will remember them.” We also need to say that we will do right by them as they have done right by us, which will be a fitting tribute to all those who serve our country so bravely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered raising awareness of a new generation of veterans and Service personnel.
PETITIONS

Closure of Belgrave Library and Lunch Club at Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre, Leicester

5.59 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I wish to present a petition that has been signed by 1,740 local residents, predominantly in Belgrave in Leicester. The petition was collected by volunteers in the local area: Mr Praful Mashru, Mr Kishorebhai Bojak, Mr Amratbhai Shyamji, Mr Vajubhai Madlani, Mrs Lilaben Doshi, Mr Vinod Kotecha, Mr Gagendrabhai Chhatrisha, Mr K. Kotecha, Mr A. Sevak and Mrs M. Mashru, and local councillors Mo Chohan, Manjula Sood and John Thomas.

The council proposes closing the Belgrave library and neighbourhood centre’s lunch club. The proposals have been brought forward by the assistant mayor, Councillor Kirk Master, who is consulting people and will consider what to do next, but residents are very concerned that these important projects might be closed, and that is why they are urging the city council to think again and to keep the library open—and the lunch club, too, which serves many elderly constituents, who have been going there for the last 40 years.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Leicester East,

Declares that Leicester City Council’s plans to move the Belgrave Library will have a detrimental effect on the whole community, local school children and other members of the public; further that it will have to downsize the services currently provided such as access to computers, national newspapers, reading classes and book review sessions; further that moving it to Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre is not conducive to the atmosphere of what a library is and should be; further that the Belgrave Library is one of the few libraries remaining in Leicester; further that the residents are also concerned about Leicester City Council’s plans to remove the cooking facilities at the Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre lunch club which provides freshly cooked and culturally appropriate vegetarian hot meals to the elderly, disabled, diabetics and vulnerable people in the community; further that if the cooking facilities were to be removed, these communities would be deprived not only of a hot meal but also of their ability to be sociable and receive support on things that they do not understand; and further that they will become isolated and a burden on Leicester City Council who would need to provide more specialist individual care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Leicester City Council to reconsider their decision to move the Belgrave Library to Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre and further encourage the Council not to remove the cooking facilities in Belgrave Neighbourhood as it provides a vital service to the elderly in the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Bozeat Branch of the Post Office

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Bozeat in my constituency. The lead signatures are those of Brian Gibbins, chairman of Bozeat parish council, and Margaret Docker and Sheila Alderman. The petition has hundreds of signatures, and it describes the problem of Bozeat post office, which is open for just two half-days a week. The postmaster would like to open for six days a week, which would be much better for my constituents and relieve pressure on the Wellingborough post office.

The petition states:

The Humble Petition of residents of Bozeat, Northamptonshire and the surrounding areas,

Sheweth,

That the Petitioners believe that the Bozeat branch of the Post Office should extend its opening hours to 9am until 5pm six days a week; and further that to accommodate greater usage of the facility and to prevent congestion at other facilities used elsewhere by the villagers.

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your Honourable House urges the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to encourage the Post Office to extend the opening hours of their Bozeat village branch.

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c.

[P001977]
motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Christopher Pincher.]"

6.2 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): I thank the Speaker for granting this debate. It is timely, because while the issue has been raised by local GP practices and their senior managers in Coventry, I am well aware, following a gracious call from the Minister's office and given the presence of other hon. Friends, that the problem has a wider significance and that it has echoes in many other parts of England, at least. I thank Jane Moxon and others who came to see me—all very senior practice managers in Coventry. They alerted me what is evidently a growing problem throughout the country.

The Minister, who is aware of the situation emerging across the country, kindly asked whether she should address the wider issue, or concentrate on Coventry. The topic of the debate is the impact on patient care and the health service in Coventry of the privatisation of the thoroughly well-executed existing service for GPs in our area. The same thing is happening in other areas, however, and I will be very happy to give way to my hon. Friends. Sufficient time is available—not that I want to detain you unnecessarily, Madam Deputy Speaker, or the Minister or other Members, but if there is interest, I am sure that we can accommodate others, such as my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher); all three Coventry Members are properly on parade this evening to take part in the debate.

The position was very simply summarised by the senior practice manager from Broomfield Park, Jane Moxon, when she came to see me. She acted as chair for the group, and still does. Warwick University is in the same position: students from the EU face the loss, absence or lateness of their patient records. Allesley Park hosted our meeting; Kevin Arnold is the practice manager there. They have all alerted me to the fact that GPs are simply unable to do their job without having their patients' records to hand.

An excellent manual service was provided under the national health service, but the Government were taken in by the lure of apparent savings and the prospect of cutting 40% from a £1 billion bill, and they contracted the work out to Capita, of all people. Only last week, we saw what could happen in the absence of a properly thought-through privatisation programme. These contracts are gaily handed out to companies that do not have the skills, preparation or sheer commitment necessary to provide the service.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for initiating this debate. I have been contacted by my GP practices in Bristol South about this issue. In a previous role, I worked in a commissioning group and I have employed GPs. The arrangements for doing that are very complex, requiring specialist local knowledge and a lot of experience. Does he agree that the decision to put the entire service out to a national tender was driven by a desire to make massive wholesale savings, and that the savings target completely ignored the service need locally? Does he also agree that we are in a very poor situation across the country? I hope that the Minister can address that point.

Mr Robinson: My hon. Friend speaks pointedly to the issue. She is absolutely right in every respect, and I thoroughly agree with her. I would go a little further and say that the irony is that we have ended up with a terrible service that is costing more than the previous service ever would, because the company was not properly prepared, did not have a commitment to providing the service, and was unable to do so, and because of the competing and irreconcilable claims about short-term gains in the form of profits and illusory savings for the health service.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The situation in Coventry that my hon. Friend describes is also being experienced by GP practices in my constituency. GP practice managers have told me that the system was trialled in west Yorkshire and proved unsatisfactory, yet the contract was rolled out regardless. Does my hon. Friend not agree that that is a further irony?

Mr Robinson: Well, we learn something every day. I did not know that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing it to my attention. That fact was not mentioned to me in Coventry, where people felt that the new system had been sprung on them completely without trial. When I was a Minister, I was a great supporter of the idea of trialling programmes. After all, we trialled them for a purpose, which was to see whether we were ready for them and whether the contractor was able to provide them. However, that seems to have been ignored in this instance. I shall say a few words at the end of my short contribution about learning lessons. This is not the first time we have been in this position. It is not as though we have suddenly discovered that contracts are not easily transferred, and there are lessons to be learned.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this problem does not just affect GP practices in Coventry? It has also had an adverse impact on individual residents, including people who have requested a copy of a relative's medical records from the primary care support service. Partly because of the service's failure to appoint a medical adviser to deal with such requests in the Coventry area, many of those people have been forced to wait for more than twice the maximum 40 days that it should take to process such a request. It is utterly unacceptable to put anyone through that kind of delay, but it is inexcusable for it to happen to anyone who is already in an extremely vulnerable position following the death of a relative.

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who puts her finger on another aspect of the situation that reveals the true motives of private sector contractors. They are not in it to improve the service and make real savings; they are in it for short-term profit. I have nothing against the private sector making profits—I am all for it—but the irony is that the companies cannot make a profit from a proper service, so they turn to such measures as imposing a £40 charge for access to a deceased relative's records, as my hon. Friend mentions. They do not have to impose that charge—I think it used to be left to the GP's discretion—but they now insist on it, and people have to pay postage and delivery charges on top, which is a disgraceful pursuit of short-term gain at the expense of the people they are meant to serve.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue to the House. Capita holds the contract for locums for the NHS, no one questions their ability, but does the hon. Gentleman have any concerns about the scheme’s value for money? The Government should look at filling those vacancies from within the NHS, making a saving and keeping that money in the NHS for NHS services.

Mr Robinson: Just as I am in favour of a profitable private sector, I am in favour of savings in the NHS. We all know that we have to make savings, but let us make real savings from properly thought-through programmes. The NHS is often the best place to carry them out. We should not have badly planned impositions from the private sector, which does not know what it is going to do or how to do it.

We have to learn the lessons. It is not as if we have not had plenty of examples, as we saw in our debate last week on another private sector company that reviews benefits. That case was an absolute disgrace, but let us not get diverted on to that, because we had a good debate on it last week. Let us stay with the problem before us tonight. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to tell us, but I must warn her that I have a few things to say; I have only just started. Correct me if I am wrong, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I understand that the debate can go longer than half an hour. I do not want to detain the House, but I urge any Member who wishes to contribute to do so, because we have at our disposal at least double the normal time. If I say that to the dismay and disappointment of the Minister, I am sorry, but we will not delay anybody unnecessarily.

Others have been in touch with me on this subject. I am pleased to say that the good old BBC was made aware of an issue and initiated an excellent survey of what is happening in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. The survey was carried out by Nikki Fox, who did a good job and presented a programme on this. She discovered that no fewer than 9,000 records had been lost. Some had been found flying loose on the ground in a car park. God knows what happened to the others—nobody knows. Some 9,000 patient records have gone missing in those three counties alone. It is very much to Mr Paul Conroy’s credit that he has written to me issuing a challenge, which I will come to later, to fulfil our public duty to reveal what has happened, which, as is usually the case, others are trying to hide. Capita says that it is unaware of the problems, yet three counties are up in arms and the BBC has conducted an expose; it beggars belief.

No fewer than 20 practices in Coventry and Warwickshire have been surveyed, and every single one of them has said that there has been a more or less serious deterioration in services. NHS England itself has now stated that patients could be at risk. The whole purpose of tonight’s debate is to reveal that risk and to urge Capita to correct the problem.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have been approached by several GPs in Blackburn who feel that the service they are providing to the public is going under. They can no longer cope with the burden placed on them. Would it be in order to ask the Minister whether she can urgently step in? GPs are under a lot of pressure right now, and this added burden is a false economy and could put patients at risk.

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with that. We see the problems extended across the border, and indeed they are not peculiar to any one part of the United Kingdom. By their very nature, they are systemic and infect, for want of a better phrase, the whole country, and I am pleased to welcome the Member from the Scottish National party to—

Kate Hollern: No, I am from the Labour party.

Mr Robinson: I am so sorry, dear. I shall not live that one down in a hurry, but I thought I had detected a Scottish accent. I welcome my hon. Friend to the debate. She is the only one who did not tell me she would be participating tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do apologise, but I cannot correct Hansard and I am afraid to say that the error will stand. I am sure she will forgive me, even if others may enjoy the mistake I have made.

There is no doubt that we are facing a major threat with this situation, and we hope we can stop it before we get to a major incident or catastrophe of some kind. That is the point of tonight’s debate. There is no doubt that this threat exists in Coventry, and we want to see what the Minister has to tell us about it. It is also clear from the interventions, which I have been pleased to take and to respond to, that this problem is widespread in England as a whole. As we have heard, in Bristol and in Manchester, and in the constituencies of those others who have made interventions, the problem is growing, not waning. Given the situation, we have to take steps.

Although we have arisen to the challenge put out by Mr Paul Conroy, it is not enough for any Member just to speak up and expose this situation. That is a public duty we have as Members of this House, and the BBC has a duty as the national broadcaster to speak about these problems. We have all had experience of this. Not only have I had my business experience, but I have had experience of problems of this kind while in ministerial office and from others. Everybody in the country knows—it is no secret—that these privatisations, unless they are carefully controlled and well thought out, go wrong, so why do we keep doing them? This particular one involves Capita—it is in the hot seat tonight. It should know what this is about by now, as it has been through several of these and got them all wrong—Capita seems to learn nothing either. Ministers change, and it may be that the Minister knows about it but then gets moved. That is the nature of our appointments system, and I would not want to change anything there, but the civil servants who run these Departments should start to understand these things.

Contract management has many attractions to Ministers and to Government, who contract the problem out and lose direct responsibility for things. Everybody then heaves a sigh of relief and closes the file as if the thing is nothing more to do with them, but that is an illusion, because it comes back to bite them harder than it would have done had they kept the problem under their direct responsibility. It is an illusion to think that we can contract out. The responsibility for a contract remains with the person issuing that contract, and where it is for a major national public service, that contract must be
taken seriously. What I did learn in the private sector is that the best companies spent more time preparing the bids for a contract, the assessments of the validity of the contracts and the validation process for a contract than they ever spent in negotiating the thing, which civil servants and Ministers often like to think they are good at. They say, “We had a hard-nosed negotiation on that one. We got them down from Y to X and we saved all this. It is great. We really screwed the private sector, didn’t we?” That is all a total illusion.

The most important thing when we do a contract of this complexity and of this kind is to get to the basis of the issues: to see who is really competent to take it on; who can make the savings that are being claimed in the real world; and who can do the other elements of the contract that have to come into play in a difficult situation competently. It is a question of competence.

Kate Green: My hon. Friend brings his extensive business experience to the debate about value for money when issuing private contracts. Does he agree that whatever the cost savings that may apparently be achieved under this contract, the cost to GPs and to practice managers of coping with the chaos, chasing records and trying to contact the help desk but failing to get through has been substantial? Does he also agree that those GP practices deserve compensation for the additional costs they have incurred?

Mr Robinson: I entirely agree with every single word my hon. Friend says. I would add, by way of a warning, that it is not a question of trying to punish the private sector by making it pay for this. Capita has to put the necessary resources into trying to correct the problem, and that must be its first priority. Something must give in the drive for profit, the drive to cut the costs of the services and the drive to improve the services. Those are irreconcilable objectives to start with, and in rectifying them the first thing that has to go is the drive for profit. Capita must realise that when it comes to put this right, it has to put the resources behind that. Compensation for GPs is important—I do not disagree with my hon. Friend for a minute on that—but I put it secondary to the provision of resources to get the contract right. I am sure that she would agree.

One other aspect of this shows an unacceptable, unpleasant and displeasing aspect of the privatisation process. It appears—I do not know this first hand—that Capita has turned to CitySprint to deliver these things. The effect of that is that we are employing drivers with no contracts, no sickness benefits and no breaks. This continual turning of the screw downwards is leading to a low-wage, low-productivity, low-output and impoverished economy. The workforce is suffering from that and it seems to be characteristic in many areas. For the public service to be involved in that process and almost to accelerate it, tightening that screw, is unacceptable.

This is another aspect of the commitment to negotiation and to the evaluation and validation process. The Government must learn to consider the quality of the service being provided and the means by which they intend to provide that service. CitySprint does not measure up to the standards we would expect from a good public sector contractor or employer.

To return to the main theme of tonight’s debate, what do we learn from this? The Government—principally the civil service, but Ministers, too—must learn to evaluate and validate the process of contracting out services. They cannot be driven by short-term savings, which are invariably illusory, but must consider the quality of the underlying contract. That is an art that must be learned, but I think it can be.

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is being generous with his time. I do not know whether he is aware that the Public Accounts Committee recently held an evidence session on the contract awarded to UnitingCare in Cambridgeshire. Many of the issues he has rightly outlined about the scope of such contracts and expertise within the NHS were highlighted, particularly as regards whether the expertise was there to do the sort of detailed and specialist work he mentions. Should that expertise be built back into the NHS, so that it can conduct those contracts in the spirit of good public service as opposed to yet more taxpayers’ money being spent on expensive external consultants?

Mr Robinson: We are ranging wide of the debate, but again I have to say that I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, and I saw something about that Public Accounts Committee hearing. That is absolutely right; the problem is getting these lessons learned by the Government. I do not know what it is; it is as if there is an institutional or cultural inhibition leading to resistance to doing the technical job properly. People can be brought in to do it—but—I think that this was my hon. Friend’s point—there is a wealth of knowledge and expertise about the health service in the NHS that needs to be released and employed. Being able to do that is the art of management.

That is my plea. Yes, we want to bash Capita tonight, but more than bashing Capita and hitting out at incompetence and inexperience in the civil service, the real point of tonight is to tell Capita it is in disgrace and needs to get this right. It is obviously a nationwide—England-wide—problem and it is not just restricted to Coventry. Capita’s overriding No. 1 objective is to put it right. That is our message tonight: “Get your finger out, put it right. Put the resources into putting this whole problem right and do not go for the short-term solution.”

6.24 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I will just make one or two observations because my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) has covered the subject very well. Like him, I have received representations. Since the last reorganisation of the NHS, problems such as this seem to be coming to light. There is a pattern. There was the problem with Concentrix and benefits, which of course is nothing to do with the NHS. We had debates about that a couple of weeks ago. Now this problem with Capita and primary care support is emerging.

When the Government look at such companies, they should look at a schedule of terms and conditions for the service they are going to deliver, the people they are going to employ and their qualifications, and whether people will be employed on zero-hours contracts. I have heard all sorts of stories about companies that subcontract out to smaller companies. That is where the problems start to arise.
There was a ruling a couple of weeks ago on taxis after a case was brought by a trade union. It may well mean that there will be a problem with zero-hour contracts, holiday pay and so on. The Government should look at that when they award contracts.

Like my hon. Friend, I have had GPs in Coventry complain to me about the inadequacy of the services, delays across the board and records being lost. Even the British Medical Association has accused Capita of failures. These delays are making it impossible for GPs’ surgeries in my constituency and across the country to do their job properly. For example, a surgery in my constituency faced delays in receiving patients’ notes. As my hon. Friend has mentioned, that can go on for a long time, and if someone is terminally ill, the situation can be life-threatening. Doctors sometimes have to meet patients without records or knowledge of their medical history, so they have to rely on the patient to provide their history. Patients at the end of the day are not doctors; they can only express in layman’s terms what they think is wrong with them. They need qualified doctors.

Colleen Fletcher: Does my hon. Friend agree that the difficulties experienced by GP practices are being compounded by the inability of Primary Care Support England service centres to deal with inquiries about ongoing problems either by phone or email? Staff from one practice in Coventry said that any response to emails was unusual, long-awaited and often failed to address the question posed. This type of comment is echoed time and again by exasperated practice staff across the city.

Mr Cunningham: My hon. Friend puts it very adequately. I and all my colleagues behind me have all experienced that and the Minister as a constituency MP may well have experienced something like that because it is widespread.

At the end of the day, GPs are having to bear the brunt of the failings of Capita. It is unacceptable that a private company can bid for an NHS contract without the infrastructure in place to deliver. I have already explained to the Minister what that means. Will she allow GPs to be given additional support and help to cope with overstretched services? As I said, a lot of this came about with the last reorganisation of the health service. When people provide a service that is funded on the basis of a policy of cuts, they can expect people to take shortcuts. The patient is important, the GPs are important, but the employment rights of those people who are subcontractors or sub-subcontractors should be upheld.

The Minister should really look into this. I detect a pattern of Government contracting out of services and problems developing with those services. I have already mentioned the problems with the benefit service. Sometimes services are contracted out because Ministers do not want to be answerable at the Dispatch Box. We have had that in the past. The Minister says, “I am not responsible.” We try to get through to the company that is providing the service for the public; we cannot get through to them and the Government was the buck. I had that last Christmas with Concentrix, but that is another debate. I will end my comments there.
course of my speech. I would like to concentrate on how we resolve the problem that we find. We need to make sure that GPs and their patients receive the service to which they are entitled.

We want to restore acceptable services, and the contract contains sufficient financial incentives to ensure that Capita shares that goal, which is an important part of the contract and process. Let us be clear that the problems encountered with medical record transfers and overdue payments are entirely unacceptable. The Department shares that view. Both Capita and NHS England are co-operating fully with the Information Commissioner’s Office to address the implications for information governance, and I accept the need for urgent action to address the impact that this is having on patients and practitioners. That is why I have been holding regular meetings with Capita’s chief executive for integrated services, Joe Hemming, its new managing director for primary care support, Simon England, and NHS England’s national director for transformation and corporate operations, Karen Wheeler, and I will continue to hold such meetings.

Both NHS England and Capita openly acknowledge that the service has not so far been good enough. NHS England has demanded and received rectification plans from Capita for the six most affected service lines and has embedded a team of seven experts within Capita to support it as it resolves these issues.

As the hon. Member for Coventry North West said, it is also about having the right resources in the right place at the right time. Capita has informed me that it is adding around 500 more full-time equivalent staff to the service, at its cost, and that it is improving the training provided to ensure that new staff understand the importance of the service to both patients and practitioners.

I know that these problems have caused great inconvenience and distress, but with reference to risk—the hon. Member for Bristol South raised this point—NHS England has assured me that it is not aware of any direct cases of patient harm that can be attributed to service issues. However, NHS England is working closely with regional and local medical directors, so that we can be assured of patient safety. In particular, Dr Raj Patel, medical director of NHS England Greater Manchester, has joined the embedded team to ensure that clinical risks and concerns are appropriately addressed.

The priority now is to deal with any backlogs, particularly with medical record requests, and to ensure that services are stabilised with the capacity to deal properly with new requests. There has been progress on that, which is encouraging. The backlog of medical record requests has reduced from 17,262 to 3,465 in the past two weeks. Capita assures me that it has an effective triage system in operation for new requests and is confident that the situation will not recur. However, I will be monitoring the situation closely.

Kate Green: On the point about reducing the backlog, which is something the Bodmin Road practice in my constituency has raised with me, it is not just Capita that needs to put in extra resources; the GP practice is now receiving an onslaught of incoming records, but it does not have the personnel to manage them.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the impact on GP services in recent weeks and months, and I will move on to that point later.

Capita has piloted a new way to move medical records. I think that is the pilot in west Yorkshire to which the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston referred, but it was not a pilot for the overall Capita project. Capita assures me that ultimately it will be more reliable and secure by tracking the end-to-end movement of every record. It is piloting that approach in west Yorkshire and plans to be ready to roll it out nationally in March 2017. I am aware that some GPs were left short of basic supplies as a result, including syringes, and that they have had to source those from other suppliers at their own expense. NHS England tells me that it has reimbursed practices for any costs incurred from having to buy local supplies of needles and syringes.

I know that many of the hon. Members’ GP constituents have experienced frustration with Capita’s contact centre. I share those frustrations. Capita assures me that the contact centre has improved the way it responds to urgent queries by investing in more staff, improved processes and enhanced training. Capita is confident that these measures will deliver a quality service to customers. We will monitor its progress closely, including through meetings.

Karin Smyth: I am listening carefully to the Minister, and it is obviously reassuring to know that Capita, NHS England and the Member are having these conversations at a national level. In those discussions, has any consideration been given to my point about the loss of local, specialist knowledge and expertise? Is any consideration being given to putting back some of those local arrangements, given the importance of primary care to the entire system?

Nicola Blackwood: I shall come a little later to the problems with the existing system that meant it needed to be replaced. However, the hon. Lady’s point about the value of institutional knowledge, especially among NHS workers and personnel in other roles, is very important. They have been engaged in a lot of consultation processes as we try to put this issue right with NHS England and Capita. If the hon. Lady writes to me, I will be happy to give her more detail.

I also expect Capita to address issues with the courier service. I am aware of several steps that have been taken to ensure that all practices receive regular collections and deliveries. Both NHS England and Capita have taken steps to demonstrate that they are committed to restoring their reputation and re-establishing a quality service, and I am encouraged to see them working in partnership to do so. That said, I recognise that GPs and ophthalmologists in particular have suffered financial detriment as a result of late processing of payments. NHS England is working with Capita to explore what can be done to support affected stakeholders, and I have made it clear to Capita that I expect it to consider compensation as an option.

Some have suggested that the old model for provision of primary care support should be reinstated, but we must remember that it relied on localised services that did not connect with one another, with much duplication across processes. The quality of these services varied greatly—in some areas, it was outstanding; in others,
it was quite poor. That was simply unsustainable. Furthermore, the system was unable to generate useful management information and so, honestly, issues such as the ones that we now face would be very unlikely to have surfaced. They would have gone unreported.

A new model, with efficient and modernised processes, is the right approach to deliver to our primary care providers the service that they deserve. The Department and I will continue to closely scrutinise Capita and NHS England as they work to resolve current problems and build a quality service that is sustainable. I acknowledge fully that there is a long way to go before the service can be considered acceptable and that Capita has much to do to earn the trust of practitioners and patients.

This is clearly a live issue. I want to be clear today: I am listening. The issue is at the top of my priority list and will remain there until I am satisfied that an efficient and effective service is being delivered that meets the needs of patients and providers.

Question put and agreed to.

6.41 pm

House adjourned.
Ian Blackford: I will give way first to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty).

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and agree with much of what he has said and indeed with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds).

I, too, have been contacted by many members of the local scheme and by representatives of Unison, the trade union, who have great concerns about the undemocratic way in which they see the process going forward, and indeed concerns about the process that the Government have used. Whatever their individual views might be on where investment should or should not go, and on whether that is for economic, financial or ethical reasons, the process seems to them to be fundamentally undemocratic.

Ian Blackford: Again, I find myself in agreement with that. The Government should reflect on the consultation that is taking place and, hopefully, on the voices that will be raised today, because they have to take on board that, in making the changes that they are talking about, they need that wide body of support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I will give way in a second but I want to make a point. We need to have a wider discussion about how we will get an attractive return on investment, not only in the local authority pension schemes but in defined-benefit schemes around the land. We know the situation we are in. Because of quantitative easing, or largely because of quantitative easing, yields on Government gilts are low and will not give us the kind of return that we need that wide body of support.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I will give way in a moment but I want to finish the point. It is important, therefore, that we have the debate about infrastructure investment. There is an important opportunity, but that opportunity must
be seen by local pension schemes as being about investing in their local economy. The Government have to think very carefully about that inter-relationship.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I agree with everything that he has said, and with the comments of one or two of my colleagues.

There is another issue to consider when we talk about the ability of local authorities to invest in various assets for pension schemes. We can have an ethical foreign policy but local authorities must be unethical in their investments, which is a contradiction. I am thinking particularly of cluster bombs and things like that. In the west midlands, a pension scheme might not want to invest in companies that manufacture cluster bombs but has to do so because the Government say so.

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and he makes an interesting point. We must have the wider debate about sustainability and ethical investment. There are certainly very attractive funds that exist in the area of sustainability, corporate social responsibility and so on, and it is very important that local authorities are allowed to have the debate about what is in their members’ best interests. They must be able to satisfy them that they are acting in their interests. It is entirely legitimate for pension schemes to have a debate about what they consider to be ethical investments, and they should be allowed to pursue them provided that they can demonstrate that they are acting in the best interests of their members.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on opening this debate. Further to an earlier intervention, we can all see some benefit from the proposed pooling arrangements, but we must also be cognisant that there can be risks, or a concentration of risks. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there ought to be trade union representation on the governance structures for the pooling in order to stand up for members’ interests?

Ian Blackford: Very simply, yes, I agree. Stakeholders and trade unions are a very important part of the debate. We must also look at the training that is given to trustees in that regard, so that they can discharge their responsibilities fully, and indeed the important role that advisers play. In some senses, we have perhaps rushed these changes, rather than stood back and tried to get something on which I hope we can build consensus.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. As chairman of the local government unions, I led negotiations on the local government pension scheme; I campaigned to defend the local government pension scheme; and I worked with the scheme, at both national and local level, on investment strategy. It is absolutely right, commensurate with what we always sought to do through the scheme, that we have ethical investment, that we encourage infrastructure investment and that we look at sensible pooling arrangements. However, the first obligation of a pension scheme is to its members, to deliver to those loyal, long-serving public servants the best possible retirement. Does the hon. Gentleman therefore agree that it is not only illegitimate but potentially unlawful for the Government to seek to impose their will on 1 million workers and their pension scheme, and that the best thing to do would be to go back to the drawing board, sit down with the trade unions and negotiate a sensible way forward?

Ian Blackford: Again, I find myself in complete agreement. The hon. Gentleman is correct and there is an argument that what the UK Government have done is perhaps in contravention of European law. I will come to that point a little later.

Sir Alan Meale (Mansfield) (Lab): First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on the fine way in which he has approached this important debate and got it going. This is an important question. In the 1960s, an ex-Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, forced through a report on the financial institutions, which revealed that over 70%—I think it was 74%—of the FT share index was owned by pension funds. That shows how important this issue is.

To go back to the hon. Gentleman’s earlier point, there is a question about the value of gilts and bonds. I do not think it is just about that—it is also about the violation of the rights of individual pension-holders. The Government pay the money over in the first place, then take it back and say, “We’ll allow you to have this, but only if we decide how it’s spent”. That has got to be stopped.

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. We are having a lot of interventions. This is a three-hour debate, so if people want to make long interventions, I would love to hear them give a speech instead. There is no need for long interventions, Sir Alan.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Sir Edward. Again, I find myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Mansfield (Sir Alan Meale), because, as I mentioned, the funds belong to the scheme-owners—those who are working in local authorities that are engaged in that way. It rather ill behoves the Government to seek to interfere in the governance of the funds if they are acting in the best interests of their members—that is the test. That is why it is important for the Government listen to the debate, reflect and perhaps come back with some new thinking.

The whole infrastructure issue is important. I think we all recognise that we have to build capacity in our economies. We have all heard the debate about being left behind. It is absolutely necessary that local authority pension funds in the north of England, the midlands and my own country of Scotland play their part. Each local authority area must make its own determination as to what is right and invest in local schemes—social housing, perhaps—for the benefit of the community. At the same time, they should invest for the benefit of the pension schemes. It is about democratic accountability and investment opportunities. It should not be too complicated.

I urge the Government carefully to consider what has been done in Ontario and Quebec. They have been able to build consensus because they have not had the same
compulsion and the Government in Canada cannot use the big stick against local authorities.

I commend the Library on a first-class briefing. On the legal framework, it states:

“Although the rules are set nationally by the Secretary of State,”

the scheme

“is administered at local level by ‘administering authorities’, which broadly correspond to county councils and London Boroughs. These administering authorities are responsible for managing scheme investments, within the statutory framework. The Local Government Association (LGA) explains that this means decisions are ‘taken by democratically elected local councillors working within the restraints of local authority budgets.’”

That local democratic accountability, which many right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, is the nub of the matter.

The briefing continues:

“When making decisions on investment, the primary responsibilities of administering authorities are to deliver the returns needed to pay scheme members’ pensions, and to protect local taxpayers and employers from high pension costs. In this context, there have been questions about the extent to which investments can be made with other objectives in mind – for example, a desire to invest in infrastructure or avoid certain investments on ethical grounds. Legal advice published by the LGA in April 2014 said that the power of investment must be exercised for investment purposes and not for wider purposes. However, as long as this remained true, the precise choice of investment could be influenced by wider considerations.”

The briefing also states that the Department for Communities and Local Government has been considering how to “achieve economies of scale” and, as has been mentioned, pooling can lead to reduced costs and enhanced returns. The principle is fine and is to be lauded. However, it has become clear that the Government are going to use the stick approach as well as that of the carrot. If subtle inducement does not work, the Government could intervene by directing local authorities to invest in a certain way or by the Secretary of State exercising control. If we are to support local democracy throughout the United Kingdom, that cannot be right, and I can understand why local authorities might be alarmed.

Mr Andrew Smith: The hon. Gentleman is totally right about how undemocratic the measure is. Is there not a double jeopardy as well? Should the Government not be mindful of the fact that if they direct a fund to behave in a particular way and the investment goes wrong, they themselves will be liable? Do they not have to remember Equitable Life?

Ian Blackford: The right hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. I promised myself that I would not be too strident in the debate and not give the Government too much of a verbal kicking, but let us look at where we are on wider pensions policy and mark the Government’s report card because, frankly, it is not a good one. Let us take the issue of fairness for the women in the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign, and that of pensions freedom, on which just last week we saw a roll-back with the secondary annuity market being scrapped before it gets going. A systemic risk was identified by the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, yet the Government have had nothing to say about their responsibilities. We can see the impact of the risk to pensioners, we all know what happened with Maxwell and recently we have had BHS—

Sir Edward Leigh (in the Chair): Order. This is a very interesting debate on local government pensions and I know that Mr Blackford, who is a consummate parliamentary performer, will want to get straight back to the point, and away from Mr Maxwell, won’t he?

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for that advice, Sir Edward, and will move on. I was trying to put across the point that, regarding the Government interfering in local government pension schemes, their track record on pensions is not something I would see as commendable.

Unison has argued that investment decisions should be made by their funds and their members. I agree. Let us remember that the pension funds we are talking about are members’ funds. The Local Government Association has also said that there is even the risk of the regulations and the Secretary of State infringing European law on Government intervention in pension fund investment—a point that was made earlier. I find myself, not for the first time, on the side of European law and against the Government.

The Local Government Association has welcomed some of the changes, stating:

“Under the previous LGPS investment regulations there were express limits and thresholds on the assets that LGPS funds could invest in. The new framework moves the LPGS to a ‘prudent person’ approach as exists in the private sector. Under this approach outright limits and thresholds are replaced with a system that gives LGPS administering authorities more flexibility and requires them to have their own policies on asset allocation, risk and diversification.”

I do not think anyone here would object to that but, having given local authorities that clear mandate, we need to see them investing under the conditions set for them and in the best interests of the members, without interference from Government.

On the Government reforms, the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association states:

“We agree with the Governments proposals for pooling and the need to ensure that fund are committed to delivering these pools. However, there is a risk that such broad powers, combined with the lack of an explicit fiduciary duty, could ultimately be used by a future government to direct what funds invest in, with limited regard on the impact to the payment of members benefits and the costs to employers and members.”

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Is it not important that there is full transparency in respect of those costs so that everyone—scheme members and the public—can see precisely what is being charged to members?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point that should be seen in the wider context of information that should be given to plan holders, including those in the state pension scheme. All potential pensioners should be given an A4 sheet detailing their entitlements, backed up by transparency about the charges for all the schemes invested in. There is more work to be done.

I ask a simple question: is it really the Government’s intention to be in a position in which they can be challenged regarding seeking to direct local authority pension schemes? The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association states that the Government ought to pause and reflect on their obligations and on the importance of local democracy and accountability. In their consultation document, the Government state:
“However, given the very large sums of public money at stake, we believe that it is entirely appropriate for the Secretary of State to be able to intervene where concerns have been raised, having taken account of all available evidence.”

That is illuminating. As a number of us have said, we are talking about plan holders’ money. Yes, there must be regulation and oversight, but the Government are hardly a neutral participant in the process and they must think again and learn from best practice elsewhere.

Earlier this year, new legislation came into force in Quebec, which has been framed as a measure that potentially ensures that costly defined-benefit plans are sustainable in the long run. We should consider having that here. Under the legislation, the province no longer considers long-term assumptions about their own finances and market volatility. Instead, they need to fund themselves based only on long-term, less conservative assumptions. The law, which aims to reduce contribution volatility for employers and thus make defined-benefit plans more sustainable, is the first of its kind in Canada. The changes will be particularly supportive when it comes to longer-term infrastructure investment. That is the kind of debate that we ought to have in this country.

The e-petition motion, and the changes to the governance of pension schemes, relate solely to England and Wales, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that there is active engagement on the topic of local authority investment in infrastructure in Scotland, where responsibility is devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The SNP-led Scottish Government are committed to changing pension scheme regulations to ensure that they are not a barrier to local government pension schemes investing in infrastructure, and they are working with the scheme advisory board to achieve that. We in Scotland realise that there needs to be more of a balance between encouraging that approach and paying due regard to the responsibility of scheme managers to invest pension fund moneys in accordance with the scheme managers’ fiduciary duty. The Scottish Government are committed to achieving that delicate balance.

The discussion of pension scheme investment takes place in a wider context, which includes activities centred on the cities and a major programme of infrastructure investment. Cities and their regions are key drivers of our economy and the Scottish Government are committed to working with all our cities to unlock investment, whether individually, collectively through a city deal, through one of the Scottish Government’s devolved initiatives to stimulate growth and deliver infrastructure investment, or through a combination of all those measures.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It seems to me that it is not only about the democratic right of local authorities to pursue their choices, but also, exactly as the hon. Gentleman is saying, about giving them the kind of fiscal skills that can only help in the furtherance of their city deals. For the Government to try to quash both those objectives seems wholly perverse.

Ian Blackford: I again find myself wholly in agreement with a Member. I am not trying to lecture the Chamber on the things we are getting right in Scotland, but the Government in London could benefit from the kind of collaborative thinking we have developed, which is very much in line with what the hon. Gentleman said.

The fiduciary duty placed on local government pension schemes to act in the interests of the beneficiaries of the funds has to be the underlying principle of investment strategies and has to govern investment decisions. The responsible investment of pension funds must always be prioritised over unstable and risky investment. It is up to local authorities to ensure that they invest the funds to achieve the best outcomes for employees, trustees and sustainable growth. I stress that it is for the local authorities to determine that, and not for central Government to determine for them.

There have been some excellent examples in Scotland of sustainable investment in local housing projects delivering much needed long-term infrastructure that benefits ordinary people. For example, the Falkirk local government pension scheme fund awarded fund manager Hearthstone £30 million to invest in social and affordable housing in Scotland. More than 300 affordable homes are expected to be delivered, with the Scottish Government providing an initial investment of more than £6 million towards 126 social homes in Falkirk and Clackmannanshire. That is the kind of collaborative work that we need across the United Kingdom.

Rather than droning on, I will wind up at this point. On the basis of the consultation that the Government have seen and on the basis of what I expect the Minister will hear this afternoon, I ask that they go back and think again. They need to try to get back to a position of consensus and collaboration with local authority pension schemes in England and Wales.

4.52 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on the way he has presented his arguments and on giving us the opportunity to debate this issue.

I will be brief. I had a letter from a constituent—it was an email, to be more precise. She raised three strong points which I intend to make today. Her first point was that she did not consider the Government’s proposals ethical. I will explain why she said that in a moment. Her second point, which has already been made by the hon. Gentleman and others, was that the proposals are undemocratic. Finally, she questioned the integrity of the consultation process that the Government carried out. I will take each of those points in turn.

First, on the ethical considerations, my constituent said:

“The regulations unfairly bar local authorities from deciding not to invest in the arms trade and seem to be written to dissuade them from ending investment in companies complicit in violations of human rights and international law. Local authorities must be allowed to make investment decisions that reflect the values of their pension holders and wider communities. The new regulations undermine their ability to do so.”

On the question of the democracy of the proposals, my constituent said:

“‘It is absolutely anti-democratic to give the central government ‘power of intervention’ to prevent local authorities from divesting from some companies, and mandating them to invest in others against their will. This is not government money, but money belonging to pension holders who should retain the right to decide on how their money is invested. Government assurances that it will reserve the power for exceptional circumstances are insufficient in protecting the principle and process of democracy and the rights of pension holders.’”
Finally, on the question of the integrity of the consultation process, my constituent said:

“In government consultation on the regulations, over 23,000 individuals and hundreds of trade unions rejected the proposal. That’s over 98% of the respondents. While the consultation closed in February, the results were only published seven months later, after the new guidance and regulations were made official. This shows an utter disdain for the principle of consultation and public input.”

Taken together, those three points provide a fairly damning critique of what has taken place. In light of that, I hope that the Government will reconsider their proposals. I should conclude by apologising; I cannot stay for the whole debate, as I have other responsibilities outside of Westminster Hall. This debate is on a serious issue, and I hope the Government take it seriously.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to today’s debate. I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) in congratulating the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) on the way he introduced the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I will concentrate on three areas: local decision making; scrutiny of Government proposals; and how the regulations and the guidance attached to them relate to broader UK policy.

As other Members have said, local decision making comes down to whether pension fund scheme members and local authorities are allowed their say in how pensions are invested, rather than simply being overruled by Government. It is also about the ability of those responsible for public institutions to exercise the judgments they are appointed to exercise within the law. In the case of local authorities, that involves accountability not only to their electorates, but to scheme members. In their role as pension trustees, they have to be able to make judgments in line with their fiduciary duties. Funds must be invested in the best interest of their members, as European directives lay out, and I hope that will not change, although I find it difficult to understand how the regulations are compatible with those directives.

If Ministers are serious about being committed to more local decision-making and giving powers back to local areas, it follows that investment decisions should be made by local authorities, fund trustees and members, not by a Secretary of State with a broadened set of powers of intervention. That is where concerns arise, however, along with concerns about the degree of scrutiny Parliament is being allowed over the issue. That is pretty alarming given the negative responses received as part of the consultation. Indeed, today’s debate is only happening at all because of a public petition being acted upon and allowed to happen by Members of this House. It is not a result of Government initiative or Government action.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is making some important points. Does he agree that it is rather shameful that the measure was introduced through a statutory instrument, rather than with a debate in the House of Commons in which all Members could properly participate?

Richard Burden: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I hope it is not lost in the debate. The Minister will respond to the debate, and I hope he will address that point specifically when he winds up, although I am afraid that Ministers have form here. It seems that the changes—or at least some of them, and some of what is written in the regulations and the guidance attached—appear to be new rules on public procurement that were announced in February without any parliamentary scrutiny up to that point.

The most we knew about either of those changes was a highly partisan press release issued at the Conservative party conference in October 2015. Indeed, the formal announcement from the Government on the local government procurement changes did not even happen in this country. Instead, it happened at a joint press conference by the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who was then at the Cabinet Office, and the Prime Minister of Israel. It took successive applications for a Westminster Hall debate to enable us to find out what those regulations meant. The ministerial reply to that debate left a number of questions unanswered, and it took more correspondence back and forth before a Cabinet Office letter to me on 4 May finally clarified that some of the actual changes being proposed were a lot less dramatic than the rhetoric we had witnessed in the Conservative party press release and the Minister’s joint press conference.

On the changes in local authority pensions regulations, will the Minister clarify what is rhetoric and what is reality when it comes to guidance and consultation in relation to administering authorities preparing and maintaining investment strategy statements under regulation 7 of the Local Government Pension Scheme (Management and Investment of Funds) Regulations 2016? I particularly want to ask about paragraphs 3.7 and 3.8 of the consultation. Paragraph 3.7 stated:

“The Secretary of State has made clear that using pensions and procurement policies to pursue boycotts, divestments and sanctions against foreign nations and the UK defence industry are inappropriate, other than where formal legal sanctions, embargoes and restrictions have been put in place by the Government.”

Paragraph 3.8 states that such guidance is intended to make it clear that the administering authority, “should not pursue policies which run contrary to UK foreign policy.”

So will the Minister confirm that his reference to, “boycotts, divestments and sanctions” in no way overrides UK Government policy and guidance on illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, nor fetters administering authorities’ ability to follow that broader policy. I ask because the UK Government have a long-standing and clear foreign policy position that is bipartisan in recognising the illegality of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. The Government’s current guidance, issued to UK businesses, does not encourage trade or financial involvement with the settlements. A recent statement by all EU member states “unequivocally and explicitly” makes the distinction between Israel and all territories occupied by Israel since 1967.

Secondly, will the Minister confirm that neither the regulations he has introduced nor the guidance that accompanies them in any way override UK Government policy and guidance on illegal Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories? Will he confirm that they do not fetter administering authorities’ ability to follow such guidance in relation to local authorities’ overarching commitment not only in regard to the Palestinian territories, but in implementing the United
Nations guiding principles on business and human rights? I want to be clear that when paragraph 3.8 of the guidance attached to the regulations says that administering authorities should not pursue investment policies that "run contrary to UK foreign policy" it in no way undermines or overrides the overarching commitment in the UK’s own 2013 action plan for implementing the UN guiding principles on human rights and business, which state that the UK Government, “are committed to ensuring that in UK Government procurement human rights related matters are reflected appropriately when purchasing goods, works and services. Under the public procurement rules public bodies may exclude tenderers from bidding for a contract opportunity in certain circumstances, including where there is information showing grave misconduct by a company in the course of its business or profession. Such misconduct might arise...where there are breaches of human rights.”

In his reply to me of 4 May this year, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk, on behalf of the Cabinet Office, made it clear that public procurement policies were in no way intended to undermine the long-standing UK policy that Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are illegal under international law. He also said, “There are flexibilities to enable individual authorities to exclude suppliers that are corrupt, guilty of misconduct, in breach of various international laws and so on’.

Will the Minister confirm that the various international laws referred to would include the Geneva conventions? The implications go beyond any question about Palestine or Israel or even the middle east as a whole. There are implications for the whole gamut of ethical investment policies and for the ability of a local authority pension fund to decide not to invest in tobacco or in the activities of companies that are felt to be environmentally unsustainable. The implications go wide indeed. In this context I want to draw the House’s attention to the Government’s response to the consultation on today’s regulations, which states: “Provided that the guidance to be published under draft Regulation 7(1) is complied with, there is nothing in draft regulation 7(2)(e) to prevent an administering authority from taking any non-financial consideration into account provided that it is made in the best long term interests of scheme beneficiaries, and does not represent any significant risk to the health of the fund.”

When the right hon. Member for West Suffolk replied to me in relation to the procurement issue, he said that such all decisions have to be made on a case by case basis, which has of course always been the situation; there is nothing new there. However, will the Minister today clarify that all the assurances I was given in relation to local government procurement, extracted from the Government in the letter of 4 May sent by the right hon. Gentleman, also apply in respect of the 2016 local government pension scheme regulations and guidance notes that we are debating today?

When I wrote to the right hon. Member for West Suffolk during his time at the Cabinet Office, even though the pensions aspect of the announcement was a Department for Communities and Local Government responsibility, I tempted him to reconsider the new management and investment regulations for local authorities’ pension funds, as well as the public procurement matters that were within his area of responsibility, and I am pleased to say that he did so. In his letter to me of 4 May, he said that the changes we are debating today, “Increase rather than decrease the potential for local discretion in decision-making”.

I am pleased to hear that. I have difficulty relating it to what is in the guidance notes and regulations, but I hope he is right about that, and I hope that any interpretations of the regulations will reflect that statement that was made on the record by a Cabinet Minister. I hope the Minister today will confirm that statement in relation to the concerns that I and others have raised today and will not doubt raise during the debate.

I have asked the Minister specific questions about specific parts of the regulations and guidance notes and the correspondence that I have had with the Government on this matter. I am sure he has been fully briefed and will be able to give full answers to all the questions. If there are areas where he cannot give clear answers, I hope he will respond to all Members in writing.

5.9 pm

**Jack Dromey** (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. Let me start by referring back to my earlier intervention. As national secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, I was chair of the trade union side that conducted a series of negotiations on the local government pension scheme, and I worked very closely with the local government pension scheme at a national level on a range of the issues that have been referred to in this debate.

Who are the people we are talking about? They are the care workers who look after the vulnerable, the disabled and the elderly. They are the Karens, whom I met at Osborne nursery school but two weekends ago—outstanding education assistants who help kids get the best possible start in life. They are the refuse collectors and the people who go out and keep our streets clean—my uncle Mick, who lived with me until he sadly died, was a street cleaner. They are social workers who take care of, among others, looked-after children who badly need the support that social services and children’s services can deliver.

The millions who depend upon the local government pension scheme, which is fundamentally a good scheme, include not just those who are directly employed but those such as bus workers, who were originally directly employed by local government bus companies and have now been transferred but are still in the local government pension scheme. There are tens of thousands of contractors’ employees who enjoy what is called admitted body status. I know that because I negotiated admitted body status for some of the local administrations of the pension scheme.

The millions who depend upon the local government pension scheme, which is fundamentally a good scheme, include not just those who are directly employed but those such as bus workers, who were originally directly employed by local government bus companies and have now been transferred but are still in the local government pension scheme. There are tens of thousands of contractors’ employees who enjoy what is called admitted body status. I know that because I negotiated admitted body status for some of the local administrations of the pension scheme.

I have been personally involved not just in the negotiations. I have, for example, addressed two conferences for the scheme at national level on the issues of collaboration to ensure ethical investment, which is absolutely a legitimate
concern, and infrastructure investment. The then national chair of the local government pension scheme, Kieran Quinn, said, “Why are we investing in light transport in Taiwan when we should be investing more in developing infrastructure here in Britain?” Of course, that is absolutely right.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) referred to housing. I remember opening a housing development with the leader of Manchester City Council, where local government pension scheme investment was key to building hundreds of affordable homes. The objectives of having an ethical approach and greater investment in infrastructure are absolutely legitimate—so, too, is the move towards pooling. We have got to get it right, but in my time we used to argue for pooling and greater collaboration to make more effective investments.

What is fundamentally wrong about the proposal is that the Government are elbowing to one side the world of local government and telling millions of pensioners how their pensions might best be delivered.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Surely, it is legitimate for a political party in a local authority administration to seek from the electorate a mandate on how it will invest in its pension funds. That is what the Government are interfering with.

Jack Dromey: The hon. Gentleman is, of course, right. He has a background in Unison—one of the major local government unions. It is simply wrong for Whitehall to tell millions of pensioners and town halls what they should do in the future. It is also potentially unlawful, and a very strong case was set out earlier to that effect.

We have shared objectives: a greater ethical approach, infrastructure investment and pooling. Why do the Government have to continue to blunder down this path? There was an extraordinary response to the consultative process, and people overwhelmingly said, “No, no!” The Government should now, even at this stage, listen to the local government unions.

How do the Government square their approach over the local government pension scheme with two stated public policy objectives? The first is localism. I remember leading for the Labour party in the endless negotiations when the Localism Bill was going through Parliament in 2011. Power to the people? This is more Leninism than localism.

The second objective is this. The Government have had a damascene conversion. Not since Saul fell off his horse on the road to Tarsus have a Government made such a change. Historically the enemy of working people, they are now positing as the friend of working people—the champion of working people—but what they intend to do is to say to millions of working people, “No matter what you think, no matter what your concerns are, we are going to tell you how your pension scheme should be invested in the future.” That simply cannot be right.

5.15 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I thank the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for securing this debate, and I thank him. Members who have articulated their opinions clearly on this issue. We have heard about a variety of interesting options for and aspects of the upcoming changes, but the nub of the matter is that 5 million people rely on the local government pension scheme. Like other people who have pensions, they rely on their pension trustees—the pension boards—to invest their funds in their best interests. To me, that is a simple principle—I am sure everybody can understand it—so why has it taken more than 100,000 people to sign a petition on something so obvious? It is obvious to everyone that local government means local. Pension schemes belong to those people; they have paid in, so they should have the right to say how that money is invested—no more and no less.

Despite that, 98% of respondents to the Government’s consultation rejected the proposals. The Government have ridden roughshod over those views. They tabled in Parliament a statutory instrument that will become law on 1 November. It comprises a new set of local government investment regulations under which the Government can instruct local government pension scheme administrators on how to invest their money. With no debate in the House to help to influence the measure and warn of any potential pitfalls, the pensions of 5 million scheme members, worth £178 billion—it is the fourth-largest pot in the world—will be dictated to by the Government.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) made clear, this is about people’s pensions and people’s lives. This is about school janitors and cleaners.

Chris Stephens: It is also about deferred pay for precisely the reason the shadow Minister outlined. Local government employees pay in, unlike other public sector pension fund members. A local government worker’s pension is deferred pay.

Kate Hollern: I agree entirely. This is an appalling misuse of power, and contrary to the best interests of scheme members, who want to ensure that their pensions are invested in the way they want, not the way the Government wants. It also flies in the face of European law. Article 18 of the directive on institutions for occupational retirement provision—hon. Members have already covered this point—clearly states that pension funds must invest “in the best interests of members”.

and that “Member States shall not require institutions to invest in particular categories of assets.”

We are in the mid-chaos of Brexit, but article 50 has yet to be triggered and we are still working under European Union directives, so we are breaking that law.

As usual, the Government are using a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and we have spoken about the back-door policy of avoiding councils that have, for ethical reasons, concerns about investment in some areas. The guidance attached to the regulations states that “using pension policies to pursue boycotts, divestment and sanctions against foreign nations and UK defence industries are inappropriate, other than where formal legal sanctions, embargoes and restrictions have been put in place by the Government.”

In summary, therefore, administering authorities should not pursue policies that are contrary to UK foreign or defence policy. There is, however, little or no evidence that the local government pension scheme has ever undertaken investment decisions in that way, and the Government should not be imposing their foreign and defence policies to the detriment of LGPS pensioners.
The Government need to listen for a change. They need to listen to the 105,000 people who signed the e-petition, to the Local Government Association, to the public sector unions representing their members and to the Law Commission, which commented on the LGPS investment regulations for England and Wales:

“We think two aspects of the LGPS Regulations could usefully be reviewed. First, in practice administering authorities consider themselves to be quasi-trustees, acting in the best interests of their members. We think that the same rules which apply to pension fund trustees in taking account of wider or non-financial factors will also be taken to apply to LGPS administering authorities. There is an argument that the IORP Directive requires this. However, we think that uncertainty on this point is undesirable and that the matter should be put beyond doubt. It would be helpful if the LGPS Investment Regulations made it clear that administering authorities must act in the best interests of pension scheme members.”

We cannot stress strongly enough that the authorities must act in the interests of members.

Why are the Government ignoring those voices? Why have the Government refused to listen? Why did they even bother to carry out a consultation, if they then ignore 98% of the results? Why are the Government not looking at everything again carefully? I fully support pooling arrangements; they are great if they get the best for the scheme members. The regulations should not be a way for the Government to borrow on the back of pensioners, or to dictate where and where not the pension fund may be invested.

Why have the Government failed to take the arrangements through the House of Commons? Because they know they are wrong. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington spoke about localism. He was absolutely right: this is the reverse of localism; it is dictatorship. The Government have no right to interfere in people’s pensions. The consultation went out and the Government, I am quite sure, felt that their proposal was a good idea, but the people who own the fund have said no. I beg the Government to listen and to put a hold on their scheme.

5.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) for introducing this debate about investments made under the local government pension scheme in England and Wales. It provides me with the opportunity to address the significant misconceptions about Government policy that have arisen as a result of briefing from trade unions and other bodies.

Judging from the debate today, before I go on to things that people might not agree with, I think everyone agrees that the scheme members of the pension funds are the most important group involved. I want to reassure those scheme members that their pensions are certainly not at risk and that we are giving local authorities more and not less control over investments.

Before I get into the detail of the policy, I should make it clear that the LGPS is a defined-benefit scheme, in which benefits are guaranteed by statute and are not directly affected by the investment performance of individual funds. Scheme members in different local funds, each with different asset allocations and funding strategies, receive the same level of benefits based on a salary and length of scheme membership.

Investment decisions in the LGPS are not, therefore, a “gamble” with scheme members’ pension rights. It is clearly the case, however, that local administering authorities should seek to maximise the returns on investments in order to limit the risk to the town hall that pensions or otherwise might pose to local council tax payers and local services. We have made it clear repeatedly that investment decisions must be taken in the best interests of scheme members and taxpayers.

The petition states that the Government might “gamble away members’ money on infrastructure projects”, but I make no apologies for the fact that we have been clear that authorities should be ambitious in developing their proposals on infrastructure investment. Investment in infrastructure is increasingly seen as a suitable option for larger pension funds with long-term liabilities.

Figures published by the LGPS advisory board in 2013 showed that only £550 million, or 0.3% of the scheme’s total assets of £180 billion, were invested at that time in infrastructure. That falls some way behind other large pension funds that have elected to invest 10% to 15% in the area. It is widely recognised that infrastructure investment is good not only for investors, but for the global economy. Indeed, investing in large-scale infrastructure projects can offer a useful match with the long-term liabilities held by pension funds.

Other countries are well ahead of us in progressive thinking and it is time for the UK to step up to the challenge. In the existing investment environment, there is also even greater pressure to reduce costs and maintain or improve performance. Our work with the LGPS funds to pool their investments will save up to £300 million a year over time, thus benefiting scheme members and taxpayers alike. The larger scale of the pools will also open up new investment opportunities, such as large infrastructure projects. I am grateful for the hard work put in by elected members and officers in making pooling begin to happen. I will meet each pool over the coming weeks to discuss their plans and set out our expectations.

Nevertheless, I have been absolutely clear throughout that investment decisions are for administering authorities and that that will remain the case. There is no question, nor has there ever been, of the Government directing otherwise might pose to local council tax payers and local services. We have made it clear repeatedly that investment decisions must be taken in the best interests of scheme members and taxpayers.

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Mr Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention but, as I said at the outset, we are giving local authorities more and not less control over their investments.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Minister explain what happens if an LGPS fund cannot pay its pensions?
Mr Jones: As I said earlier, the LGPS is a defined-benefit scheme, so the benefits to the pension fund participants are protected by statute. I do not think that is an issue for the people with investment in the funds. As I will explain, there is an extremely important point about how pension funds are able to invest and the additional freedom that we have provided in that respect.

I want to underline that I respect and understand the strength of feeling shown by many of the respondents to our consultation on the new LGPS investment regulations and the people who signed the petition. The proper conduct of pensions and pension investments is of deep concern to us all, as it should be. A key concern expressed by respondents to the consultation was about the power in those regulations under which the Secretary of State could, after proper consultation, intervene in the investment activities of an administering authority. It may be helpful and, I hope, reassuring if I set out the reasons that we have taken that power.

Historically, the LGPS investment regulations and the framework that they impose have sought to constrain investment decisions to minimise risk and protect the interests of scheme beneficiaries and taxpayers. More recently, however, those regulations have fallen below the standards in Europe and the private sector in the UK. Under the new investment regulations, administering authorities will be significantly more responsible and accountable for their investment decisions. Provided that authorities act reasonably within the framework provided by the regulations and guidance, they will no longer be constrained by prescription from the centre about how their assets are invested. For example, we have removed limits on the proportion of assets that may be invested in particular ways. The new regulations therefore provide authorities with much more freedom over how they invest LGPS funds and bring that scheme broadly into line with private sector schemes in that respect, and represent a landmark policy shift.

The power of intervention has been included in the new regulations as a backstop in the rare circumstances in which it may be necessary to protect the around £200 billion of assets and 5 million members of the local government pension scheme. The regulations include several safeguards to ensure that that power is used appropriately and proportionately, including full consultation with the relevant authority. The Government’s response to the consultation made it clear that that power would be used only on clear evidence that an authority was failing to act in accordance with the regulations or guidance.

Ian Blackford: I want to try to be helpful. There is awful lot of concern about the power that the Government have given themselves to intervene. We understand the statutory obligations under these local authority schemes, but as a way out of that, did the Government consider giving that power not to themselves but to the Pensions Regulator?

Mr Jones: A lot has been made of the fact that these measures are being made by statutory instrument. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 gives Ministers broad powers over the running of pension funds. That Act was scrutinised at significant length in the House. Considering the suite of powers that Ministers are given by that Act and taking into account the views of organisations such as the local government pensions scheme advisory board, the new regulations do not go anywhere near as far as they could have. I know from meeting that board that several people from administering authorities and trade unions are represented on it, and I discussed this issue with them at some length.

To pick up a few other points, the new investment regulations and guidance allow authorities to take into account non-financial factors, such as social, environmental and corporate governance considerations, when making investment decisions. However, authorities must take proper advice, act lawfully and take decisions that are in the best interests of scheme members and taxpayers. They must also act in a way that is consistent with UK foreign and defence policy.

The guidance is clear that administering authorities should not use pension policies to pursue boycotts, divestments or sanctions, except where formal legal sanctions exist and embargoes or restrictions have been put in place by the UK Government, where policy responsibility for such matters lies. We have taken the same view in our guidance on boycotts in the context of public sector procurement, which in turn is based firmly on the position in international law.

Richard Burden: The Minister ran together three things: boycotts, divestments and sanctions. Boycotts tend to be a consumer thing. Sanctions tend to be a Government thing. The issue relevant to this debate is divestment. Paragraph 3.7 of the consultation document says that: “boycotts, divestments and sanctions against foreign nations and the UK defence industry are inappropriate”.

Will he clarify that action to divest pension funds from a company involved with Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories would not fall foul of that so long as it was done on a case-by-case basis?

Mr Jones: I will address more of the hon. Gentleman’s points later in my comments, but I can clarify that any such divestment must be in line with the policy of the UK Government.

The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned on a number of occasions the situation in Canada. We are aware that public service pension schemes in Canada have been merged, based on the fact that they are now important global investors. The Ontario teachers’ pension scheme seems to be regularly wheeled out as an example. There are several Members here from the west midlands who will know Birmingham airport well, and I am aware that the Ontario teachers’ pension fund has a significant investment in that airport. We see in the situation in Canada one of our drivers for pooling the LGPS funds, along with the wider need to save costs, not in terms of a direct cost saving to the Government but one that will be put back into those pension funds for the benefit of members.

I agree entirely that transparency of pension investments is important, so that all concerned can see where pension fund cash is being spent on fees and why. My Department is working closely with the scheme advisory board and others to ensure that information is clear in relation to fees charged to pension funds.

I assure hon. Members that there is an opportunity for trade union representation on pools. That is a matter for the individual pools themselves and depends on their governance arrangements, but the individual local
authority members that support each scheme will have the right to be part of setting up those pooling governance arrangements, and it will therefore be their decision on whether union representatives are on the pools.

There have been extremely good examples of investment in local housing in England, as well as in Scotland, which the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned. There is a good example in Greater Manchester, where funds have been used from the Greater Manchester pension scheme. As I said, a relatively small amount of funding has gone into that type of investment hitherto, and we want to encourage pension funds and pools to increase such investment.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) mentioned the significant correspondence he had had with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock). Without seeing that correspondence, it is difficult for me to answer some of his questions directly, but I will undertake to look at that correspondence and come back to him with a written response.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned overseas business risk guidance issued by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. That guidance does apply to local government pension funds, but it is important to be clear that the Government are committed to promoting trade links and business ties with Israel and therefore the guidance strongly opposes boycotts.

Richard Burden: Just for clarity, I mentioned nothing about trade with Israel. I mentioned overseas business risk and the FCO guidance relating to Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. If the Minister wishes, I can quote from that guidance, but I am sure he knows what I am referring to. It is nothing to do with Israel; it is to do with illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.

Mr Jones: As the hon. Gentleman knows, that is covered in the guidance, and I will write to him at further length on that point.

The hon. Gentleman asked for clarification on whether local government procurement guidance applies to the LGPS. Our guidance on pension scheme investments is entirely of the same framework as the guidance issued by the Cabinet Office on public procurement. Both operate within the wider framework of national and international law.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned tobacco. It is our position, as is clear from our response to the consultation on investment, that decisions on matters such as whether to invest in tobacco are for individual pension funds or the people who represent members.

Richard Burden: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case for the Government to think again. Does he agree that it would be absolutely extraordinary, having had a consultative process in which 98% of respondents objected to the Government’s proposals, for the Government to say, “We know it’s your pension and we know that 98% have said no, but we intend to go ahead regardless.”?
Ian Blackford: Indeed. The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. He spoke about Leninism; it is Big Brother knows best. I hope, at this late stage, that the Government reflect, so that we can get to a situation where we all support, in broad terms, what they are doing, but we can only do so with a proper governance model.

Question put and agreed to.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 25 October 2016

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

Leaving the EU: Wales

9.30 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the effect on funding for Wales of the UK leaving the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. The debate is technically about budget decisions but, as we all know, making such decisions is not simply about working out how one reallocates figures. At its fundamental essence, the debate is about the people and the constituencies we represent, and their future, and that is where I would like to begin.

At the core of my constituency is the town of Port Talbot, which is home to more than 37,000 people. Since 1902, the beating heart of Port Talbot has been its steelworks—the largest and, I confidently say, the best in the UK, producing a third of the UK’s steel. Many people do not give a second thought to steel, but when they are driving their cars, having a can of baked beans or putting in a load of washing there is a decent chance they are using a piece of steel produced in Port Talbot. Everyone here today knows that the future existence of the works, as we call them, currently hangs in the balance.

The story of Port Talbot over the past 50 years is the reason for the debate. It is a story shared by many towns and cities across the country, from Stoke-on-Trent and its potteries to Dagenham and its Ford factory or Merthyr and its coal mines. Like them, Port Talbot was truly built, and grew, on the foundation of one industry and one company. Half a century ago, the works employed nearly 20,000 people out of a population of 50,000. Every other shop and business in the town depended on the custom of those workers and did a thriving trade, especially on Thursdays, which was payday. Times were good; the town centre was bustling and huge crowds would enjoy their summer weekends on the sandy beaches of Aberavon. As the plant churned out steel faster and better than anywhere else, we also produced extraordinary talent, such as Richard Burton and Sir Anthony Hopkins and, more recently, Rob Brydon and Michael Sheen.

The decline of the steel industry in the UK over the past 50 years can be seen in the standard of living in Port Talbot. The enormous lay-off of 6,000 people in 1980 led to huge numbers signing on to benefits. Today, the works employs just 4,000 people. They are in highly coveted jobs that still provide a decent wage, but nothing has replaced the jobs that were lost or the energy and pride that the industry gave Port Talbot. Icons of our community, such as the Plaza cinema, are boarded up, and smaller shops that depended heavily on steelworkers struggle on. Unemployment is 10% higher than in the rest of the UK, with one in four people relying on benefits to make ends meet. The level of education in our community is proportionally much lower than in the rest of the country. The people of Port Talbot are as warm, tough, hard-working and talented as anyone we could ever wish to meet, but many are losing hope that their lives will give them the kind of security that we all want. They simply do not see that there are opportunities for them. They know that we cannot recreate the jobs and economy of half a century ago, but they are frustrated that there are not the jobs and the economy for the next half century in which they can play a role.

I have told the story of Port Talbot today because it is a town that, despite recent improvements, is in long-term crisis. The future of my constituents hangs in the balance, and unless we take concerted action their prospects will continue rapidly to decline. That is why the debate is so important. As much as iron needs oxygen to be transformed into steel, our area, and the whole of Wales, needs investment to transform its future into one where people have security and opportunity.

And we now come to the crux of the matter. For years, the EU, in various guises, has contributed an enormous amount of investment in Wales, working closely with the Labour Welsh Government. Due to the consequences of the history I have described, south Wales qualified for the highest level of European structural and regeneration funding. All in all, EU structural funds and the common agricultural policy deliver well over half a billion pounds a year, in addition to money from other key funding areas such as higher education, culture and urban development. Working with Government, charities and businesses, the investment has made an enormous difference.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): European funding also provides leverage for getting matching funds from the UK and Welsh Governments, which makes it very valuable to our communities.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. There is a clear multiplier effect with EU funding, because it provides the confidence that opens the door to all sorts of other sources and channels of investment. Although we are giving the raw data here, the multiplier effect is absolutely enormous.

Infrastructure built with EU funding is creating jobs and easier access for people and business, including through the Harbour Way road network, the new Port Talbot Parkway station and our town centre. That investment has helped to develop skills, funding 4,885 apprenticeships and 1,360 traineeships for young people, as well as programmes that have led to local people gaining 14,860 qualifications, which has prepared them for work. It has also been a catalyst for business, funding the Baglan energy park, upgrading our commercial centres and being a major investor in the SPECIFIC innovation centre. It has backed world-class industrial excellence in south Wales by being a principal backer of Swansea University’s bay campus, and has contributed to programmes—from historic gardens and activity centres to toddler play areas and community sports facilities—that have improved our family and community life, ensuring that one day Wales will once again dominate the Six Nations.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that 16,000 farmers across Wales gain direct subsidies from the CAP? Without that funding,
more than 90% of them would go bust. Will he join me in calling on the UK Government to commit to ensuring that the subsidies continue for all farmers?

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely that the role the CAP has played in the agricultural industry in Wales and the UK, and indeed across the entire European Union, has been critical and has supported thousands of farmers and their livelihoods. I will talk a little later about how we need to see a clear commitment to long-term funding to replace every aspect of the European funding on a like-for-like basis, including the CAP.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall. Does he agree that European funding has been used to great advantage, including in Northern Ireland, but that Brexit signals not an end to the funding of worthy schemes but rather a new way of distribution and the opportunity to ensure that the schemes that are funded are necessary and helpful to local communities? With that in mind, the Government have committed to helping to ensure that the farming grants and community schemes are retained within this Parliament, until 2020. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that with Brexit, we have a new way of doing things?

Stephen Kinnock: There is an old phrase, “Never let a crisis go to waste”. Brexit has caused a crisis, and that opens up massive questions about where we go now as a country. A major part of that, of course, is what will happen in Northern Ireland. The Government have made commitments up to 2020, but 2020 is within the blink of an eye. We need a far more long-term plan and a strategy that goes way beyond that.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on obtaining the debate. Is it not the case that Welsh steel and other industries will benefit from Brexit with respect to the procurement rules? Indigenous businesses in the construction industry and so on may prosper.

Stephen Kinnock: The way in which the Government have interpreted EU procurement rules has been completely wrong-headed for many years. There are ways to build in local content clauses in procurement, to ensure that the use of British steel in British projects is maximised. Unfortunately, the Government, because of their laissez-faire attitude, have hidden behind EU state aid rules. As a result, they have failed to use those rules in a way that could have benefited the steel industry, which is one of the industry’s five major asks. We have seen some improvements, but we need a proper industrial strategy in this country that clearly sets out how procurement can be used to promote British industry.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the real worry for steel outside the European Union is that the Government will simply put no trade defence mechanism in place?

Stephen Kinnock: That is a major concern. The British Government have been the ringleader of a set of countries trying to roll out the red carpet for China, to allow it to dump untold amounts of its unfairly subsidised steel on the EU and British markets. As we know, the Secretary of State for International Trade has said that he has no plans to support the steel industry with trade defence instruments. When combined with all the other uncertainty that Brexit has caused, that is a major concern for our industry.

Workways+ is a project that helps long-term unemployed people and people with complex needs to develop the skills and qualifications that will help them into paid positions. The Cynnydd Project works to help young people avoid the unemployment trap. BEACON is helping Swansea University to work with industry to pioneer renewable chemicals, fuels and other materials, bringing another key future industry to the area. Those are just three EU-funded projects already under way, and many others are in the pipeline. Each one makes the lives of our constituents better.

In reality, the situation in Port Talbot, Aberavon and across Wales calls for far more investment to accelerate our recovery from decades of under-investment in the face of the impact of globalisation and deindustrialisation. Yet all that funding and all that progress is at risk after the referendum vote to leave the European Union. While the leave campaign made promises that all EU funding would continue to flow to Wales at the same levels, I think we know that those promises are about as valid as what could be printed on the side of a bus.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made that promise, but he has also said that he wants to guarantee funding for projects that meet UK priorities. Does that not imply that the Government intend to use this opportunity to insist that money is spent on their priorities, rather than those agreed with partners and the European Union?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend. One of the huge risks to Wales of Brexit is that we will see a power grab by the Westminster Government. We will start to see the Westminster Government using the opportunity to claw back funding. We know that the £350 million was a lie. The figure was far more like £190 million, but where will that money go? Will it just disappear into the black hole of the Treasury in Westminster, never to be seen again in Wales? That is a huge risk for Wales in light of Brexit.

Now that all the bluff and bluster of the referendum campaign is behind us, it is all about what the Prime Minister’s Government actually do. So far on that score, the signs have not been positive. Despite repeated requests from the First Minister for a commitment to full continued funding, so far the Government have pledged only to continue funding agreed EU-funded projects until 2020.

That is not as powerful a pledge as it may first seem, for a number of reasons. First, it is for only one additional year after we are scheduled to leave the European Union.
Union in March 2019. The Government have made zero assurances that funding will be retained after 2020. Secondly, the Chancellor made clear in his statement on 13 August that the pledge applied only to projects signed before this year’s autumn statement. Apparently, any projects signed after that will be assessed by a method that is yet to be revealed to us—a mystery method. Funding is therefore not guaranteed for multi-year projects signed after next month, even if they are in the current EU 2014 to 2020 funding round.

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely agree. We have seen in all the feedback since the Brexit vote that businesses are in a holding pattern. Many companies, both outside and within the UK and the EU, are waiting to see how things develop in the wake of Brexit. We have no idea what the Government’s top-level negotiating position will be in terms of hard or soft Brexit, and we have no idea what the plan is on the budgetary side in terms of replacing EU funding. That double whammy causes massive uncertainty for business. It relates back to the point on the multiplier effect. EU funding opens the door for other businesses coming in, and that uncertainty is the enemy of business, as my hon. Friend says.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con) rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I call Byron Davies.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I call Stephen Kinnock. He is definitely Stephen Kinnock.

Stephen Kinnock: I am, Mr Bailey.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. My sense is that we are moving firmly off topic with that intervention, but delivering value for taxpayers’ money is a top priority for all Governments, including the Welsh Assembly Government. In light of the unemployment figures coming out of Wales at the moment, which are certainly going in the right direction, along with a range of other economic indicators, I would argue that the Welsh Assembly Government are definitely providing value for money for Welsh taxpayers.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. In many ways, this debate is about resilience. The resilience of the Welsh economy in relative terms is weaker compared with that of many other parts of the United Kingdom. With the impact of Brexit, the loss of funding and inflation—the weakening of the pound will send inflation up, and we know that the poorest are always hardest hit by inflation—his reference to the triple whammy is an apt and correct way of describing what is happening.

The third reason why the pledge is not as powerful as it appears is that the Government have not yet agreed with other EU Governments that UK-based applications for EU funding will be in any way affected. The EU funding programmes for 2014 to 2020 are well under way—they have either already been launched or are in the advanced stage of planning. I fear that the Government’s antagonistic behaviour towards the EU and their lack of clarity over future funding will harm the prospects of Welsh applications.

Fourthly, the Government appear to have no plan for how the underwriting of funding will work at a small business or charity level, which is so important. Fifthly, even if Westminster does replace EU funding, there are serious considerations as to how that will be done and calculated. The Government will likely be tempted simply to increase the funds available on the basis of the Barnett formula. However, as the Welsh Labour Government have made abundantly clear, the Barnett formula has disadvantaged Wales for years, and we simply cannot afford or accept such chronic under-investment any longer.

At a minimum, the chosen approach to replacing EU funds must be ring-fenced—it must be in addition to the block grant. Beyond that, a revision of the Barnett formula is long overdue. In short, there is no clarity and no confidence for the people of Wales. The Government must urgently make it clear that they will underwrite all project funds agreed in the 2014 to 2020 mechanism. They must make it clear that they will maintain EU levels of annual funding to Wales for at least a decade post-Brexit, and they must set out how the replacement of funds will work in practice for the Welsh Government and local organisations in the spectrum of Brexit scenarios.

Also, the Government must commit to including Welsh voices in the negotiations, especially with regard to other themed EU funding programmes such as the Erasmus student exchange programme or the Horizon 2020 higher education innovation partnership. Of particular concern to south Wales is the future of the UK relationship with the European Investment Bank, whose loans have helped to build the Swansea bay campus; improved the Welsh Water and Severn Trent network in 2015; and upgraded the Great Western mainline. The last loan was worth £430 million. Such institutions matter greatly to us. The head of the bank, Werner Hoyer, has already publicly made it clear that current levels of lending to the UK cannot be maintained after Brexit. Welsh voices must be heard in the negotiations as our future so
critically depends on those relationships with the continent. The Government must make clear whether they will seek associate status to the programmes and institutions. They must bring clarity quickly as the futures of people, communities and organisations across Wales hang in the balance.

Although it looks likely that the entirety of the UK will suffer economically in the coming years as a result of Brexit, it is in many parts of Wales where it will hit hardest, as our economic resilience is relatively low. That does not take into consideration the impact of Brexit on the steel industry, which would be hugely endangered if EU tariffs are imposed on it. If investment in Wales is not maintained, vital projects will go under, followed by businesses. People will lose jobs, and unemployment and welfare bills will shoot up. Communities will fracture. Port Talbot and its people have been through enough. That does not have to be our future.

In Port Talbot, Aberavon and across south Wales we are seeing the enormous potential to accelerate what we are doing. There is innovation. One company, SPECIFIC, has developed a steel-based paint that acts as a solar cell to generate power. It could turn every building in the country into a power station—except perhaps for Boris’s Foreign Office. The Swansea bay tidal lagoon is a world-leading project to capture wave energy. The Swansea bay city region proposal, Internet Coast, could transform south Wales into one of the best digitally connected places in the world. All that is being done without any sign of a proper industrial strategy. Imagine if we actually had one.

Alongside the Government’s Brexit negotiations, they must also present a modern industrial strategy, backing skill development, innovation, modern manufacturing, sustainability and the digital revolution. The strategy must focus on regions such as south Wales, where we have so much underdeveloped talent. When the Welsh Secretary declares that we should not simply replace EU money with Westminster money because we have to address underlying issues, we have to laugh. First, of course we need to address the underlying issues. Unlike him, I am unwilling to settle for basic skills. I am ambitious to ensure my constituents have the high skills needed for new industry to flourish in south Wales. Secondly, it seems blindingly obvious that financial support is a precondition for building such industries and developing skills. Finally, it was very nice of the Welsh Secretary to say that publicly, but it is his Government’s responsibility to come up with the solution, so he may wish to get on with it.

The Government must recognise with humility and sobriety rather than the gung-ho hubris they have shown so far that, if Wales does not continue to receive funding for crucial programmes, communities will be devastated for generations, with everything that that means for people’s lives. It will result in a lack of security, a lack of dignity and a lack of hope. I therefore hope that the Government will reassure the people of Wales quickly that they will ensure the floor is not ripped out from underneath them.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Parallel to the UK’s membership of the EU has been the rise of one of the most successful businesses in the world: Airbus. One of the real threats to business is the arrangement concerning communication between the multinational aspects of that business. It is essential that the Government work closely with business to preserve a premier economic powerhouse such as Airbus.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. There is no better example than Airbus, which is an exemplar of a cross-country, cross-industry collaboration. Airbus has worked as a consortium that has developed through its supply chains a world market-leading capability. When people say the European Union is a sclerotic project that does not work anymore, there is one answer to that question: Airbus. It is a fantastic example, as my hon. Friend has described. We must now see a commitment from the Government to continue to support such projects moving forward. It will be more difficult in the wake of Brexit, but it is still possible. It is up to the Government to show leadership to ensure that that happens.

We need a comprehensive funding and industrial strategy that does not say our best days were in the coal and steel boom years of the 1960s. We need a strategy that says our best days are still ahead of us.

Several hon. Members rose—

9.57 am

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. There is great pressure on time. Nine Members indicated in advance that they wished to speak in this debate and I have had another three since. I want to call the Front-Bench speakers at around 10.30 am, so we will start with a time limit of four minutes, which I might reduce as time goes on. I also ask that Members recognise it will be necessary for speakers to take no interventions. If Members persist in intervening, they may lose their priority on the speakers list.

Also, the clock controlling the time limits is working here at the desk, but not up there on the wall, so the Clerk will hit the bell one minute prior to the end of the time limit. The bell is not a fire alarm; you do not need to vacate the building. It is simply an indication to the speaker.

9.58 am

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I am delighted, as the real Byron Davies, to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing this debate. I am pleased that we are all here contributing to what should be a wider and national conversation about what happens to Wales post-Brexit. I am sure that we here today recognise the importance of ensuring Wales gets the best possible deal from Brexit. The UK Treasury has of course guaranteed European structural and investment funds in Wales for projects signed before the UK leaves the EU. The Treasury has also guaranteed funding received directly from the European Commission: for example, the universities participating in Horizon 2020. The guarantee also includes pillar 1 of the common agricultural policy, so the agricultural sector in Wales will receive the same level of funding it was expecting under the 2014-2020 programme. The access of the UK, and consequently Wales, to the EU funding programmes
will be subject to negotiations during the withdrawal process. Even once outside the EU, it is possible that the UK will receive funding from it.

Although it is essential that we support the Secretary of State for Wales and the Minister, who are ensuring we have funds for important infrastructure projects, as part of this process we must scrutinise how the money is spent. I must admit that I was shocked that Carwyn Jones did not have a plan for Wales after Brexit and failed to lobby the British Government prior to the referendum. Apparently, it was too political. That means he did not obtain any guarantees about having funding matched. That is staggering, given the importance of the current funding to Wales. The fact that the First Minister, of all people, did not think of that or secure it is beyond me. It could be argued, however, that it is part of a deeper undercurrent of thoughtlessness and evidence of the Welsh Government’s blase attitude to the spending of public money. Unfortunately, Wales’ lack of scrutiny is part of the problem. It is due to myriad factors, including a lack of a competitive national media, which leaves the public with an information deficit, and the processes in the Assembly, which mean that many parts of Welsh policy and spending decisions have received a woeful lack of scrutiny. It is no longer good enough to say that the Assembly will get there or that things will change. It has been two decades, and in this place and the Assembly we must seriously start to look at and tackle the problems that the Assembly and Wales face post Brexit.

Wales has received three rounds of EU funding worth almost £4 billion in less than two decades. In the heady early days of devolution, the then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, said that the first round of funding was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shape a new Wales, shake off the shackles and take advantage of the myriad opportunities and the booming years of the early 2000s to create a hi-tech, trading nation that is proud of its industrial past. We were told that it would grow to become a confident, outward-looking nation once again. Two decades on, we are on our third round of funding.

The Welsh Government’s wasted spending includes a £7.5 million Government procurement card for luxury hotels, iTunes, Victoria’s Secret underwear, yacht wear and other vital uses of taxpayers’ funds for Welsh Government officials. Some £1.6 million was spent on a martial arts centre that never opened in north Wales. Tens of millions of pounds in business loans went from the former economy Minister to firms that went bankrupt, despite warnings about their viability. Some £1.8 million was spent on chauffeur-driven cars; £20 million was spent on properties on the M4 relief road, without a spade in the ground; £3.4 million was spent on a heritage centre that closed within three years; and hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on major road projects that a 2010 Wales Audit Office report said cost 61% more than estimated and hampered wider transport objectives. My point is that, although it is of fundamental importance that we debate and discuss the future of funding for Wales and support the Wales Office in achieving that—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I call Jonathan Edwards.
about £3 billion to support our rural economy between 2007 and 2013. Our economy depends on those streams. Even under my preferred deal, we would not qualify for CAP payments. Norway gets around that by paying the CAP payments and tariffs that it would receive if it were in receipt of CAP. Unless we have those guarantees from the UK Government, I fear dark days lie ahead for the rural economy and the Welsh economy as a whole. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

10.7 am

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Britain has been terrorised by clowns, and we now know that their ringleader is a peroxide blonde with a German name and a red nose masquerading as the Foreign Secretary. He promised a mixture of lower costs, market access and lower migration, but we are obviously going to get higher costs, which is why the deficit reduction plan has been torn up, no market access—it sounds like it will be a hard Brexit—and increasing migration, as ever. Boris said that we could have our EU cake and eat it, but Donald Tusk has said that all we will get is salt and vinegar.

The referendum took place immediately after the Welsh Assembly elections, so the Welsh people did not have time to contemplate all the ramifications of Brexit on their grants, and 16-year-olds and people living abroad were not allowed to vote. It is now coming home to us that we face the triple whammy that I mentioned earlier. Wales starts from a position of having something like 70% of UK GDP per head. As the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) said, 200,000 people who rely on EU trade—25,000 of them are in Swansea bay—face tariffs.

There is enormous uncertainty. We hear today that the promised electrification to Swansea may not proceed, and we do not know what is happening about the lagoon or the Swansea city deal. Tariffs are going up, and companies such as Nissan want compensation. It is like someone going to a shop and buying a mobile phone that they are told has a colour picture, but when they get home they find it is black and white. In other words, if the promises that were made were not a reasonable representation of the future—the falling pound, the loss of investment and the loss of jobs—the British and Welsh people deserve a referendum on the exit package before we trigger article 50. Article 50 should not be triggered until something like next October.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the fall in the pound has been excellent for exporters?

Geraint Davies: I assume that the fall in the pound to a 30-year low was designed to make Polish workers better off when moving abroad. The weak pound is a nightmare that will generate huge inflation in Britain. People will not be able to go on holiday, except on the night of a full moon. We propose that at least £5.5 billion of that be spent on the NHS by 2020, given it a much-needed £100 million per week cash transfusion, and to use £1.7 billion to abolish VAT on household energy bills.

That was a specific pledge made nine days before the referendum, not for some slipping date in the future, but by a specific date—precise figures, specific pledges.

Furthermore, there is no point in the Prime Minister trying to distance herself from the promises made. I know she virtually went into hibernation for the course of the referendum campaign, but none the less, of the signatories to that letter, one is now the International Development Secretary, another is the Transport Secretary and a third is the Foreign Secretary. They are now in government, and they should honour the pledges that they made. Unfortunately, however, as my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) alluded to in his intervention, it already looks as if those promises are slipping.

We know about the pledge on projects started before the autumn statement, but we have no idea about what will happen after that, as my hon. Friend the Member...
for Aberavon said. Even worse, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said at Question Time last Thursday—I listened very carefully:

“Most EU funds will be guaranteed post-departure by the Treasury, as we said in August.”—[Official Report, 20 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 950.]

“Most” is simply not good enough—the pledge made on 14 June should be honoured. My constituents deserve not only a continuation of EU funding, but the extra funds promised as well. Any failure to deliver will be a gross betrayal.

10.14 am

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): Thank you, Mr Bailey, for the opportunity to say a few words in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for speaking for the heart of industrial south Wales on this important issue. If I can do half the job speaking for rural Wales that he did for that area, I will be doing a good thing, because it was an excellent speech.

Farming is crucial to our economy, directly employing 58,000 people and with an output of produce worth about £1.5 billion. Some 80% of Wales’s land area is farmed, so there is no doubt that farming contributes substantially to the landscape, which is a vital element of our tourism, and—that is key—to producing and selling food tariff-free in the EU. Any possible funding loss to our farmers, therefore, will inevitably have a wider impact on Wales’s economy. A survey taken before the vote on 23 June revealed that two out of five businesses in the countryside depend on farms, and each of those farms contributes £100,000 to the local rural economy.

We note that funding under pillar one of the common agricultural policy will be upheld until 2020 as part of a transitional arrangement, and there was thanks from the farming community for that, but we need further clarification on the situation post-2020. We need clarification on structural and investment fund projects and agri-environmental schemes, and we need more detail on environmental stewardship policies. Despite the red tape and many criticisms over the years, the CAP did and does ensure that family farms survive. Post-Brexit, there is a huge challenge that is fundamental to the whole rural economy, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, working with the Assembly Government, needs to have a holistic rural strategy that combines food, farming and biodiversity. To date, such a strategy has been lacking. We need an early and clear communication, post-Brexit vote, on the subsidy regime and the position of seasonal foreign labour.

The maintenance of a subsidy regime to 2020 was welcomed, but the sector has been encouraged to diversify and invest for its survival. Investment, however, not least in negotiation with banks, requires certainty over cash flows and a baseline on which to continue operations. In that context, a three-year window until 2020 for the farmers whom I represent is completely inadequate. Between 2014 and 2016, net farm incomes in Wales declined by about 25% to some £13,000 a year. There is also the impact on secondary businesses in the rural economy. EU support amounted to £250 million a year, together with an investment programme of some £500 million for 2014 to 2020. Such funding is vital.

The UK Government have been giving conflicting messages. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has implied that funding will continue, but her junior Minister, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), said at the Royal Welsh show this year that the Government cannot guarantee that future agricultural support will be as generous as the current subsidy regime. That is completely unacceptable to the rural community that I represent and would have a dreadful effect on the capacity of family farms to function in the future. The farmers and businesses of rural Wales need clarity and answers from the Government, which so far have been woefully lacking.

10.17 am

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate.

As matters stand, the implications of the UK leaving the EU will be seen in each town, city and village in Wales. Although we can be blasé about EU funding, and it is often not obvious, it has contributed enormously to each of our communities. In my constituency, agricultural funds have had a tremendously positive impact on all the farms. The common agricultural policy provides funds for more than 16,000 farms in Wales, and the European structural fund has also made a considerable contribution to various projects throughout Ogmore. Farmers throughout Wales benefit hugely from such funds, and in the same way, people in other industries have benefited from other such projects and funding, as my hon. Friend said so eloquently.

According to the Welsh Government, EU funding and projects have supported more than 200,000 people to gain qualifications, helped more than 70,000 people into work and created close to 40,000 jobs. The effect on funding for Wales of the UK leaving the EU should not be understated, and unless we plan accordingly, that funding will be sorely missed.

Uncertainty clouds the future of every aspect of EU funding in Wales. As I mentioned, the EU makes a fantastic contribution to our farming industry, but although the CAP pillar one scheme will be upheld until 2020, we do not know any detail of the arrangements with which the UK will replace it. Our farmers are therefore left in the dark and cannot feasibly plan for the future—they have no idea what funding they will receive in only four years’ time.

Those set to benefit from the proposed south Wales metro have also been left in the dark, as that project was almost certainly going to receive EU funding, without which it has become far more ambitious and possibly harder to achieve.

In August, the Chancellor offered what he referred to as a funding guarantee, which in truth is nothing of the sort. According to First Minister Carwyn Jones, the funding that the Chancellor referred to covers only about half of Wales’s regional funding. The Treasury’s guarantee to back EU-funded projects signed before this year’s autumn statement should be applauded, but there remains uncertainty for many other projects. Uncertainty benefits no one, and I hope that the Government will recognise that and clarify their position.
The Welsh Government have worked well to ensure that Wales is on the way up, and I am sure that we all hope things will stay that way.

The future of Wales is in the hands of those who are managing our departure from the EU, and I fear that they do not understand the scale of the EU’s contribution to Wales. If agriculture funding is not replaced pound for pound, farms will close and jobs will be lost. If the Government do not replace the funding that would have come from the European social fund, there will be a skills shortage. I am sure all Members can agree about the success of the Jobs Growth Wales scheme, which is partly funded by the EU and has been led by the Welsh Government for several years. Likewise, if funding from the European maritime and fisheries fund is not replaced, those industries will suffer. The effect of the UK leaving the EU on funding for Wales could spell the end of some of the greatest projects in Wales and Welsh prosperity, and I hope that the Government will work to ensure that that is not the case.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Like the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) and my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), I am a democrat and accept the result of the referendum. Indeed, my constituency and Wales mirror the United Kingdom in that roughly 52% voted to leave and 48% voted to remain. We are talking about the future, and although the Prime Minister has said that she has a mandate from the 52%, we must talk for 100% of the residents of Wales and 100% of our constituents. It is important to put that on the record.

I was shocked, as many people were, that the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, did not have a contingency plan. There was a simple question—leave or remain—and I could not believe that the Government did not cover both those bases, and particularly a leave outcome. We are in a difficult position. The captain—the then Prime Minister—has abandoned ship and left us rudderless and clueless about how to move forward.

I am a strong advocate of the European Union. Indeed, I am a strong advocate of unions—the EU and the Union of Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. I do not like the word “Brexit”, because it excludes Northern Ireland. We must have a better, more positive word about the United Kingdom’s future outside the European Union.

I worked with the Minister on structural fund projects before he came to this place. He knows how important structural funds have been to the development of Ynys Môn and north-west Wales. It is wrong of Conservative Members to say that that was a waste of money. The social cohesion that those funds have brought to my area after decades of under-investment is a testament to the European vision and the vision of the Welsh Government, which worked with the UK Government and the European Union to develop those areas.

My constituency is the gateway to Wales. It contains the major port of Holyhead, which links Wales to the Irish Republic. The Dublin to Holyhead route has been called the new Dover to Calais route, yet because of our exit from the European Union, that link is now uncertain. We need to look at that, because it will impact hundreds of jobs in my constituency. I remember working with the then MEP—it just happens to be Glenys Kinnock, the mother of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who moved the motion—the Welsh Government Minister and the UK Government to get extra resources for that port. They understood the importance of linking Wales and the UK with the rest of Europe.

It is important that we have a vision for the future. Guaranteeing structural funds until 2020, as has already been committed to, is not good enough. We want a clear vision and a clear plan for the future. I want devolved Administrations, the farming unions and rural Wales to be part of that—I want them not on the fringes, but at the centre making decisions. Many of the issues that we are talking about are already devolved. I do not want them to be centralised here in the UK Parliament. I want devolved Administrations to have a direct voice in the future of Wales and the future of the United Kingdom.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who spoke movingly about his constituency and his fears about our impending exit from the European Union.

I take issue with the hon. Member. Member for Gower (Byron Davies), who said that Carwyn Jones did not have a contingency plan. I ask the hon. Gentleman to look at the Treasury’s recent evidence to the Public Accounts Committee, in which it said that it had no contingency plan because the referendum was not a general election and the Government’s official policy was to stay in the European Union. It therefore made no plans. How naïve can it be?

Wales receives more EU funding than any other part of the UK. The Wales Governance Centre estimated in 2016 that Wales received a net £245 million from the European budget in 2014. That equates to £79 per person, yet Wales voted out, with 52.5% opting to leave. Like many others, I am at a loss to understand why the nation voted against the public interest. However, as a democrat, I accept the result. Unlike Members of some other parties in the House, I believe that we cannot continually have referendums until we get the answer we want from the people.

There is no future in debating our past; we should debate where we go from here. Let us begin by trusting the people of Wales. President Abraham Lincoln said: “I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts”.

He went on to say “and beer.” As we know, we like some of that in Wales too. The UK Government here in London and the Welsh Assembly both have a role in ensuring that Wales continues to prosper even after exit from the European Union.

We must demand from the UK Government a new funding settlement for Wales. EU funding is critical to Wales’s development. We have heard from many hon. Members about the projects in their constituencies.
Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I now intend to call the Opposition spokespersons. It would be helpful if you could keep your remarks within 10 minutes to allow adequate time for the Minister to respond and if you could keep your remarks within 10 minutes to call the Opposition spokespersons. It would be helpful that Scotland and Wales have in addition to a democratic strategy for Wales to prosper. Even though we are attempting to do that in Islwyn by encouraging businesses that I meet to come to Wales. It is time for the Welsh Assembly Government and the Government in London to step up to the plate. We need a trade deal. We need a strategy for Wales to prosper. Even though we are disappointed, exiting the EU provides a real opportunity for Wales.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. I now intend to call the Opposition spokespersons. It would be helpful if you could keep your remarks within 10 minutes to allow adequate time for the Minister to respond and Stephen Kinnock to summarise at the end.

10.29 am

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Bailey. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I will be well within 10 minutes. I thank the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) for bringing the debate before us.

As was said by numerous Members, for a number of reasons, Wales stands to lose a huge amount—more than many other areas in the United Kingdom—from the UK’s exit from the EU. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) talked about Wales’s trade surplus. Wales is a trading nation with a massive trading surplus, so it stands to lose out from the massive changes proposed to the way in which trade works.

The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams) talked about the rural community and the common agricultural policy in particular. The Government have given certainty on that up until 2020, but farmers need certainty way longer out than that. They are planning 10 or 20 years ahead and thinking about how their land will be used well into the future. As he mentioned, 80% of Wales’s landmass is used for farming, so it is really important that the Government give certainty. That is a major area in which Wales stands to lose out.

The hon. Member for Aberavon talked about Wales’s industries and its post-industrial areas. One problem that Scotland and Wales have in addition to a democratic deficit—our voices are rarely heard because the UK Government is never made up from a majority of Scots—is that the UK Government often poorly understand some of the industries and things that are most prominent and prevalent in our local communities. The UK Government, made up mostly from the south-east and less from the north of England and from Wales, poorly understand what it is like to live in a post-industrial place. They poorly understand what it is like to live in a heavily industrialised area and how communities rely on those industries. As a result, when the UK Government negotiate with the EU, those areas will be forgotten. Those things are not high enough on the priority list.

We keep hearing about how the City will receive special deals, but what about industry? What about areas in Wales and Scotland that actually need that support and have received, for example, EU structural funding? They are really important. It is vital that the devolved Administrations have a major voice in the exit negotiations so that we can explain to the UK Government how the industries work and how our communities live so that they can ensure that they prioritise them and not just the views of the City of London.

In a huge number of cases, people voted in protest against Tory austerity. It would be shocking if the UK Government used that as an excuse to centralise power in Whitehall, as a Labour colleague said. In the exit negotiations there is a real risk to Wales, Scotland and the north of England that our voice will be too small, too quiet and not heard enough. Leanne Wood, the leader of Plaid Cymru, said:

“The Prime Minister’s commitment to “a country that works for all” will ring hollow if Brexit leaves Wales in a weaker position than before.”

The UK Government need to reflect on that.
nearly 40,000 jobs and helped more than 72,000 people into work and 56,000 people into further learning. As my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) said, 16,000 farmers in Wales get direct subsidies from the common agricultural policy, without which 90% would be in financial difficulty. My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) highlighted the positive impact that that funding has on farmers and the risk posed by leaving the EU.

Wales is set to receive £2.7 billion in structural funds up to 2020. We have heard examples of local regeneration already delivered across Wales. Many communities have been transformed with the support of EU funding, including many in my constituency. We heard my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon outline the iconic Swansea University campus and the Workways+ and BEACON schemes, which have been supported through the EU.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) highlighted the important point of matched funding and what that means in supporting EU funding to go even further in regenerating Wales. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) highlighted the regeneration projects in his area and the lack of reassurance coming from the Government.

Despite that, Wales voted in line with England to leave the European Union, and we respect that decision. However, Wales did not vote to become poorer or to damage its public services. That is why, as we begin the process of leaving the EU, we need to work together to ensure that Wales, its economy and its communities get the best deal.

Albert Owen: Does my hon. Friend understand that many people who voted to leave were under the impression that some £350 million saved from Europe was going to be spent on the health service in the UK? Five percent under Barnett would give Wales about £17 million. Does he think that should be honoured by the Government, or at least debated?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes a correct point. During the referendum campaign lots of lies were told and comments made, and the people of Wales and the rest of the UK voted for a specific set of circumstances. They did not vote to make our services poorer. Indeed, the investment promised by the Brexiteers—as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds)—in the pledge signed on 14 June should be honoured.

Geraint Davies: Further to that, will my hon. Friend accept that the people of Wales and Britain voted in good faith in principle to leave and that that was subject to the exit package set out? There is a strong case for another vote not on the principle of whether to leave but on the exit package and whether it represents the reasonable expectations of voters, because already something like 7% of the people who voted to leave now say they do not want to leave. As this is a once-in-a-lifetime choice, surely they should look at the exit package in a referendum.

Gerald Jones: As I mentioned earlier, it is important that we respect the result, but it is also important that we ensure we get the best deal for Wales and for the UK in the coming negotiations. Despite the many challenges ahead, we must ensure that Wales has a positive voice throughout the negotiations to secure the best possible outcome. It is essential that the UK Government work closely with the Welsh Government and other devolved Administrations to ensure that their negotiating strategy works for the whole of the UK, not just for England.

The Joint Ministerial Committee met yesterday, although clarity was lacking on the current position and on what future discussions will look like. As we begin the process of exiting the EU, Wales has several priorities. We must prioritise the protection of jobs and ensure business confidence in the aftermath of the referendum. Full and unfettered access to the EU single market is crucial for Wales. Welsh businesses currently benefit from our trading relationship with the EU. If we were to leave the single market, and if tariffs were to be imposed on Welsh goods, that could have a crushing impact on our manufacturing and agricultural sectors. We need certainty about funding for current and future EU programmes.

The First Minister of Wales sought an urgent guarantee, immediately following the referendum, that Wales would not lose a single penny of EU funding up to the end of the EU financial perspective, running until 2020. This month the Treasury pledged to extend the guaranteed funding for all projects agreed before the UK leaves the EU. However, it has not given any commitment to replace the funding, further into the future, that we would reasonably have expected to receive if the UK were to remain in the EU. That is vital to our universities and agricultural businesses. Wales currently receives £650 million in EU funding, in particular through the common agricultural policy and structural funding. Campaigners for leave said that Wales would not lose a single penny in European funding, and we will hold them to that promise.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon outlined, the case for revision of the Barnett formula arrangements for Wales is now even stronger, to ensure fair funding for Wales during and after the current EU programmes. The Wales Bill provides an important opportunity to consider future funding arrangements for Wales. I urge the Government to reconsider their opposition to delivering a much needed fiscal framework to Wales as part of the Bill, and perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

It is my view, and the view of my party, that EU citizens working and living in Wales now should be able to remain here after the UK’s exit from the EU. EU citizens should not be used as bargaining chips in the negotiations, and we must stamp out the unacceptable abuse that has, sadly, risen since the referendum result.

Christina Rees: Since the referendum the UK Government have said little more than “Brexit means Brexit,” but Ministers have alluded to a hard Brexit. Will my hon. Friend agree with the Welsh Labour MEP Derek Vaughan who has said that as a result of that stance the EU has withdrawn behind its lines, and we will end up with a hard Brexit?

Gerald Jones: I do indeed agree. As I said in my speech, the people of Wales and the UK voted to leave but not to reduce public services. They certainly did not vote for a hard Brexit. It is important to have the clarity that we need as we go forward. It is essential that we remain outward looking, internationalist and pro-business.
We require that we remain committed to fairness and opportunity for all, and I look forward to some reassurances, perhaps, from the Minister this morning.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on securing the debate, and the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), who I think is appearing in Westminster Hall in his new capacity for the first time. I also congratulate him on being the only Member from the Opposition ranks who has understood the commitment given by the Treasury on EU funding in Wales. A number of Opposition Members have raised questions in relation to its running out at the autumn statement; but that is not the case. A further letter has been delivered to the Welsh Government, highlighting the fact that the Treasury would be willing to underwrite EU programmes in Wales up to the point of exit. That is a crucial and important Government commitment.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I respect what the Minister says about what the Treasury has said; but what about the letter of 14 June that I read? Is it now Government policy simply to ignore that?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman must understand that initially, in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, the Government gave a commitment to support EU funding up to the autumn statement; but a further Treasury commitment has been made since then. Those letters have been delivered to the Welsh Government. Indeed, I assure the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that the First Minister of Wales has given a genuine welcome to the Treasury’s commitment to trying to ensure that there is a commitment to the 2020 programmes in a Welsh context. Opposition Members should be aware that in claiming, in contrast with the Labour spokesman, that there is no commitment up to the exit from the EU, they are doing the people of Wales and their constituents a disservice.

Wayne David: The Chancellor of the Exchequer said that there will be a guarantee, but only for those projects that “meet UK priorities”. That is a qualification, surely.

Guto Bebb: It is a terrible thing for hon. Members to speak from a position of lack of knowledge. The commitment that has been given is very clear. Where a project is considered to be a Welsh Government priority it will be accepted by the Treasury as a priority for the UK Government as well. I recommend that Opposition Members read the comments by the Treasury. Some of them have raised the issue of a south Wales metro, and I recommend that they read the comments about that made by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), to the Select Committee on Welsh Affairs yesterday. It will be well worth their while. The Welsh Government need to get on with that project, because if the scheme is in place in good time the money will be forthcoming from the EU. If it is signed off before our exit from the EU, again, the Treasury will give a commitment. Opposition Members peddle scare stories about the commitments we have given. It is important for them to get their facts right.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is not a scare story. I quoted precisely from the letter of 14 June, not just about guaranteeing EU funding but about additional funding for the NHS and a pledge on VAT, both by 2020. Is that the Government policy now or not?

Guto Bebb: I am unsure which letter of 14 June the hon. Gentleman is referring to. I am referring to the Treasury commitment of October this year. I think that a commitment made this October trumps a letter of 14 June. The hon. Gentleman has also raised a number of issues about promises made in the referendum campaign that imply a lack of understanding of how a referendum campaign works. It is not about electing a Government. In the referendum campaign there were members of the Labour party on either side of the argument, and the same was true of the Government. To claim that promises made by the referendum campaign are binding on the Government is nonsense, and I think that the hon. Gentleman knows it.

Albert Owen: A few years ago the Minister would have been agreeing with us. It is the first time I have ever been accused of scaremongering for quoting the Chancellor of the Exchequer and Finance Ministers. As to the referendum campaign, we are not talking just about individuals making commitments. We are talking about the Foreign Secretary, the Secretary of State for International Trade and the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU. Those are three leading individuals. Will the Minister hold them to account, on behalf of the people of north Wales?

Guto Bebb: Again, I highlight the fact that comments made about the letter of 14 June do not reflect the Treasury’s position as it has developed. [Interruption.] Also, it is important to understand that those individuals from the leave campaign who joined the Government have done so with the intention— [Interruption.]

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Members have had the opportunity to intervene. They must not continue to harass the Minister from a sedentary position when he is trying to respond.

Guto Bebb: I thank you, Mr Bailey. I assure you I was not feeling harassed.

It is important to point out that the individuals from the leave campaign who joined the Government will serve in relation to the Government’s agenda, which, to a large extent, is still based on the manifesto commitment of the last election.

I need to move on to reflect on some of the comments of the hon. Member for Aberavon. He began with an important comment about the way a single-industry town is affected by the fact that that single industry has contracted. He highlighted the changes that have happened over a period of years. However, the debate is about European funding in Wales. That funding has been important, but there is no denying that we have qualified for three rounds of such intervention. I do not believe that there is fault with Brussels in the fact that we still qualify for the highest percentage of support from the European Union, but Opposition Members should reflect on the fact that time after time we have ended up still qualifying for the highest level of intervention.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) stated, when we qualified for the first round of intervention the expectation was that it would be a one-off opportunity, because eastern European countries were joining the European Union whose standard of living was significantly lower than that enjoyed in Wales at that time. However, we have qualified again and again, and it appears that Opposition Members here expect Wales to qualify again in 2020. That is an indication of the failure of the Welsh Government in Cardiff to make the best of the funding available.

I fully accept that some European schemes across Wales have been successful and have made a difference, but no Member can deny that other schemes in Wales have been wasteful and inefficient. The real issue Opposition Members should face is that Welsh GDP per head is continually falling, despite the intervention that has been described by Opposition Members as absolutely crucial to the future of Wales. I believe we need a funding stream in place to support Wales, and I will fight for that as part of the Wales Office, but the crucial point is that to claim the status quo is the way forward is to ignore the realities on the ground in Wales, which were reflected in the referendum. The only two parts of the west Wales and valleys region, which receives the highest level of European intervention, that voted to remain were Gwynedd and Ceredigion. Opposition Members should reflect on that.

Geraint Davies: If the Minister expects GDP per head to go up in Wales, does he accept that the Government should stick by the cast-iron promise from the previous Prime Minister to electrify the railway to Swansea? The Government could make Swansea bay part of the wider electrified European network and give us the tools to export, rather than cutting us off at the knees and laughing as they are now.

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman has used intemperate language throughout the debate. It is important to point out that he argued that nothing is happening in relation to the Swansea city region, but we are expecting the proposals for the Swansea city region deal.

Geraint Davies: Where is the money?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman asks where the money is from a sedentary position. It would be a very irresponsible Government—perhaps like the one down the M4 in Cardiff—who would commit funding to a project without even having the costings. The hon. Gentleman should also be aware that we have a commitment to look carefully at the Swansea tidal lagoon. The Wales Office is working hard to ensure that that project has an opportunity to succeed, but it has to work for both the taxpayers and the people of south Wales.

I will take no lessons from the hon. Gentleman. He claims to be a democrat, but on several occasions in the debate he has called for another referendum. I think what we are seeing is an individual who perhaps did not fight as hard for his beliefs as he should have during the referendum and is now asking for a second chance. On the electrification of the south Wales main line, I will take no lessons from the Labour party, which did nothing to electrify the south Wales mainline, when the Government have just delivered improvements to the Severn tunnel and a new service from Swansea that started yesterday, and we will see fast trains getting to Cardiff and Swansea in due course. I expect the hon. Gentleman to welcome that. [Interruption.] The excitement of Opposition Members indicates to me that they are aware that some truths are being told.

Chris Elmore: I am not getting anywhere near as animated as the Minister suggests. Specifically on electrification, the chair of Network Rail yesterday said there is no money beyond 2019 to fund electrification to Swansea, which affects my constituency and affects the electrification of the valley lines. Will the Minister confirm whether the Swansea electrification will be completed by 2024, as previously committed to by the Welsh Secretary, the Transport Secretary and, I believe, the previous Prime Minister?

Guto Bebb: Electrification improvements on the south Wales main line will continue, and we look forward to delivering the promises that were made. We are looking at ensuring that the fast trains we need in south Wales will be delivered.

Albert Owen: I assure the Minister that none of us in objective 1 structural fund areas wear it as a badge of pride. He and I were on the same side in the 1980s and 1990s fighting for such funds; the then Conservative Government refused even to apply for them, which is why we are now in a dire situation. Will he commit, post-Brexit, to fight for the assisted areas scheme in Wales, to help the areas that need the greatest help?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman makes a constructive point, which I welcome. We are discussing EU funding in Wales post-2020, which will not happen because the people of Wales, along with the people of the rest of the UK, made a decision to leave the European Union.

It is imperative that we highlight the need to continually support Wales, which is clear from the Government’s commitments to Wales that have been highlighted: we are increasing revenue funding to the Welsh Government to £370 million; we have provided a funding floor to the Welsh Government, which has never been provided previously by the Labour party; over £900 million in new capital funding has been made available to Wales; there is a commitment of £500 million for the south Wales metro; we are waiting for proposals on the Swansea city deal; and we are in the process of encouraging a growth deal for north Wales. It is clear that the Government are delivering on our commitment to a regional policy that works for the whole of the UK.

I think the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), who is making signs from a sedentary position that are unworthy of him, if I may say so, should be aware that the failure of EU funds in Wales to help our GDP position was not the fault of the EU funding. There is no denying that the way in which that funding has been utilised on three successive opportunities is a reflection on the Labour Government in Cardiff.

I am glad to say that the relationship between the Wales Office and the Welsh Government is extremely good, and I am glad to say that we have an understanding of the historical failures of EU funding streams. We
are getting a constructive approach from the Welsh Government—unlike their colleagues in Westminster—who want to see a way forward in giving stability in the short term so that people who are committed to European projects know that those funds will be in place until 2020, which is precisely what we are offering.

Beyond 2020, it is important that we develop a strategy for the whole of the UK, which is exactly what we will do, working hand in hand with colleagues in the Welsh Government. Opposition Members should not take to their high horses and claim that they have no responsibility for the situation we face in Wales; they do, and they should acknowledge that. The people who vote for them highlighted their concerns in the referendum, which was a reflection, in my view, on the mismanagement of Wales by the Welsh Government for a very long time.

Kirsty Blackman: I have not been in Westminster Hall for quite a while, but I did not expect that Opposition Members would ask important, constructive questions and that the Minister would stand up and throw out political points. Will he commit to actually replying to the wide range of issues raised by Members on this side of the House and to providing a comprehensive response?

Guto Bebb: To be frank, I am astounded to be accused of making political points by a Member from the Scottish National party; there are always firsts in life. In relation to the crucial question that was asked, which has been misunderstood by Opposition Members and which is the point I want to make sure that people in Wales hear, there is a commitment to EU funding in Wales up until the point that we exit the European Union. That was the misunderstanding that was highlighted in the speech of the hon. Member for Aberavon who secured the debate, and is the point that was misunderstood by many Opposition Members, although it was properly understood by the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. It is important to highlight that.

I will finish on agriculture. Concerns have been expressed about the future of the agricultural sector. As with general EU funding for Wales, there is a commitment to agricultural funding up to the point of exit from the European Union. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr Williams), who represents a rural constituency, will be as aware as any other hon. Member that there are complexities involved in ensuring that we develop a support structure for the agricultural sector moving forward. That work is in hand and information will be provided in due course. The hon. Gentleman will understand that the complexity in the change we are facing is something that will take time to resolve, but I assure him that the Government are committed to ensure that that issue is also reflected in our work.

10.58 am

Stephen Kinnock: I thank all of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members for making powerful and passionate speeches. We have seen how high passions are running on these vital issues, which is because the future of our communities is at stake. We will defend the fact that we need funding and resourcing until our dying day. The Government are teetering on the brink of a gross betrayal of our communities. The Minister made the point that, although we have had all those years of funding from the EU, the west Wales and valleys, for example, still qualifies for it as it is below 75% of EU GDP. That is not something we would ever wish to celebrate, but can we really argue that EU funding has been the cause of that difficulty? Surely to address that issue we need to continue the funding and support?

There are three questions. First, what happens after 2020? Secondly, what about the projects signed after the autumn statement and what is that secret method? Thirdly, what about Welsh applications that are suffering because of the antagonistic behaviour of the UK Government towards the rest of the EU? Those are the three questions that I asked in my opening remarks and that my hon. Friends have continued to ask. Unfortunately, we have not received answers today, but I assure the Minister and his colleagues that we will continue to press for those answers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the effect on funding for Wales of the UK leaving the EU.
Plumbers’ Pensions

11 am

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of plumbers’ pensions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey, for what will be a short but hopefully considered debate about the future of plumbers’ pensions. I want to bring the issue to the attention of the House to ensure that we acknowledge the complicated concerns that plumbers have right across the country. I plead with the Government and everybody involved that we all work together to try to resolve the difficult and technical issues that are having a quite grievous impact on plumbers not just in my constituency but throughout the whole of the United Kingdom.

I first became aware of the difficulties with plumbers’ pensions when I was invited to attend a meeting of Perthshire plumbers by a Conservative councillor colleague who was associated with the trade, so that I could listen to some of the concerns that were starting to emerge from plumbers right across Scotland. I was totally shocked when I heard the scale of the difficulties, the sheer numbers involved and the concerns and anxieties presented to me by plumbers that evening. Theirs are businesses that have been serving communities such as mine, the Minister’s and yours, Mr Bailey, for decades. They are family businesses, run by people we all know and are familiar with, that do a fantastic service on behalf of the people they look after.

Plumbers have been blissfully unaware of the ticking time bomb that has been waiting for them at the end of their careers and working lives, because they have been busy getting on with their work, developing their businesses and ensuring that our pipes are fixed and our washing machines are repaired. Now they find, at the end of their careers, that life savings and family homes are at risk. These people have done absolutely nothing wrong. They have conscientiously contributed to their pension pot and ensured they have done the right thing for all the people they have employed throughout the years.

This is a technical issue, so if Members will bear with me, I will try to explain and define it as simply as I can. It seems that many plumbers are caught up in a living time bomb that has been waiting for them at the end of their working careers. It is a fantastic scheme that plumbers have enjoyed, and it is actually more than fully funded. The last actuarial valuation was carried out in 2014, and the actuary found that the assets were enough to cover 101% of the scheme’s liability. That calculation was assumed on the ongoing basis, which assumes that the scheme would continue to pay out to members.

Probably the most invidious part of the calculation is the inclusion of what is called orphan liabilities—liabilities that cannot be identified from people who have already left the scheme. Those account for something like 60% of the liabilities included in the whole scheme, and a shortfall of £453 million. It is totally unfair and almost absurd that plumbers who have conscientiously paid into the scheme are exposed to such huge liabilities.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Eric Cuthill, who runs Hugh Stirling Ltd in my constituency, has raised concerns about this issue. He has been paying in for his employees for 34 years, meaning that his employer debt liability could run into the tens of thousands. Does my hon. Friend agree that that kind of liability is quite unfair when small businesses such as my constituent’s have done so much to support their employees through occupational schemes?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. These people are not city spivs. They have not malevolently tried to get out of paying their contributions. They are people like my hon. Friend’s constituent, who have conscientiously paid into schemes and never knew they would face a potential issue at the end of their working careers. It is so unfair that they are being exposed to issues such as this. These are the people who fix our central heating, get the washing machine working again, fix our broken pipes and repair the boiler.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is it not strange that last year in the Budget, the Government found £6 billion to make cuts in inheritance tax and capital gains tax? This issue is actually about inheritance. I have a constituent who is unwilling or unable to pass on his business to his son, because of its liabilities. My hon. Friend has touched on a very simple solution, which is a change in the method of valuation of the pension liabilities.

Pete Wishart: I want to come up with a few suggestions for the Government about how they can resolve some of these real and difficult situations. My hon. Friend is right; it is incumbent upon the Government to work
with us. This is not about having a go at the Government. We were all unaware of these unintended consequences. My plea today is that the Government do two things: first, acknowledge that there is a serious difficulty in it; and secondly, work with us and the sector to resolve it.

I want to give a couple of examples that show how invidious the situation is for many of our constituents right across the country. One is a guy called Mike. Mike's business was established in 1985 by his father. He joined the business a few years later as an apprentice plumber. Mike and his dad built a business like so many family plumber businesses that we are familiar with, which provided a professional service to customers and tried to ensure that its employees were looked after. Their business grew, and by 1990 they had a pension scheme for their employees and were paying sick pay and holiday pay through a scheme operated by SNIPEF. Over the years they have had many apprentices, and they currently employ 14 staff. Their employees have all been trained to the highest possible standard.

Over the past 26 years, Mike has paid something approaching £400,000 in employer pension contributions to the scheme. Mike's father is now retired and seriously ill, and Mike cannot bear to share his worries about the business with him, despite the fact that they have worked so closely together over the years. Mike, like so many employers including the plumbers I met in my constituency, has only just been able fully to understand the magnitude and significance of section 75 and cannot believe its implications for responsible employers. Mike's business is unincorporated and he now realises that by triggering the debt he will lose his home, his life savings and other assets that he has spent all his working life securing. In his words, he is faced with continuing to work and accruing a section 75 debt until he dies, because he fears the effect of triggering the debt.

I have loads of example, which I might send to the Minister for his reflection and views, but I will give one more. Kyle's business—another family business—was started by his father in 1982. Until recently he was a 50% shareholder, but in 2015 he bought out his partner for more than £100,000 and, at 52, he now owns 100% of the business. He currently has one plumber in the scheme and has contributed £242,000 to it over the past 37 years. Kyle has a young family and is worried sick about his potential liability. He has made all but one of his employees redundant and is now working for another company. He would like to close his business completely and sell off his business property, but he knows that doing so would trigger a huge debt. His time is now split between running his own company and working as an employee for another.

Kyle has contacted SNIPEF and has been told that his liability is an incredible £1.7 million. He is worried beyond belief, he cannot sleep at night and he feels totally destroyed and depressed. He says he just wants to curl up in a ball and die. Plumbers in our constituencies have done nothing wrong, but they are left in that condition. I have given real-life examples that we must address. I have many other examples, and I will pass them on to the Minister.

I want the Government to do a couple of things. I know the matter is difficult and technical—I have looked at it and understand the Minister's difficulty in resolving it, but resolve it he must. First, let us agree today that the issue is huge and acknowledge that something must be done to resolve it. The Minister could make a start by considering the problem of the debt being triggered by the departure of the last active scheme member working in a business. The Pension and Lifetime Savings Association has said that employers are artificially retaining a single active member so as not to trigger the scheme.

The Government could also look at how the debt is calculated. It is based on an insurance assessment of the scheme's value, which will obviously inflate its value. Surely it could be calculated by technical measures looking at the way the scheme operates and the actual membership. The phantom liabilities, or orphan liabilities, must be dealt with, because they inflate the scheme's value. No one knows where the people to whom those liabilities relate are, and they no longer participate in the scheme, yet the valuation is kept artificially high. To enable us to move forward, there should be exceptions for small and micro non-associated family businesses. The Minister has an army of civil servants available to try to resolve the matter, and a pensions Bill is going to be introduced, which will allow him to look at it. I hope very much that he will do that.

I want to allow my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) a few minutes to speak, as she has been looking at the matter and SNIPEF is based in her constituency, but I have a plea for the Minister. We know that something is going on, and he has acknowledged that—I have seen some of his helpful responses to hon. Members who have raised these concerns. Will he please work with us? These people have done absolutely nothing wrong. They are the cornerstone of our community and provide a service to it. My appeal is that MPs, the Government and the sector work together to resolve some of these issues.

11.14 am

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on securing this extremely important debate. I should say at the outset that both the plumbing employers federation, SNIPEF, and the pension scheme for plumbers are headquartered in my constituency, and that both have made representations to me.

The essence of this debate is the treatment of small companies: the person round the corner who runs a business out of the back of a van and employs one or two people. Carrying the orphan liabilities of the pension scheme is utterly debilitating for such small businesses. It can leave them with unsustainable debts and therefore make their businesses unsustainable too.

As my hon. Friend outlined, orphan liabilities include liabilities incurred by companies that left the scheme before the legislation changed, so current employers who get to the end of their time in the scheme can be picking up the tab for employers who ceased to be scheme members years ago. Those former employers may have retired and have no interest in the industry now, but their business life continues to have an impact on people still working in the industry, and especially on people who are approaching retirement. If the current circumstances continue, those people will face the loss of their savings, their houses and their retirement. Having spent their working life in hard physical labour, they now face spending their retirement in penury. That
simply cannot be right, especially when the cause of it is their desire to do right by their employees by ensuring a decent retirement for them.

I will be interested to hear what the Minister says on another point that we should have regard to: the effect on younger plumbers who may be sole traders at the moment, but who are thinking about taking on another member of staff. If they are discouraged from providing a workplace pension by seeing what it has done to previous generations of plumbing employers, will that not run counter to the current efforts to have everyone signed up to a pension? We must find a way to amend the section 75 regulations—my hon. Friend gave a couple of good examples of how that might be possible—and give employers a break. Certainly the pension scheme must be sure that it can meet its liabilities, but that must not be at the cost of people’s savings and investments being destroyed through no fault of their own.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I thank and commend the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for securing this debate. I am delighted that I can pronounce his constituency name without assistance. I also thank other hon. Members for their contributions.

This is a serious matter and not one the Government take lightly. I am quite new to this job, but it seems to me that the real lobbying from constituents through their Members of Parliament to the Government is an example of how things should work instead of teams of lobbyists coming to formal meetings. I commend hon. Members who are representing their constituents. They are not facing a heartless Government who treat the matter as a minor detail. The examples the hon. Gentleman gave of Mike and Kyle are typical and I would be pleased if he would send me details because I have seen similar examples and the question is how we deal with them.

I have listened carefully to what has been said about this worrying situation faced by small employers. As the hon. Gentleman said, they are fantastic people who have been going about their business for many years. The Government have received and listened to representations asserting that there is a simple solution. There is not. The issue is complex and, unfortunately because of the way government works, we cannot react quickly because the unintended consequences that have happened can lead to others. I hope hon. Members will not think this is just Government waffle.

Before I came into the Government I thought things were much simpler than they are and that is part of our democratic system, but it does not mean that we treat them lightly. I am well aware of the difficulties facing small employers in these schemes when managing their own pension commitments in the current economic climate and their responsibility for other people in the scheme.

Alan Brown: I appreciate what the Minister is saying about the matter being complicated for technical reasons and that the Government are sympathetic, but we need to know about the timescale. Some of these plumbers have already triggered section 75, so there is debt coming at them at a rate of knots. Timescales and assurances are required.

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman has made a very reasonable point, which I hope to come to. By the way, my door is open to hon. Members and, if they feel it necessary, their constituents or representatives. This is not something that we are avoiding. I had better make progress now if the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun will excuse me.

We have been talking to a lot of stakeholders about aspects of the operation of employer debt for some time. I have read the files. The hon. Gentleman asked for urgency, and he is right, but the matter is in hand. Last year, there was a call for evidence, which is an official mechanism for seeking views, on the operation of the current regime, the effectiveness of the current easements and the impacts of proposed changes. My officials are reviewing the responses that we received and exploring what further flexibility we could introduce to help employers to manage precisely the kind of debt that has been referred to, but as many respondents to the call for evidence highlighted, there is no easy or quick solution. Quite a few different ones have been mentioned.

My original thought was, as I said, that the issue was much simpler and that a change to the system of valuation could deal with it—the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire made a point about that in his opening speech. However, all of this has consequences. The reason why these laws were in existence in the first place was to protect the very people who otherwise could have found themselves retiring with no pension because of all the surrounding circumstances, but we are not saying that this is something that will just go on for years and years; we hope to do a formal consultation very soon.

I should like to state again on the record that the current employer debt legislation is there for a very good reason: to protect members of occupational pension schemes and ensure that, when they retire, they receive the pension that they have been promised. We cannot let that aim disappear. We have to find a way to ensure that the injustices mentioned by hon. Members contributing to the debate are dealt with, but at the same time we must not do anything to threaten the pensions of the other people.

The Government have made a significant number of changes to the legislation in response to representations made by employers. A number of mechanisms are in place whereby only part of the debt, or no debt at all, may be payable. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire may be aware that there are currently eight such mechanisms in legislation, which reflects the wide variety of circumstances that can arise with diverse scheme structures and the equally diverse range of employer types. For example, the existing scheme and flexible apportionment arrangements permit an employer debt attributable to the departing employer to be shared among the remaining employers or taken over by them, so reducing the debt to nil or a nominal amount. Those can be useful provisions in cases in which an employer ceases to employ members or undertakes corporate restructuring.

For small employers, which we are talking about today, that are participating in a large non-associated multi-employer scheme such as the plumbers scheme, a
period-of-grace arrangement provides for the situation in which an employer temporarily ceases to employ active members but intends to do so again in the future. The regulations provide for a period of grace of up to 36 months when no debt triggers, giving time for new employees to be recruited.

The high proportion of orphan members has been mentioned. The scheme would like the liabilities that relate to such members, whose employers no longer participate in the scheme, to be passed elsewhere rather than be shared among remaining employers. The requirement to meet a share of orphan liabilities is common to all schemes and an important part of member protection. Although it would be very difficult to make a special case for a particular scheme, we are looking more widely at the challenges faced by defined-benefit schemes and want to encourage a wide debate about the challenges facing those schemes and what the solutions might be, including that one. We are well aware that some parts of the pension sector are stressed, but the situation is very mixed and the problems are far from universal. We are trying to build a better understanding of those, using the call for evidence and all the meetings with stakeholders, to form an opinion on what the Government intervention should be.

Alan Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way again. The topics that he is covering involve wider pension issues. Does that not underline yet again the fact that there should be an independent pensions regulator to help to address these matters?

Richard Harrington: That is a whole different argument, as the hon. Gentleman knows. I would be very happy if we could have another debate on that and I am happy to check with him informally about it because it is something that has been proposed, particularly by his party. Respectfully, however, as far as this issue is concerned, that is irrelevant. I am not saying that the argument has merits or does not, but as far as this issue is concerned, we do not have a standing commission. The Government are here to try to deal with the issue and it is our intention to do so. We will produce a Green Paper very soon. We have said that that will be in the winter, which will certainly be before the leaves reappear, even in Scotland. We will do it as quickly as we possibly can.

Pete Wishart: The Minister is very reassuring today, and I am grateful for the very generous responses given to the concerns. I get the sense that we are trying to resolve this, and the Green Paper is a great opportunity to do that. May I just make this plea to the Minister and seek clarity from him? Will there be retrospection to ensure that any plumber or anyone who is caught up in this situation before the change is enacted is not left out and left high and dry with the huge debts that may have accrued?

Richard Harrington: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman that undertaking, precisely because it is exactly the sort of thing that we will be discussing in the Green Paper, but I would like to state that there is not a plan to ensure that these people do not get what is very logical and right. I am very conscious of the fact that we are not dealing with some offshore hedge fund, but with people who did not really want to be in the pensions business and did not want the liability—they just wanted themselves or their employees to have an ordinary pension. There is a difference, and it is right that Members of Parliament represent their constituents in this way, although I will just say that as far as the pensions industry is concerned, some of the bodies, such as the Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association and others, are also very knowledgeable on these subjects.

My door is open. We want to get this right. I ask the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire and his colleagues, who have made such passionate and decent contributions, to be a little more patient, but I would be very happy to be summoned back here or to the Floor of the House if they feel progress is too slow.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
The whole House will be grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and he has rightly pointed out the all-party support that there is. Given the enormous amount of money—millions of pounds—spent by the Government in resisting resettlement initiatives, does he agree that the only serious issues now are conservation and resettlement, where there does not seem to be a major problem, the Americans, where there does not seem to be a major problem, and economic existence? If some of the money spent on resisting their claims had been spent on resettlement, we would have had the pilot resettlement and would know much further we can go.

Andrew Rosindell: My hon. Friend makes a superb point. He is completely right: had previous Governments addressed that long ago we would not be in this very unfortunate position today. It only takes common sense to realise that this could have been resolved a long time ago, and that the money spent has been a huge waste. The appalling record that we have left in not dealing with this when it should have been dealt with has left many of us feeling very sad. That is why we hope that, today, we will get some indication of whether the Government will now resolve the matter once and for all.

Hope for a resolution came in November 2000 following the High Court judgment and the decision of the then Foreign Secretary, the late Robin Cook, who restored the right to return to the outer islands. That remained the case until that right was withdrawn in June 2004 by Order in Council—thus overturning the High Court and bypassing Parliament. Then, nearly four years ago, as Foreign Secretary, William Hague announced a review of the policy, the results of which are still awaited. The Government now state that they intend to make a decision on resettlement before the Christmas recess this year, so today I will focus on why the decision should be in favour of resettlement and on the consequences of not doing so.

The expulsion of the Chagossian people from their homeland remains a blot on the UK’s human rights record, and a breach of international human rights law and, many would argue, of Magna Carta itself, the very basis of our cherished liberties. As long as this situation prevails, I believe the United Kingdom remains guilty of double standards. How can Her Majesty’s Government argue that the people of the British overseas territories of Gibraltar or the Falkland Islands should have the right to remain living peacefully in their homelands and their right of self-determination, and be prepared to use the British armed forces to defend their rights, yet at the same time refuse to accept that the exact same principle applies to the Chagossian people of the British Indian Ocean Territory who, despite their forced removal from their island home, have remained loyal subjects of the Crown throughout and cherish the fact that they are British subjects?

If the UK refuses to allow the Chagossians the right of return to live in their homeland if they choose, will the Minister explain how this fits with Britain’s desire to be re-elected to the United Nations Human Rights Council next year? A decision to grant the right of return would surely demonstrate that, under the leadership
of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the United Kingdom is now taking its human rights responsibilities very seriously indeed.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am sorry, Mr Betts, that I was a few seconds late. I ask my hon. Friend whether the right to return should also imply a right to a job. I really am concerned that when the Chagossians get home, there will not be a decent economy for them to function in, apart, perhaps, from working for Americans. We should try to build up some kind of support society, as it were.

Andrew Rosindell: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. We are talking about a community that has not lived there for more than 50 years, and just giving the right of return on its own is not good enough. We will need to ensure that there are adequate facilities for the people to live in an appropriate way and to work. There are many options, including working for the Americans on the base on Diego Garcia and possibly working in conservation in the marine protected area—I will come to those matters later. He is absolutely right: we cannot just say, “Go home if you wish”, but do nothing to support the community. It was our British Government who forcibly removed them in the first place, so if they go back, we have a duty to ensure that they have adequate resources to have a sustainable community.

This is surely an appropriate time for our new Prime Minister to end this shameful episode once and for all, and to make a right decision after so many years of procrastination by her predecessors. The recent report by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination urged the UK to “hold full and meaningful consultations with the Chagossians...to facilitate their return to their islands and to provide them with an effective remedy, including compensation.”

To argue, as sadly Her Majesty’s Government seem to, that the convention does not apply because the British Indian Ocean Territory has no population when the UK expelled those people in the first place must rank as the height of cynicism. The UN Human Rights Committee, which monitors observance of the UN human rights covenants, has on two occasions urged Her Majesty’s Government to rectify the situation and report on the measures they have taken to comply with the international covenant on civil and political rights. The committee’s last report said:

“The State party should ensure that the Chagos Islanders can exercise their right to return to their territory and should indicate what measures have been taken in this regard. It should consider compensation for the denial of this right over an extended period. It should also include the Territory in its next periodic report.”

In June, the UK Supreme Court concluded that, in the light of the 2014 KPMG feasibility study that found no obstacle to settlement, maintaining the ban on a Chagossian return may no longer be lawful. The judgment noted that if the Government failed to restore the rights of abode, it would be open to Chagossians to mount a new challenge by way of judicial review on the grounds of irrationality, unreasonable or disproportional. After 17 years of litigation, is it not high time that our Government agrees to resettlement. It is the unanimous view of the all-party parliamentary group that the extension should be conditional on both parties agreeing to support and facilitate resettlement. If the UK does not make the extension conditional, there is a danger of losing important leverage with the United States. A decision in favour of resettlement might then be postponed for many years to come. We simply cannot allow that to happen.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I am sorry for being a couple of minutes late to the debate. After the debate last year, I received a letter from one of my constituents who had watched, having previously known nothing about the situation. He said to me, “What is behind this? After all these years, what would make Her Majesty’s Government decide not to allow resettlement?” Can the hon. Gentleman tell us, from his long experience, what is behind the fact that the Government might not agree to what seems to be an absolutely just case for allowing the Chagossians to go back home?

Andrew Rosindell: As always, the hon. Lady makes an excellent point and gets to the heart of the issue. I only wish that I could give her an answer. Perhaps the Minister can. I certainly know that it is not down to the United States of America because, as a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, I have raised the matter every time I have been to Washington. When I ask why it is not possible for the Chagossian people to go back and why Washington blocks it, the Americans say, “We’re not blocking anything.”

I find it astonishing that the situation has gone on for 50 years—half a century—and that no one has got to the bottom of it. Of course there are financial implications. Any responsible Government cannot just agree to something without working out how things will be funded, but we have a moral responsibility. This has gone on for so long and it has been handled totally differently from all our other overseas territories, where self-determination has been paramount.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I hope to catch Mr Betts’ eye later and make a contribution, but I have visited the islands with the Americans. They were very clear when we were on the island and in subsequent discussions with me when I was a Minister and with the Government more generally that they unequivocally oppose resettlement. I am not sure exactly who my hon. Friend has spoken to but, as far as I am concerned, the Americans have always opposed resettlement.

Andrew Rosindell: As my hon. Friend, a former Minister, for his helpful intervention, but that is not what I have discovered when I have directly confronted the Americans. I would love to know which particular American said that they oppose resettlement because when I speak to senior level Americans in Washington, they are baffled and do not really understand.

The Leader of the Opposition has raised the matter with President Obama, and I understand that even he had no understanding of what objections there could possibly be. It is completely contrary to the attitude
when Americans have air bases elsewhere, where the local community work on the bases. There is no sense and there is no moral justification.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We might as well have the full list of the former Ministers with responsibility for the matter. It may be that President Obama is not very well sighted on the precise situation of the Chagossians, but it is certainly true that every single American official that I had formal dealings with in relation to the British Indian Ocean Territory was absolutely clear that they wholeheartedly opposed any resettlement. That should not be the defining point for a British Government, but it is an important factor to bear in mind.

Andrew Rosindell: We will move on from this point because, even if it is correct—I do not believe it is—this line has been carried forward by every generation without anyone questioning its original purpose. The duty of Her Majesty’s Government is to defend the rights and freedoms of Her Majesty’s subjects. These people are Chagossians. They are British. They are of equal status to the people of the Falkland Islands or Gibraltar, and there is no way on this planet that we can justify treating them in an inferior way. Sadly, that is what successive Governments have done but, in this very year, we have a chance to rectify it. In my view, it has been clear for many years that there is no fundamental objection from the United States to resettlement, even if it is of the outer islands, rather than Diego Garcia.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend has come to an important point. I hope he will forgive me for not being able to stay for the rest of the debate. When I was a Minister, I put forward a good suggestion, and the officials said, “That’s against ministerial policy.” I asked the Secretary of State, “Is it against your policy?”, and he said, “No, it’s not against mine.” That is an example of the historical negative: one cannot do something in a new way because it has not been done that way before.

The Americans ought to be big enough to say which island they want protected and what will happen with all the rest. We are not talking about something as small as the Isle of Wight, close to the mainland. We are talking about the Indian Ocean Territory. There are plenty of opportunities. Any sensible American could say, “Yes, there’s no problem. Let’s argue about some margin, but there is no particular problem, and there is no particular reason for total exclusion.”

Andrew Rosindell: My hon. Friend is correct. We must fully accept the need to secure the base and its operations, but I believe that a resettlement, even on Diego Garcia, can be made compatible with that requirement, as is the case with other US bases around the world. Indeed, the US may find that a neighbouring community of Chagossians could provide a convenient source of workers and security personnel when they are trained for work on the base.

The all-party parliamentary group had expected the Government to make a decision on resettlement following the KPMG report in February last year. We were not convinced of the need for yet another consultation with Chagossians, this time on likely costs and the demand for resettlement. Although it is impossible to remove all uncertainty, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office consultation showed 98%—or 525 Chagossians—in favour of resettlement. In reality, fewer will take up that offer, but there will certainly be enough to make resettlement viable. Of course, all Chagossians rightly want the restoration of their basic right to visit their homeland at any time of their choosing.

Our all-party group believes that a pilot resettlement for 50 to 100 people on Diego Garcia is the best starting point, but we should consider the outer islands if the Americans have genuine security concerns. That would cost more and would not please some conservationists, although many think that conservation and resettlement can be compatible and are necessary for an effective marine protected area. Chagossians could fill a much-needed conservation protection role. Travel would then be via the Maldives. The APPG would not support any alternative options to resettlement unless they were the collective wish of the Chagossian groups in Mauritius, the Seychelles and here in the United Kingdom. We see the restoration of the right of return and abode, which was denied by Orders in Council in June 2004, as a basic requirement.

As the United States was complicit in the removal of the Chagossians from their homeland, it is perfectly reasonable to expect the US to contribute in kind and money to the resettlement. Also, we would expect the Department for International Development, which already finds it hard to spend its budget, to contribute as the British overseas territories are, I believe, supposed to have a first call on the aid budget. With further support from non-governmental organisations and private sector funding, the costs of resettlement need not be much of a burden on the UK taxpayer.

The Times published a letter from the APPG on 7 November 2015, which said:

“Discussions with the US, for the renewal next year of the 1966 agreement on the use of the Territory, provide a unique opportunity to resolve the future of the Chagossians and of the Chagos Islands. Fifty years on Britain should dispose of this albatross and rectify the injustices and human rights violations of the past.”

The continuing damage to the UK’s reputation for promoting human rights far outweighs the costs, liabilities and risks of trying out resettlement. There would be all-party support for resettlement, not least from the leader of the Labour party, who is now the honorary president of our APPG. There would be negative international repercussions if we did not restore the rights of return and abode to the Chagossian people. There would be damage to the UK’s reputation in Africa and wider afield, playing to those who accuse us of ongoing colonialism, with a knock-on effect for the Falkland Islands and Gibraltar and for the ongoing actions in the United Nations General Assembly, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the African Union and the Commonwealth.

Hopes having been raised more than four years ago, the Chagossian and Mauritian reactions will, inevitably, be greater than ever before. The national and international campaign is certain to continue, with ever more negative publicity for the United Kingdom Government. As a Government-supporting MP, that is something that I do not wish to see. It cannot be in the UK’s interests for that situation to continue for a further 20 years. Allowing
resettlement will be welcomed by the United Nations, by Parliament, by the media and, I believe, by the vast majority of the British people.

There could be no better time than now to make this decision. As the all-party group said in its letter to The Times on 4 July 2016:

"It is time for a political decision which restores the rights of the Chagossians to return to Chagos and to put this shameful episode behind us."

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. The Minister asked at the beginning of the debate whether it would be appropriate for him to take off his jacket. In view of the temperature in the room, which seems to be trying to replicate the temperature of the area we are talking about, it is fine if anyone wants to follow suit and remove their jacket.

2.54 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Chagos islands, on securing this timely debate.

As the hon. Gentleman said, we have had 50 years of denial, cover-up, obstruction and plotting against the rights of the Chagos islanders. This is truly shameful episode that reflects a lot of what is wrong with UK foreign policy—it is truly a hangover of colonial thinking. Imagine if Vladimir Putin and his officials were discussing moving on some “Man Fridays” or “Tarzans” to clear room for a military base, and imagine if they then forcibly evicted those people, allowing them to take only a suitcase, before dumping them at docklands or holding them intermediate in police cells. We would be incandescent with rage, and we would say it is typical of such an authoritarian leader, yet that is what has happened in the UK’s name within the lifetime of many of us in this room.

Worse, as part of that operation, these people were used as bargaining chips for the Polaris nuclear missiles. Imagine the detachment and the uncaring attitude that saw the islanders cleared for a US naval base and an £11 million discount on the Polaris system. That trading of people’s homes, livelihoods and heritage has an equivalent value of £200 million today, which would more than pay for the return of the Chagos islanders.

Even since the true picture emerged after initial denials and cover-ups, the UK Government have spent approximately £3 million defending the indefensible in court. That sum was revealed to me yesterday in a written answer, and I am sure it will be a quantifiable lawyer cost that excludes civil servant and ministerial costs over a 17-year period. Will the Minister confirm that the true costs are greater than the £2.6 million mentioned in the written answer?

The costs become more pertinent when we consider that the Supreme Court judgment in June concluded that, in light of the KPMG study, maintaining the ban on Chagossians returning may no longer be lawful. It is also interesting that the Supreme Court castigated the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, noting that its conduct in withholding important documents has been “highly regrettable”. That sums up the denials and cover-ups over this 50-year period.

There have been plenty of other wrongs, too. One was the creation of the marine protected area, which has been deemed to breach international law and has been confirmed by Wikileaks to be a ruse to prevent people from returning to the islands.

Chris Bryant: As the Minister who introduced the marine protected area, I should respond to that specific point, which has been raised several times in the press. When my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) asked in the House of Commons whether the marine protected area was being advanced merely to prevent people from returning to the Chagos islands, I made it absolutely clear that that was not the case and that these were two completely separate matters. For that matter, the then Member for Crawley pointed out that the Chagossians in Crawley, who had been asked whether they were in favour of the zone, supported it by 90%. These two matters are completely separate.

Alan Brown: I thank the ex-Minister for his intervention. It is clearly difficult for me to argue against him on one level, but a view has been taken that the zone breaches international law, so I stand by the spirit of my comments.

The Immigration Act 2016 denies British citizenship to Chagos islanders’ descendants, which creates an absurd position whereby the UK is refusing to cede sovereignty over the islands yet is denying British citizenship to descendants. That is a complete contradiction.

Another wrong that I would like the Minister to address is that Diego Garcia has reputedly been used for rendition flights. Will the UK ever give us the true picture on that? As the hon. Member for Romford said, another ongoing deception appears to be that the original clearance and the subsequent non-return is a security matter, yet we know that yachts continue to visit the Chagos islands, and people live near US bases all over the world. A base in itself should not be a barrier to return, especially in the outer islands. I have listened to interventions from two ex-Ministers, who said that the Americans oppose return. It is therefore incumbent on the Minister to make the true position clear. How much consultation have the Government really had on the return of Chagos islanders? Is that factored into the potential renewal of the agreement, which is due at the end of this year? What is the true American attitude?

I believe that the exorbitant costs quoted in the KPMG report are also being used as a potential barrier to return to the islands. We must remember that, again, the UK benefited from an initial cash discount worth £200 million in today’s money and that, as the hon. Member for Romford said, the international development fund can easily accommodate those costs. I also remind the Minister that if the Government released some of the military spending that is double-counted as international aid, it could be put to much better use to support the return of the Chagos islanders. There is also the clear moral argument that the islanders should have the right to return, and that 98% of Chagossians surveyed want to return. I remind the Minister that time is running out for some of the original inhabitants who were cleared off 50 years ago.
This issue has been debated in both Houses for more than 50 years. As has been pointed out, members from all parties in the UK Parliament have joined the all-party group, which shows the will of the House of Commons. I also note that the Scottish National party passed a conference resolution calling for right of return for the Chagos islanders. Once again, I plead with the Government, after 50 years, to do the right thing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Three hon. Members want to speak. We have until half-past 4, so that gives Members no more than eight minutes each.

3.1 pm

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. As a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Chagos islands, I thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this important debate.

About three decades ago, I remember reading a book that outlined, chapter by chapter, all the remaining British overseas territories, many and varied as they were. When I came to the chapter on the Chagos islands, I could barely believe what I was reading. As recently as the late 1960s, through Orders in Council, the then Wilson Administration forcibly evicted the people of the Chagos islands from their homeland, and they were dispersed, mainly to Mauritius, but also to the Seychelles and other parts of the world. It was a story that I would have expected to have read from 150 or 200 years ago, a colonial account, but it was just within my lifetime.

Little did I think that 20 years later, I would be personally involved in the situation. I was leader of West Sussex County Council, an area that contained Gatwick airport, the main route from Port Louis in Mauritius, when many Chagossians who had been exiled to that country started arriving at Gatwick, and we needed to house them and support those British citizens coming to the UK mainland. Since then, I have had the privilege of representing, in my constituency of Crawley, the largest Chagos islander community in the UK, and possibly one of the largest populations anywhere in the world. There are many more Chagos islanders in Crawley than there are, sadly, on the Chagos islands themselves; I do not think that any indigenous islanders are permitted on the islands.

Over the years, we have heard excuse after excuse for why Chagos islanders cannot have right of return to the British Indian Ocean Territory. We have heard arguments that the US objects on military grounds to the islanders’ presence, yet there are US air bases in this country and around the world where civilians live in close proximity, and indeed, as we have heard, work there. Why should it be any different for the British Indian Ocean Territory?

Sir Henry Bellingham: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of any examples from his constituency of Chagossians who have applied for jobs on Diego Garcia, or any opportunities that the Americans have publicised and made available? Is there any appetite among the Chagossians in his constituency and elsewhere to secure some of those jobs?

Henry Smith: I thank the former Minister for overseas territories for the attention that he has always given the issue. I can answer the last part first by saying that yes, the Chagos islanders would very much like to live and work in their homeland, but I am not aware of any employment opportunities being offered by the US authorities or the British authorities, who are also present on the island.

Other excuses have been used over the years, including environmental reasons such as sea level rise. There is some evidence to suggest that due to the uniqueness of the ocean topography there, in a rare exception, sea levels are falling slightly around the Chagos islands. During the devastating Indian ocean tsunami on Boxing day more than 10 years ago, the Chagos islands were not affected by the tsunami risk. Then, as we rehearsed a few moments ago, there are the arguments involving the marine protected area, but it does not extend right up to the shore—there is a limit, three miles out, I believe—and subsistence fishing is allowed, so it is not really a reason either.

Chris Bryant: I still want to nail down this particular issue. I have never thought that the marine protection zone played any role in whether people could or could not be resettled in the Chagos islands. The overwhelming view that I heard from Chagossians was that they wanted the marine protection zone to be put in place, for the protection of their own future livelihood.

Henry Smith: I think that the marine protection zone is a distraction, and another reason why there should not be a bar to resettlement.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Romford mentioned in his opening remarks, we are now coming up to a break clause in what is essentially an agreement between the United Kingdom and the United States about the future use of Diego Garcia, which occupies a strategic location. It was strategic during the cold war and the various Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, and given the ongoing turmoil in the middle east, it remains so. It is in Washington’s interest to continue to have an air base there. We have only until the end of the year, just over two months, to sort out the issue, which is why this debate is so important. We are in a strong position to set conditions for the United States. If it wants to renew its military presence on Diego Garcia for a further 20 years, the US should help us facilitate a right of return for the Chagos islanders.

Bob Stewart: How many people are we talking about when we talk about those who wish to return to the Chagos archipelago? How many people are there already—I think it is about 3,000 maximum, and they are transitory—and how many people from there want to go back?

Henry Smith: I am grateful for the interest that my hon. Friend is showing in this debate. I have yet to meet a Chagos islander or somebody of Chagos descent who does not want the right of return. I think hundreds of people, or possibly a few thousand, want to return. However, the important thing is the principle of being
allowed to return. As for the makeup of the current population on Diego Garcia, it is of course US and British military personnel, as well as a lot of Filipinos who work on the base in a service capacity.

Andrew Rosindell: Perhaps my hon. Friend can enlighten me because I am puzzled by this. The former Minister said the Americans absolutely object to Chagossians going there, but Filipinos go there. How can that be right? I do not understand what the problem is. As it is their homeland, the Chagossians are surely the right people to help on the airbase. This puzzles me.

Henry Smith: I am as perplexed as my hon. Friend. It is one of those appalling ironies that appear time and again when we debate this sorry matter in British history. I am a patriotic person, but on this issue the British Governments of many persuasions over many decades should be ashamed.

I do congratulate the Government on convening an independent commission on the right of return, which has concluded that return is possible. Mention has been made of the international aid budget. The costs of return have been estimated at well below £100 million, which is a small fraction of the overseas aid budget. As my hon. Friend the Member for Romford says, the British overseas territories have first call on that budget.

In conclusion, there is no reason why Chagos islanders should not have the right of return. We cannot turn back time and we cannot undo the past and a half decades, but we can put things right now. Time is running out with regard to the leverage that we have with the United States and their lease renewal, so I therefore implore the British Government to do the honourable, decent, British thing and allow these British citizens to return to the British Indian Ocean Territory.

Several hon. Members rose—

3.12 pm

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Will hon. Members who wish to speak please stand? There are people now standing who had not stood before. If each Member takes six minutes, we will get everybody in.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I had the privilege of travelling to the islands last November during a two-year stint as a Minister for various parts of the world, including the overseas territories. My views are personal and not those of Her Majesty’s Government, but they are based on two years of looking into the matter. I certainly read every word of the KPMG report and every piece of consultation that came across my desk very fully, and I have spoken to all the key people involved.

We cannot undo an historic wrong, but we can mitigate it. In all candour I must say to hon. Members that I do not believe it is right to repopulate the islands as part of that mitigation, but there are things we can do. I want to explain why. I visited Diego Garcia, the military base that formed a part of the main island, and I visited the part of the island that does not have a military base and the outer islands. During my five-day visit I slept in a bed for 15 minutes; the rest of the time I spent travelling. The time that I got to actually do any visiting was quite small.

I mention this because it was a very expensive trip to get there. This is the line of route that everyone will have to take, as will every block of cement, every video recorder or TV, or—in many cases—the foodstuffs we will have to take. I travelled via Singapore and Bahrain on a military flight. I then travelled on a rough fishing vessel for nearly 20 hours to get to the outer islands, where I got on to a military RIB that was able to conduct assaults on islands. We were unable to get on to the island and we had to jump into the water to wade to the outer islands that had coconut palms right up to the beach and there was foliage hanging off the beach area into the water. I am not saying one could not populate the islands, but the concept that the outer islands are an idyllic possibility is for the birds. They were difficult, overgrown, humid areas that were accessible only where the Marines had gone in and chopped down foliage.

I asked to look at a memorial that was put there and I asked whether we could cut through to the cemetery, which was a depressing place with lots of small graves of children and babies. When the outer islands were depopulated, they were very difficult places to live. Had it not been for the British Government depopulating those islands, I am not sure how viable they would have been within five years, given the only revenue stream was coconut oil, which was already declining. It was difficult to support life even at that time.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) rose—

James Duddridge: I will try to give way in a second if I can.

On the main island, the military element of the island is not just a runway. There is space for tens of thousands of troops to be potentially deployed on hard standing. In the conservation area going up into the old town, the houses are falling apart. There is no real infrastructure there at all. I met British and American military there. During the whole of my trip I was with Americans and Brits. I am unequivocal as to the American position on a political and diplomatic level.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The former Minister is painting a wonderful picture for someone like me who would love to undertake such a journey. When he was a minister, a consultation was undertaken with members of the Chagossian community. The then Minister said on 12 April:

“I recognise that Chagossians have urged us to announce a decision soon, and we very much hope to do so.”—[Official Report, 12 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 171.]

Can he give us his recollection of that time and when he thought a decision would be made by the Foreign Office?

James Duddridge: I think the hon. Gentleman is citing a debate in this room. It was certainly not my intention that things would be left quite so far. We have had a change of Prime Minister and the focus has been elsewhere, but at that time we were waiting for the full consultation to complete. I also met other hon. Members, so I extended the consultation. There is a broader process; it is not simply one Minister making a decision.

The islands have a great use for prepositioned ships. I went on board one of the five prepositioned ships. They have five or six storeys—like multi-storey car parks—with
the smallest vehicles being almost the width of this room. Two Afghanistan and Iraq style wars could be conducted for a month using those ships. They are absolutely essential to American, British and global security. Many other nations use that area.

I also met the Filipinos who worked there. They lived in not great accommodation, in what I would describe as a prefabricated hut with rooms on either side and a shared bathroom in the middle. Those cost contractors about £1 million to put in place for accommodation for two, because of the costs of getting all the equipment on to the island. I do not think we can underestimate the costs.

I also visited a hospital that was used by the Americans, the Brits and the Filipinos. Provision was basic, so anyone giving birth or experiencing complications needed to be flown off the island, and it was very difficult to move around the island.

Andrew Rosindell: Is the former Minister suggesting that we go round the world and perhaps depopulate lots of other British overseas territories, such as Pitcairn, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha? Shall we just depopulate? Is that the right thing to do?

James Duddridge: Certainly, if Tristan da Cunha or Pitcairn were unpopulated, I think it would be wrong to repopulate those islands. If the Americans were not on the island I am not sure it would be the right thing to repopulate Diego Garcia. We cannot provide the level of services that people demand. In the United Kingdom we are already providing benefit to people in Diego Garcia as members of the British public. After I stopped being a Minister, I visited Mauritius, where I saw the community—[Interruption.]

I apologise for taking longer than I might have over my speech and for not taking more interventions. I am happy to attend the all-party group—and, indeed, to join the group, if I would be accepted as a dissenting member—and to discuss my visit and experiences with parliamentarians in a bit more detail.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. Members now have only four minutes for speeches, because we must start the winding-up speeches at half-past.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will make my comments very quick, but perhaps by saying less rather than speaking quickly.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on making, as always, a cohesive speech to set the scene. The issue is full of uncertainty. The three issues of resettlement, the marine protected area and sovereignty are weighty, and much thought needs to go into them. That is why it has taken so long to come to firm conclusions and why I join the all-party group in asking for the right decision to be made.

We all know the history of the islands and the reason why the British Government took the steps they did to secure defence for us and our allies. What was done was necessary at the time. The human aspect is that more than 1,000 islanders had to move from their home. My heart goes out to the people who had to settle elsewhere.

We cannot ignore that, but we need to think about it in the context of that time in our history, when defence was at a premium. We are not at the same point, internationally, as we were. Perhaps we no longer need the use of the islands, but that decision cannot be taken without regard to the pressures put on us by the UN tribunal judgment. We cannot ignore it. Clearly, decisions were made by Britain as a colonial power and we still have the right to make those decisions.

I know that we do not have—indeed, we may not even want—the reputation of a colonial power, but we do have responsibilities that must be addressed, such as the legacy of colonial nations. Despite the legal steps that Mauritius has taken recently, it should be hoped that we can work together to determine what is best for all involved. We are the closest of allies with another former colony, although after Brexit I do not know if that is still the case, considering President Obama’s “back of the queue” remarks. It is to be hoped that relations with Mauritius can be rebuilt. I am certainly of the belief that those who were resettled must have the option to return home, and must be aided in doing so, should it be decided that the issues have progressed enough for our security in the area to be solid without having the territory.

We asked the islanders to leave, and we must be of a mind to help them to go back if that is what is needed. However, we should not bear the responsibility alone. Our American allies were instrumental in the decision-making process in the 1960s and they should now facilitate the resettlement of islanders as a matter of urgency. The American military base in Diego Garcia plays a large part in considerations, and there are certainly responsibilities on the part of the Americans. Will the Minister explain what discussions have taken place with our allies to see what role they will play in resettlement in the near future?

The marine protected area was legally established—that has been a big issue in the debate—and is a further decision for the Government. I would again urge caution. The fact is that we had the right to take the steps that were taken. Now is the time to reconsider what is needed and how we can help facilitate the return of those who want it. However, the issue is not one for emotions alone. It requires in-depth thought, and consideration of our global defence and security strategy. We cannot ignore the human aspect, but we must understand that there is a larger picture to be considered.

3.24 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I will be quick, Mr Betts. Let us be quite clear. Diego Garcia is the largest US base outside continental America. Its strategic position is vital for the western world. It is clear that it has got to stay, because, in these troubled times, we should not give up such a positioning. Diego Garcia has a huge air base. It also has facilities for military ships and, clearly, it is a forward mounting base for a large number of troops—allied troops, not just Americans—if necessary.

We all understand the importance of the base’s strategic position in the middle of the Indian ocean. We understand
why it was built there. We also probably understand why Chagossians were evicted between 1967 and 1973. I understand it, but it is wrong. It was wrong then and it is wrong now. A solution is required to this problem and compromise is necessary. The British Government—our Government—say they want to try to get people back. That is great, but it is clear that the base is going to have to stay there. It must stay there. It is too good a strategic military facility for us to give it up lightly. Well, I do not think we are going to give it up. It is not ours. It is America’s, but actually we own the territory—or do we? Actually the Chagossians own it. I am very much in favour of getting Chagossians back to their homeland.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) has suggested a way for that to happen. If there are about 3,000 Filipinos working there, and about 3,000 Chagossians want to return, how about slowly changing the mix, so that Chagossians can go back and have a job there if they wish? It is mad that Chagossians cannot work there but Filipinos can.

The argument about resettlement is incredibly important. We have had a report and heard many speeches. I personally feel that there is a powerful case. I take on board entirely some of the obvious practical objections and difficulties. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), who was my successor as Minister with responsibility for Africa and the overseas territories, went to the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos islands—I was removed from office before I had the chance to do so, unfortunately. The House appreciated his words of wisdom this afternoon. There are many practical difficulties, but with the help of DFID and with a great deal of imagination and innovation, the arguments are quite strong.

We need to separate that issue from jobs on the base. We need to be clear about the fact that the distances involved are huge. Diego Garcia is many miles from the outer islands. We are talking, therefore, on the one hand, about possible resettlement not on Diego Garcia as such but in the old villages and towns on the outer islands, and on the other about jobs on the base. We need to draw a distinction. There are a lot of jobs, provided mainly by the United States Air Force and the American military, but also by the smaller UK team there. It is a great pity that the old town is in a dreadful state, and that American corporate social responsibility has not put money into building up the old town and repairing some of the buildings and putting some of the Filipinos and other workers into them rather than Nissen huts or containers.

The logic behind my questioning of my hon. Friend the Member for Romford and my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) about what effort the Americans are making to employ more Chagossians in Diego Garcia is that there are many jobs available. I would like there to be some sort of outreach programme in Mauritius and the Seychelles, and in Crawley, to find out what the demand would be. That could be an important next step—it is absolutely doable and achievable now—and a key part in the negotiations about renewal of the agreement. There is a great opportunity to do that but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Romford pointed out, time is running out. The Foreign Office really needs to put a great deal of effort into seeing whether some form of scheme can be put in place immediately. I hope the Minister takes that on board.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I will be very brief. I just wanted to comment on the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I do not think there is any question of the base being given up in our lifetimes because it is obviously of key strategic importance. We should follow the advice of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), whose speech introducing the debate revealed great wisdom and huge experience on everything to do with the overseas territories. We need to draw a distinction between the different arguments.

The argument about resettlement is incredibly important. We have had a report and heard many speeches. I personally feel that there is a powerful case. I take on board entirely some of the obvious practical objections and difficulties. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge), who was my successor as Minister with responsibility for Africa and the overseas territories, went to the British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos islands—I was removed from office before I had the chance to do so, unfortunately. The House appreciated his words of wisdom this afternoon. There are many practical difficulties, but with the help of DFID and with a great deal of imagination and innovation, the arguments are quite strong.

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3.30 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and to speak on this matter in Westminster Hall for the second time. The first was exactly a year ago, in the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan), who sends his apologies that he cannot be here today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing the debate, on giving us a comprehensive introduction to the current situation and on replacing the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—I am sure some Labour Back Benchers wish that that was as easy in all circumstances as he appears to have found it.

This has been a comprehensive debate. To leave plenty of time for the Minister to respond, I will dwell briefly on just a few points: resettlement of the Chagos islanders as a human rights issue; the weakness of the various arguments that we have heard against resettlement; and a couple of broader questions about the sovereignty of the islands and their use as a US base.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) said, the Scottish National party clearly stands for the principle of self-determination. It is great to hear so many Conservative Members standing up for that principle today, and I hope they will want to endorse it again if the Scottish Parliament considers another referendum Bill. We have stood in solidarity with the Chagossians for a long time; indeed, in 2004 my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) said in this Chamber:

"The more we discover about the matter, the more disgraceful, underhand and thoroughly disreputable the long-term treatment of those few thousand people is shown to have been."—[Official Report, 7 July 2004; Vol. 423, c. 277WH.]

That disgraceful treatment continues to this day, at the cost of the United Kingdom’s reputation as a defender of fundamental human rights. We remain guilty of double standards and hypocrisy; as was said earlier, if the eviction took place today, it would be considered a breach of fundamental human rights under international law.

In 2009, the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), who was then a shadow Foreign Office Minister, said in this Chamber:

"There is no doubt that there is a moral imperative.”

He mentioned

"what I suspect is the all-party view that the rights of the Chagossian people should be recognised, and that there should at
the very least be a timetable for the return of those people at least to the outer islands”—[Official Report, 23 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 176WH.]

That was the Conservative position in 2009; it would be interesting to hear whether it still is, now that the Conservative party is in actually a position to do something about it.

We have heard a number of objections about the feasibility of resettlement, not least from the former Minister, the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). I say to him with the greatest respect that there may well be logistical challenges to resettling people on the islands, but—as the hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) said—this is about their right to return almost as much as it is about whether they do return. As for logistics, there is a US naval base, which I presume has electricity and running water, on the island. If it is possible for the United States Government to build such a sophisticated base of operations in such a remote location, surely it is possible for people to choose to make their own lives on the island in the way that their ancestors did for generations.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for the fact that I could not be here for the start of the debate. Hon. Members will recall my position on the matter as the shadow Foreign Office Minister in the last debate: I am a strong supporter of righting this historical injustice. With respect to logistics, we have been able to move ahead with building an airport in St Helena, and we have done many other things in the overseas territories that have cost an awful lot and have been logistically difficult.

Patrick Grady: Absolutely. I do not think any of this is beyond the wit of man. The point has been made several times that if the Government diverted some of the money they spend on litigating the issue towards helping the people they forcibly removed to resettle in their own homes in their ancestral territory, the infrastructure issues could be overcome.

I am excited to hear what the Minister has to say about the US position, given the differing views we have heard on what that might be, but perhaps we should flip our perspective. Perhaps we should think about not whether resettlement is a barrier to US activity, but whether US activity has to get in the way of resettlement. Those things ought to be able to co-exist, although perhaps there are questions about the US use of the area as well. The former Assistant Secretary of Defence under Ronald Reagan, Lawrence Korb, has said that there is “no good...reason” to oppose the Chagossians’ return. As my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun said, yachtists seem to visit the island pretty frequently, so there does not seem to be much of a security concern there.

Nor should conservation and the right to return be mutually exclusive. I imagine that people who want to live on remote islands want to live in harmony with nature, ensure that their lifestyles are as sustainable as possible and respect the sustainability of the environment, even if the marine protected area is on questionable legal ground—or in questionable waters.

There are general questions about the sovereignty of the islands. It is not just a question of the right to return. We are in a critical phase, with the roll-over of the 1966 agreement about to take place. I would be interested to hear whether the Minister believes that part 2 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 applies. That Act places treaty ratification into statute and requires parliamentary scrutiny of it. We may be faced with the roll-over of a treaty, but surely the particular circumstances of the 20-year extension mean that it should be subject to the affirmative procedure in Parliament, and surely the Government have nothing to hide or to be concerned about. If the Minister cannot answer that question today, I hope he will do so in the not-too-distant future. In any event, not only Parliament but the Government of Mauritius must be included in any future dialogue.

Finally, there are issues relating to the use of the naval base, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun alluded to. It is important that we get assurances that the British Indian Ocean Territory has not been used for the illegal rendition or torture of detainees during the so-called war on terror. If it has, people should be brought to justice. We call on the Government to recognise that Diego Garcia is part of the internationally recognised African nuclear weapon-free zone and to give assurances that no nuclear weapons or other weapons of mass destruction have ever been placed there. They must also give assurances that military installations on Diego Garcia have not been used to store cluster bombs, in violation of their treaty obligations under the convention on cluster munitions.

The SNP stands fully behind the right of the Chagos islanders to return home. As recently as 16 September, we heard that the Government want to keep the matter under review, but we need an answer at long last. As several hon. Members have noted, it is not clear what makes the Chagossian situation so unique. Why are the Government so insistent on standing in the way of the right of return? Is it cost, is it security, or do they simply not want to admit that successive Governments have got it wrong? Britannia has not ruled the waves for some considerable time; the sooner the UK Government realise that, the better.

3.37 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this important debate and on the work of his all-party group, which has relentlessly promoted the issue in Parliament.

The Chagos islands attract cross-party consensus on the right thing to do. Today is the day to break through the institutional inertia, the sense of paralysis and the 17 years of expensive litigation that has amounted to millions of pounds of public funds wasted. This could all have been sorted if it had been looked at from the beginning as a fundamental human rights issue.

Many Members have made excellent contributions today. The hon. Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) described the appalling irony that Filipinos who work on the base in Diego Garcia are permitted to live there, but indigenous islanders cannot—a very important point. Mr Bryant, the Member for Rhondda, observed that
while the US position should definitely be taken into consideration, it should not be the defining principle for this Parliament. Mr Duddridge described—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. It is not appropriate to address hon. Members by name; please refer to them by constituency.

Catherine West: Thank you for that timely reminder, Chair—Mr Betts. [Laughter.]

The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) described vividly his journey to the British Indian Ocean Territory islands. He also described some of the difficulties of any resettlement package, which are of course understandable after 50 years. However, there remains a question simply of justice. It is some 51 years since the creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory and 49 years since the expulsions began—that must be one of the longest exiles in world history.

Nearly four years ago, on 20 December 2012, the then Foreign Secretary Lord Hague announced a review of policy, and in 2013 he commissioned the much mentioned KPMG study into the feasibility of a return for the islanders. That study was concluded in 2014 and published in February 2015. It found no insuperable obstacles to resettlement. In a further consultation with the Chagossians, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office found that 98% of the 825 who responded were in favour of resettlement.

With the extension of the 1966 UK-US agreement on the use of the British Indian Ocean Territory due by 30 December this year, now is the ideal time to allow Chagossians who want to do so to return to their homeland and rebuild their lives. In any case, all Chagossians want to be able to visit their islands at will. The all-party group believes that the extension should be conditional on both parties agreeing to support and facilitate resettlement, and that that should be reflected in a new side agreement.

It has been clear for some time from various discussions, including those between my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and President Obama last autumn, that although there are concerns that need to be addressed, the US has no strong objections to resettlement; otherwise, I am sure they would have come up at that meeting. We need to look carefully at the conservation issues, but we know that there are several miles around the islands in which fishing can be undertaken as a subsistence occupation.

The cost of resettlement could be reduced by simple infrastructure and the supply of goods and services from elsewhere in the region, such as Mauritius. We should look to the US, the European development fund and the DFID budget for that—after all, the Secretary of State for International Development said this morning that they are looking for some new projects to fund. I am sure that there are British companies that would be interested in infrastructure projects on the islands. Resettlement need not be much of a burden on the taxpayer, particularly compared with how much has so far been spent on expensive legal fees.

The continuing damage to the UK’s reputation for the promotion of human rights far outweighs the cost, liabilities and risks of trying out a resettlement. The UK’s reputation is tarnished by the ongoing violation of fundamental human rights. It is clear that this is not a one-party issue; it is cross-party, and we agree about it. As the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, it was wrong then and it is wrong now.

In June, the Supreme Court concluded that in the light of the KPMG study, maintaining the ban on the Chagossians’ return may no longer be lawful. The court noted that if the Government failed to restore the right of abode, it would be open to Chagossians to mount a new challenge by way of judicial review on grounds of irrationality, unreasonableness and disproportionality. The court castigated the FCO, noting that, in withholding important documents, its conduct had been “highly regrettable”. Surely, after all these years of expensive litigation, costing several million pounds, this should be the day on which we proclaim that we will do the right thing. If we do not rectify the situation, it will be for ever on our consciences. I note the presence of several former Ministers; I think that is because this issue must be resolved.

In 23 April 2009 the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), then a shadow Foreign Office Minister, said in this Chamber on behalf of the Conservatives something that the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) quoted earlier. It is worth repeating:

“There is no doubt that there is a moral imperative...I suspect...the all-party view” is “that the rights of the Chagossian people should be recognised, and that there should at the very least be a timetable for the return of those people at least to the outer islands...The Foreign Office should recognise that the House of Commons feels very strongly on that.”—[Official Report, 23 April 2009; Vol. 491, c. 176WH] More than seven years later, can we now expect the Government to fulfil that commitment?

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): If the Minister could leave a couple of minutes at the end for the mover of the motion to wind up the debate, that would be appreciated.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure and an honour to respond to this very important debate, in which Members have eloquently summed up the wrongs and challenges facing the Chagossians, as well as the length of time it has taken for us to work towards a solution. Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), I am conscious that there are present many previous Ministers who covered the portfolio. At one point I thought I could just stand back and allow them to answer all the questions, such as their detailed knowledge, which I shall draw on as I develop my points.

I begin as others have by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) not only on securing the debate and raising the issues, but on his work throughout the Commonwealth. He gives a sterling effort in ensuring that the voices from the British overseas territories are heard and that these matters are debated. The whole House pays tribute to him for that. I also congratulate him on his election to chair of the all-party group, which is important in promoting these debates and in ensuring that these matters are considered.

The continuing damage to the UK’s reputation for the promotion of human rights far outweighs the cost, liabilities and risks of trying out a resettlement. The UK’s reputation is tarnished by the ongoing violation...
I apologise on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas. Normally he would respond to the debate, but is currently travelling. We have been keeping notes on all the questions that were raised, and I will ensure that they are in his in-tray when he returns from his overseas visit.

I shall be up-front straightaway and, like successive Governments before this one, make it clear that we need to express our sincere regret about the manner in which the Chagossians were removed from the British Indian Ocean Territory in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We can all agree that what happened was wrong. That has been summed up by many of the voices we have heard during the debate, but most powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), who made the case very clearly indeed. What happened in the ’60s and ’70s was unforgivable.

We are aware of the Chagossian community’s strong attachment to the islands and their long-stated wish to resettle. It is the job of the Government to examine the issue dispassionately. We must consider the interests of the Chagossian community as well as the wider UK interests, including our security and the interest of UK taxpayers, and we must be honest and realistic about the lifestyle that a resettled population might expect. That is why, as we have heard, in 2012 the Government launched a review of the resettlement policy to understand the demand, viability and cost. We have taken great care over that work, commissioning an independent feasibility study, consulting widely, including with our US allies, and visiting and listening to all those with expertise and interests.

I must be clear that, as has already been articulated, establishing a small and remote community on the territory would not be straightforward. The independent feasibility study published in 2015 found that resettlement could be viable, but also highlighted significant practical challenges, including the difficulty of establishing modern public services, healthcare, education and economic opportunities, particularly job prospects. The challenge that we face, even if we want to pursue this ambition, was best and vividly described by the former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge)—he described the challenges we face on some of the outer islands that might be considered for resettlement. It would be a very difficult task indeed.

When the House last debated this issue almost a year ago, a 12-week public consultation had just concluded. The results of that consultation were published in January 2016. It found that, although resettlement was a key issue for the 832 Chagossians who responded, there were more nuanced views about the resettlement scenarios. Only a quarter of those who were in favour of resettlement were also content with the realistic scenarios of how it might work in practice. Our consultations highlighted that further work was needed to refine those policy options—what actually works in practice? That work is under way and when it is complete, the final policy decision will be taken and announced to Parliament and the public. As yet, there is no fixed date for that announcement, but I assure hon. Members that we expect it to be before the end of this year.

Mr Ellwood: As I touched on, the work is on some of the economic opportunities that exist, lifestyles and the ability to provide the necessary support. We need further work to ensure that the proposal is viable. I think that it was mentioned in one of the earlier contributions that it is simply not enough just to find a solution to return those who want to go back; there needs to be a viable and sustainable community. The options need to be examined in more detail.

Dr Offord: I am very grateful to the Minister for setting out a time frame—he said he hoped to make an announcement by the end of the year. He will correct me if I am wrong, but did I understand that he just said that a quarter of the respondents to the consultation said that they did not want to go back? I ask because the House of Commons Library is under the impression that 89% of the 895 Chagossian respondents supported resettlement.

Mr Ellwood: If I may, I will get a more detailed report on the analysis that came back from the consultation and write to my hon. Friend so that he is fully appraised of the response to the consultation. However, the bottom line is that the details about how a resettlement would work in practice need to be pursued. We hope to make sure that that happens, but I will articulate to the Minister responsible that we want an answer and a report back to Parliament within the year.

Many hon. Members have stressed the strategic importance of the military location. Anybody with a military background is soon made aware of the significance of Diego Garcia and its role internationally for our allies, for NATO, for the United States and for Britain. The joint UK and US military facility on Diego Garcia contributes significantly towards global security—I cannot stress it any more than that. It is central to our operations, and to those of the United States and our international partners, to counter threats in the region, including terrorism and piracy. The continuing operation of the base is a key factor that we must take into account in our considerations.

One hon. Member asked about dual accounting in official development assistance and defence spending. I will make it very clear that there are occasions when military activity comes under the Ministry of Defence budget and qualifies for ODA activity. I complained about that when I visited Afghanistan and found that Britain was doing work in military training, mine clearance and so on, which is “ODA-able” but we were not charging for it. We were doing things that did not go towards that figure. It is very important to put into context that this is not a competition as such. Those who make the ODA rules—it is not us—recognise that certain minimal activities to do with stabilisation, reconstruction and peacekeeping can be paid for by military personnel. There are not many activities, but there are some.

Bob Stewart: On that very point, would it be possible to use the Royal Air Force’s Voyager aircraft—the big ones—to take Chagossians back for a visit, and then bring them out again?
Mr Ellwood: That is another point I will pass on to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and the Americas to consider when he gets back.

The British Indian Ocean Territory marine protected area in the north, which the UK declared in 2010, is highly valued by scientists from many countries. They consider it to be a global reference site for marine conservation in an ocean that is heavily overfished. We are aware that some concerns have been raised about the motives for the creation of the MPA, but those concerns are unfounded and I was pleased that previous Ministers were able to clarify exactly how the MPA came about.

The UN convention on the law of the sea arbitral tribunal found no evidence of improper purpose in the creation of the MPA. This issue has been scrutinised by UK courts, which have consistently found, including as recently as May 2014, that there is no substance whatever to the allegations of improper use. The arbitral tribunal found that we should have consulted Mauritius about the establishment of the MPA, so as to give due regard to its rights, and we have started a series of bilateral meetings to implement the tribunal award. The most recent of those meetings took place in August.

I reassure the House that the Government are very aware of the views and concerns of the Chagossian people, and of all those who support them. Those views have been fully and passionately represented by hon. Members today. We want to make the right decision, based on all relevant factors, including what we have heard during the course of our consultations with Chagossians living here in the UK, and with Chagossians in Mauritius and the Seychelles. We have to balance the Chagossians’ views against the practical difficulties that our feasibility study has highlighted, the very real concerns about costs, and our need to operate a military facility that is vital to our security.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Romford for securing this important debate, and all hon. Members for their contributions. The Minister for the Commonwealth and the United Nations, Baroness Anelay of St Johns, is looking forward to meeting the all-party group in due course.

3.56 pm

Andrew Rosindell: I thank hon. Members from all political parties who have contributed to this important debate today. However, we still do not know what will happen. We are still waiting anxiously to find out what Her Majesty’s Government’s decision will be. It is not only those of us here in Westminster Hall today who are waiting but the people of the Chagos islands, whose spirit has been broken these last 50 years.

We in this House have a duty, first and foremost, to stand up for the interests of the British people, and the Chagossians are British. They are as entitled to their human rights, their dignity and their right of self-determination just as much as we are in this Chamber and just as much as our constituents are. We defend our overseas territories and their rights to remain British and to self-determination, and yet we single out one of them and say, “Your rights are not at the same level as the others.” There is no moral justification for that.

I say to the Minister that my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) made it clear when he was shadow Foreign Minister that this issue had to be addressed when we were in government. Why after six years have we failed to do so?

I do not buy for one moment the idea that the islands cannot be inhabited. That is propaganda. Other remote islands around the world—the Maldives are not that far away from the Chagos islands—are fantastic tourist destinations. If they can be inhabited and used, whether for marine conservation or as a military base—we defend the importance of the military base on Diego Garcia—there is absolutely no reason why we cannot come up with a plan to put right this situation, which has gone on for far too long.

I know the Minister is a defender of the rights of British subjects to self-determination in the rest of the overseas territories. I ask him please to take this back to the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister. Please say to them that this is the last chance—the very last chance—that we are going to get, prior to the potential renewal of the agreement between the US and the UK, finally to resolve this injustice and to give the Chagossian people the same rights that we would always defend for our own constituents.

The British way is to stand up for human rights and self-determination, and to give people the right to determine their own destiny. As my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith) said, let us do the British thing and give the people of the Chagos islands the right to continue to be British in their own homeland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Government policy on the British Indian Ocean Territory and Chagos islands.
Child Sexual Exploitation: Telford

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House considered child sexual exploitation in Telford.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Hollobone. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Minister on her appointment. I know that she will be a great champion of the vulnerable.

Child sexual exploitation is a sensitive and difficult subject, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak for the victims in my constituency. Telford has the highest recorded rate of child sex offences in the country, a rate that has continued to increase. House of Commons Library documentation shows that child sex offences in Telford are now at a rate of 18.4 per 10,000 heads of population. That rate is greater than in higher-profile places such as Rotherham, Rochdale and Middlesbrough, and compares with a national average of 7.9 cases per 10,000 heads of population. We know that the crime has gone on in Telford for more than 20 years and is still going on. I raise the matter today so that we can better understand the causes and break the silence that surrounds the issue, giving victims the chance to be heard. We need to find out what went wrong and what could have been done to prevent the exploitation, and ensure that we learn the lessons of the past.

In recent weeks, I have met with bright, articulate, young women who have come to tell me about their experiences, in some cases stretching back over many years. What has come across powerfully for me is that victims want to be reassured that they will not be brushed aside. They want recognition, and they want acceptance that something went wrong. We all want to have confidence in the authorities in Telford, which are tasked with the difficult responsibility of protecting our young people, and that is why I have asked for an independent review. We need to be sure that we have put mistakes right and that the culture has changed. It is not about blame, but about acknowledgement that victims were failed. Pretending otherwise intensifies the sense some victims and their families have that what happened to them was somehow their fault.

There needs to be a much better understanding of social and cultural attitudes towards women, because it was, in part, the attitudes to the victims that led to the crime being unidentified or unaddressed for so long. We must move away from victim blaming and shaming and recognise that these were children who were victims of a crime. We must change our perception of the victims. Too often, assumptions were made that the young girls were failures. Pretending otherwise intensifies the sense some victims and their families have that what happened to them was somehow their fault.

There needs to be a much better understanding of social and cultural attitudes towards women, because it was, in part, the attitudes to the victims that led to the crime being unidentified or unaddressed for so long. We must move away from victim blaming and shaming and recognise that these were children who were victims of a crime. We must change our perception of the victims. Too often, assumptions were made that the young girls were failures. Pretending otherwise intensifies the sense some victims and their families have that what happened to them was somehow their fault.

In Telford we have seen the recent phenomenon of shaming videos, in which derogatory terms are used to describe young girls. The girls are “outed” for allegedly promiscuous behaviour. That attitude to women and girls promotes a culture in which it ultimately ends up being acceptable to trade women like commodities and then blame the women themselves. There has been an emphasis on educating girls and their families about the risks of grooming, but it is equally important that our boys are educated so they do not think it is normal to treat young girls in that way.

One particularly poignant aspect of child sexual exploitation is that the young victims often believe themselves to be in relationships with the men who groom them. I have had victims tell of their conflicting emotions of loyalty and attachment to men who befriended them and gained their trust but then went on to trade them for sex with other men and trap them in fear of being exposed or shamed, or of their friends and families finding out. It is essential, therefore, to do more to encourage victims and their families to come forward, and to ensure that they are properly supported and helped to overcome their experience. Too many of them fear being stigmatised and blamed, and for that reason keep quiet. In many cases, young women who are now adults are only just starting to make sense of what happened to them when they were as young as 12, and they may have parents, partners and children who know nothing about it. Shaming leads to a culture of silence around the issue, and we should therefore speak out so that victims feel more confident about telling their own stories themselves.

We have to be honest: this is a crime in which 95% of perpetrators are men and most victims are young girls. We do no one any favours to ignore that fact or to avoid the conclusion that historical child sexual exploitation, like many sex crimes, is a consequence of social and cultural attitudes towards women and negative gender stereotyping.

I commend the Government’s commitment to dealing with child sexual abuse. Their setting up of the independent inquiry led by Professor Jay is a testament to that commitment. Authorities in Telford have said that no independent review of what happened there is necessary, because the overarching national investigation into child sexual abuse will look at that. The Jay inquiry is tasked with investigating child sexual abuse in institutions, and in cases where abuse was reported but no action was taken, but for victims in Telford the abuse happened in taxis, in the streets, in betting shops, in takeaways and in cars, in the streets, in betting shops, in takeaways and in taxis, and we know that many of the victims not only did not report it but to this day remain afraid to tell anyone what happened. I have looked at the terms of the truth project, which is how the Jay inquiry will take evidence, and they clearly set out three different scenarios in which evidence will be taken from young people. They all relate to institutional settings or to institutions failing to act on reports of abuse.

On the face of it, it therefore appears that the Jay inquiry does not cover child exploitation, and I should be very grateful if the Minister could clarify that, either in her response today or after the debate. Can a victim of grooming and child sexual exploitation in Telford come forward and tell their story to the Jay inquiry, and have their experience inform the inquiry and its findings? Even if the Jay inquiry is to cover child sexual exploitation in Telford, we do not expect the report to be finalised until 2020, given the many competing strands and aspects of investigation. How likely is it that we will get to understand fully the causes of what happened in Telford if we can rely only on the Jay investigation?
A Select Committee on Communities and Local Government report on lessons learned from Rotherham, produced in the 2014-15 parliamentary session, stated:

“We would be seriously concerned if other local authorities...were to hold off...investigations”

pending the outcome of the Jay inquiry. It also noted that “the stimulus for action” in getting the Rotherham inquiry to take place was the press and not any council processes or external inspections. It is important to challenge the authorities so to avoid any complaints creeping in, and we should all, as Members of Parliament, challenge attitudes towards the powerless and the voiceless.

I know that good work is going on in Telford and that progress is being made. However, even if we accept that everything is as it should be—and that very well might be the case—there still needs to be recognition that this happened. There are those who would rather we did not talk about the issue. I understand that it is difficult, but we should not shy away from it just because it is difficult. If we brush it off and say, “It’s all okay now”, that is not much comfort to victims.

I invite those who would rather we did not speak about the issue to think about how that makes victims feel. I urge them to realise what a sensitive, complex issue it is. Not talking about it does not make it go away; it diminishes the experiences of victims. It is almost to dismiss the experience as though it never happened. When people in authority say, “Well, it’s all okay now”, it feels like no one is listening. We do not want any young woman feeling that there is no point in saying anything because nothing will be done or that she will be blamed, shamed or in some way made to feel culpable. In any event, there is a natural reluctance to go to social workers or the police, and we should do all we can to give the victims the confidence to come forward.

I want to say to those girls in Telford who have not yet spoken out that they are not to blame. This was a crime. It was something that happened to them that should never have happened. It takes huge courage for them to see their MP and talk about it, and I pay tribute to all the bright and articulate young women who have told me their stories.

I also want to touch on the distress caused to parents. There is a sense of self-blame, with parents asking, “Did I fail my child? I do not know how to make it better. How could I not have known this was happening?” Support for families is a vital part of the healing.

I pay tribute to the street pastors in Telford for their fantastic work. I have been out with them at night and seen the work they do with young people leaving clubs, sometimes the worse for wear. People in Telford feel a huge sense of trust and warmth towards them, and they must be congratulated for being such an important part of our community.

In conclusion, there needs to be more work on challenging cultural and social attitudes towards women and girls, or this crime will keep on happening. We need to recognise the social and cultural prejudice—albeit unconscious—that exists. Much can be done to focus on the perpetrators: the men who buy and sell young girls for sex. We should also be mindful of those who turn a blind eye or who see these girls through a negative gender stereotype. It is not the victims who are to blame.

I take this opportunity to thank the Home Secretary for a very full and thorough response to my recent correspondence on the issue. I am most grateful to her for taking these concerns so seriously and for making the issue a priority. I am pleased to learn that she is sending her officials to Telford to discuss the issue with the authorities. I know that the authorities in Telford are committed to getting it right. I know they want to build the confidence of the people they are there to protect and the public. An independent review will find out why this crime happened and will give reassurance to victims that they will be heard and will not be ignored, and it will ensure that all is being done to stop it happening in the future. I have been a councillor, and I know how difficult it is for even the best councils to find fault with themselves and to cast a critical eye. It is easy to drift into complacency or close down challenge by seeing complainants as a nuisance or those who speak out as somehow vexatious. Respectful challenge is to be encouraged and is part of a healthy transparent process that enables victims to come forward and get the help and support they need.

Finally, I pay a special tribute to one young woman who motivated me to ask for the review and this debate, and who is here today. She has been incredibly courageous and has fought hard to make things better for others. She has been willing to challenge the system, question authority and put forward solutions to ensure that this crime is tackled. She has already made a huge difference to the debate on this issue, and I thank her for that. She can be assured that as her MP, I will continue to speak for her and for others who have suffered, to ensure that their voices are always heard.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this vital debate, which is of huge importance to her constituents. She has shown herself to be a doughty champion of them. I am grateful to her constituent for being so brave. It could not have been easy for her to speak her MP, even though my hon. Friend is so lovely and so nice. Her constituent would be absolutely right to be proud of that. She had the courage to speak to a Member of Parliament and share intimate, personal and difficult issues in her life. She was so brave, and she motivated my hon. Friend to take up this cause. Whoever she is, I pay great tribute to her for doing that. I can absolutely assure her that her voice has been heard today, and I have no doubt that her Member of Parliament will continue to champion such causes to make things much better for everyone in Telford.

Rightly, we all understand that child sexual abuse and exploitation is a despicable crime, and we must do everything in our power to prevent it from happening. I am clear that where abuse has occurred, it must be thoroughly and properly investigated and those responsible brought to justice. Anyone who has suffered child sexual abuse, however long ago, should feel confident to report what has happened to them to the police in the knowledge that they will be supported and their abusers will be brought to justice. Abuse should be reported to the local police force, but if victims feel more comfortable telling someone they trust who can then support them to make the disclosure to the police when they are ready, that is also welcomed.
As a result of a lot of training, police attitudes have improved. My hon. Friend may have constituents who were frightened to go to the police, but they should have the confidence to go to the police now. Wherever and however long ago the incidents happened, they will be listened to carefully. I am sure they will find it is a different experience today than it perhaps was in the past. The police will gather evidence so that they can press charges and secure a conviction through the Crown Prosecution Service. If there are any remaining concerns that allegations are not being investigated thoroughly, that can be escalated, first through a complaint to the local force. Any complaint against the local police force on allegations of child sexual exploitation is automatically referred to the Independent Police Complaints Commission. There is a more rapid and serious escalation of those concerns.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, the Government are undertaking an ambitious programme of work to tackle child sexual abuse nationally, as we clearly set out in the “Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation” report. That report includes a lot of the issues that she raised, including education and challenging stereotypes about women, as well as looking at working with perpetrators and the attitudes of young people. We have urgently tackled the culture of denial within professions about the scale and nature of this crime, and we have strengthened local accountability. More victims and survivors of abuse are now being identified and are getting the protection and support they need.

The issues that my hon. Friend raised relating to historical failings in Telford are of great concern to me and to the Secretary of State. That is why we asked officials, ahead of this debate and their visit, to speak with us. We spoke to police leaders, the director of children’s services and the Local Government Association. Likewise, council leaders have written to the Home Secretary to provide reassurances that they are taking action to address past failures and are better able to protect children from abuse. Service leaders have separately told my officials that they acknowledge the scale of the problem and the past failures in Telford, as well as the remaining problems. They are prioritising tackling child sexual exploitation and are working together to address the issues.

I know that my hon. Friend recognises that steps have been taken in this area. Although overall children’s services were judged still to require improvement in Ofsted’s July report, it found that:

“Work with children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation is very strong. The local authority has been a champion for tackling this issue. It provides leadership to partner agencies, with whom this work is well-coordinated.”

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary’s 2015 vulnerability inspection said that the police are “demonstrating a strong desire to improve outcomes for children who are at risk of harm.”

The council and others must now focus on implementing the recommendations made by Ofsted, the council’s scrutiny committee and HMIC, so they can continue to improve their response to young people in Telford. A wide range of support is available to services in Telford and elsewhere through both the Local Government Association and the recently launched child sexual exploitation response unit, which is backed by £1.24 million of Government funding. The unit operates independently of the Government and will ensure specialist support is made available to people working in children’s safeguarding across the country, enabling them to develop and deliver a strong and robust first response to children and families who are the victims of child sexual exploitation.

It is for the authorities in Telford to decide whether they want to access that additional support, and whether they think an independent inquiry would help them make the further improvements they clearly need. I suggest that, if my hon. Friend has not already done so, she should encourage them to take up those offers of help, to look at the resources available in the child sexual exploitation response unit and to ensure they are doing absolutely everything to address her constituents’ legitimate concerns and to give the whole community of Telford the confidence and assurances that she seeks. She is absolutely right that the victims in Telford, to whom dreadful things have happened, must feel, first, that they have been listened to and, secondly, that those in power and with responsibility have learned lessons from the past. I hope she and the council can agree on the mechanisms by which that can be addressed locally.

My hon. Friend rightly commented on the national Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, which has announced 13 strands of work. It is possible for her constituents to share their experiences with the inquiry. One of the strands of work allows people who have been affected to come to the inquiry independently and have their concerns listened to—they do not have to do so via an institution. Part of the inquiry’s work is to look at what more the BBC and other institutions could have done, but individuals can come forward with their experiences to shape our understanding and lead to better services in the future. I assure my hon. Friend that we are not waiting for the end of the inquiry. It is a huge inquiry, and it will take many years to hear all the evidence. It will report at least annually on lessons it has learned so people in the Home Office, the health service, local government and the police—the whole of society—can take on board that learning and start to change their actions. Again, I encourage her constituents to talk to the inquiry.

Ultimately, if my hon. Friend is not satisfied that the council and its leadership are really listening to the victims and the community at large, she has the opportunity to give evidence to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. If there is good evidence that the council is failing, section 15 of the Local Government Act 1999 enables the Secretary of State to intervene directly but, as I am sure my hon. Friend understands, that is very much an action of last resort. We respect local government, but we expect them to conduct themselves in an open, transparent and good way, and they should be wholly accountable to the local people they represent. We will intervene, but it has to be based on a lot of hard evidence. From the independent inspections of Ofsted and the constabulary, we have not seen enough evidence to warrant intervention, but if my hon. Friend or councillors have evidence of a systematic failure of leadership, and if they feel they are not making progress, they should share that information with me and we will take it up.

I hope I have reassured my hon. Friend. Her constituents who are here today and the wider community that we take this issue extremely seriously. My hon. Friend has
done a very good job in raising those concerns. She should use some of the tools I highlighted, and she should not hesitate to meet with me and officials if she feels there is anything more we can do collectively or individually. We want to leave no stone unturned in stamping out the vile and despicable crime of child sexual exploitation.

*Question put and agreed to.*

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**Leaving the EU: North-East Exports**

4.26 pm

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect on exports from the North East of the UK leaving the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

We all agree that the British people’s decision on 23 June to leave the EU was the most profound decision to affect this country since the second world war. I, like many in the House, very much wanted the UK to stay part of the EU, but the country, including the north-east of England, voted otherwise. That decision must be implemented, but as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has pointed out, the country voted on the principle of leaving, not on the terms. The detail is therefore important.

The referendum result has created much uncertainty about the UK economy’s long-term prospects, not just internationally but in many boardrooms around the country. I wonder how soon it will be before that uncertainty is felt in households in communities from south-east England to Scotland, from County Durham to Northern Ireland, and from Wales to East Anglia, and how soon it will be before that uncertainty spreads from the boardroom to the shop floor.

I want to use this debate to explain the importance of the European single market to the north-east of England, to raise several issues and to probe the Minister on what he and the Government think is the best option for the north-east of England in a post-Brexit Britain. I know the Minister shares the view that remain was the best option for the British people, but in our own ways we have both taken on responsibility for delivering the best deal for the UK under the circumstances, unlike the former—or perhaps the current—leader of the UK Independence party, Nigel Farage, who abandoned the field of play once he got the referendum outcome he wanted. Like all populists, he was ready to pick up the megaphone to let us know what he thought to be wrong, but when the argument went in his favour he was not prepared to hang around and take responsibility for putting right those perceived wrongs.

The Minister has the unenviable task of securing the best deal for Britain. Since he wanted to remain in the EU and the single market, how is he going to convince his colleagues that maintaining access to the single market is the best option? Furthermore, how are the Government going to implement all the promises made by the leave campaign, of which he now has ownership?

“Let’s give our NHS the £350 million the EU takes every week”—so said Vote Leave’s website. That slogan was emblazoned on the side of the campaign’s battle bus. Vote Leave committed to “hundreds of new schools” in a campaign video on YouTube, and to the abolition of prescription charges. According to a Vote Leave press release from 14 June:

“There is more than enough money to ensure that those who now get funding from the EU...will continue to do so”.

There was a promise of new roads and the expansion of regional airports, and the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) even said in a Vote Leave press
release from 19 April that there would be enough money for 14 Astute-class submarines. There was to be money for pothole repairs and tax cuts, and wages would be higher and fuel bills cheaper—no doubt, Brexit would be a land of milk and honey, where the sun shines and everyone lives happily ever after. The Minister is on record, in his blog, as saying: “There was no manifesto for ‘out’”—but yes, there was, and the people voted for it.

For the people of north-east England, we must get Brexit right, because although my constituents may have voted to leave the EU, I do not believe that they voted to be poorer, to put their jobs at risk or to see their region fall further behind. If I were them, I can imagine how disappointed and betrayed I would feel if, on top of all the uncertainty, which was not there before, all the promises made by those who supported the leave campaign were not met. That disappointment would be deepened by the fact that so many of those who made the pledges not only now sit on the Front Bench, but will sit around the negotiating table to negotiate our exit. The Minister and the Government have a duty to inform the British people of how those promises are to be fulfilled—the Minister might make a start today. If they cannot be fulfilled, perhaps the Minister will be straight with the British people and say so.

The EU single market is essential to the north-east of England: 58% of the region’s trade is with the EU, which is a full 10% higher than the national average; it is the only region that exports more than it imports; more than 100,000 jobs in the region rely on trade with the continent; and, over the past five years, almost 90 European investment projects have created or safeguarded more than 6,000 jobs, and £1.1 billion in inward foreign investment has come to the north-east from EU members.

According to the North East England chamber of commerce and a report by Ernst and Young, the north-east has seen the second highest increase in foreign direct investment—sitting just behind the north-west—with a substantial 83% increase on last year in FDI projects. An EY survey of investors about the link between the EU referendum and FDI asked how important access to the single market was, and 79% of investors cited access to the single market as a key feature of the UK’s attractiveness, a higher figure than last year’s. The same survey found that 52% of investors thought that a “slight change” in access to the single market would affect the attractiveness of the UK as a destination for business; in the event of a “significantly less favourable” change, the figure rose to 55%.

The North East England chamber of commerce has major concerns about future trade deals. Membership of the single market has brought significant benefits to the north-east of England, attracting business and creating jobs. The chamber stated in its EU referendum briefing paper of July 2016: “There are also major implications for relationships with overseas markets where existing trade deals have been negotiated by the EU and for the future of trade documentation needed by businesses. Due to the complexities of these issues, there is significant concern among businesses about the UK Government’s capacity to address these issues in the required timescale before Britain exits the EU.

Many of our members are also concerned about the effective flow of information so businesses are aware of any changes they need to make to their practices. Assurances about this are vital.”

What assurances about that will the Minister give to companies in the north-east?

In the same briefing paper, the chamber also stated: “There is also...the hope and expectation that the anticipated benefits of Brexit in being able to conclude trade deals more quickly around the world will be realised. The new department headed by the International Trade Secretary...should aim to quickly set out its plans in this regard so businesses can see that Government is seeking to get beyond a damage limitation exercise to exploit new opportunities.”

I offer this opportunity to the Minister to lay out those plans. Business needs certainty, and that would seem to be the one thing in short supply at present.

As I am sure the Minister is aware, Japanese investment is key to the north-east of England. There are about 50 Japanese companies in the region, including Hitachi in my constituency. It provides almost 1,000 direct jobs, with many more in a growing supply chain. Nissan provides 7,000 direct jobs and 30,000 in the supply chain. With 300 automotive companies in the region, the car industry in the north-east produces £11 billion in sales and is responsible for more than £5 billion in exports.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Nissan is the UK steel industry’s largest customer in the automotive trade, purchasing most of its steel from Tata in the UK, largely from Port Talbot and the strip-producing sites. What does my hon. Friend think about the potential barriers to trade if energy imported from the European Union via interconnectors were to carry a World Trade Organisation tariff for the United Kingdom in future? What will happen to large manufacturing plants and energy-intensive industries when they face larger tariffs on energy imports?

Phil Wilson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. So much of Brexit has to be sorted out, and I do not know the answers, but I hope that the Minister will enlighten us. There will, however, be major consequences for industry in this country, but especially in the north-east, where a lot of our manufacturing industry is. It employs a lot of people there and provides skills that we need to revitalise the economy in the region.

Throughout the referendum campaign, I was clear about saying that if Britain voted to leave, companies such as Hitachi and Nissan would not immediately cease production, close their factory doors and ship out to the EU. I still believe, though, that if we are not part of the EU single market, the potential for long-term growth must be called into question. Furthermore, what growth there might be could come at a cost to the Exchequer.

Following Britain’s decision to withdraw from the EU, Nissan’s chief executive, Carlos Ghosn, indicated that the company might halt further investment in its Sunderland plant unless the Government agreed to compensate it for any adverse financial impact of Brexit. At the Paris motor show in August, Ghosn warned that “important investment decisions will not be made in the dark...If I need to make an investment in the next few months and I can’t wait until the end of Brexit, then I have to make a deal with the UK Government”,

[Phil Wilson]
and he suggested:

“You can have commitments of compensation in case you have something negative. If there are tax barriers being established on cars, you have to have a commitment for car-makers who export to Europe that there is some kind of compensation.”

Earlier this month, the Prime Minister met with Mr. Ghosn to explore what assurances Nissan was seeking. The Financial Times reported that the meeting came ahead of Nissan’s decision on whether to build its new Qashqai SUV in Sunderland, a decision that might be taken as early as November. After the meeting, Mr. Ghosn said:

“Since Mrs May’s appointment, we have maintained a clear dialogue with the UK Government during this challenging time”, and he stressed:

“We want to ensure that this high-performing, high-employment factory remains competitive globally and continues to deliver for our business and for Britain.”

He added:

“Following our productive meeting, I am confident the government will continue to ensure the UK remains a competitive place to do business. I look forward to continued positive collaboration between Nissan and the UK Government.”

On the face of it, those are nothing more than warm words, but last weekend The Sun newspaper reported that Nissan is to announce that it will build the Qashqai SUV at its Sunderland plant—I hope so—and that an announcement might be taken as early as November. After the meeting, Mr. Ghosn said:

“Since Mrs May’s appointment, we have maintained a clear dialogue with the UK Government during this challenging time”, and he stressed:

“We want to ensure that this high-performing, high-employment factory remains competitive globally and continues to deliver for our business and for Britain.”

The Japanese Government are so concerned about Brexit that they published a 15-page document at the time of the G20 summit in China, pointing out:

“Following our productive meeting, I am confident the government will continue to ensure the UK remains a competitive place to do business. I look forward to continued positive collaboration between Nissan and the UK Government.”

The Minister wrote in a blog post on his website on 25 October 2011:

“A vote to come out of the EU would be to try to reverse nearly four decades of economic development...I am convinced that the advantages of membership outweigh the disadvantages.”

I agree. He said to the BBC just last month that “we must...try to achieve...zero-tariff access to this market of 500 million people in the EU.”

Again, I agree, but it seems to me that in so doing, the Government are setting out in a direction that the Conservative party accused the Labour Government of taking back in the 1970s and upon which it frowned at the time.

The Prime Minister said in her closing speech at the Conservative party conference:

“It’s not about picking winners, propping up failing industries, or bringing old companies back from the dead. It’s about identifying the industries that are of strategic value to our economy and supporting and promoting them”.

That sounds very much like picking winners to me. We should support our industry and develop an innovative industrial strategy, but don’t let’s write off whole industries. Millions of people may have voted for Brexit, but let us not forget the millions who did not. I am of the view that the Brexit negotiations will be complicated and uncertainty will reign for some time to come.

We know that the Minister’s preferred option is access to the single market—if not membership—but in what form? The existing model? The Swiss model? Will we stay part of the customs union? Does he agree with the report by his own Government that said that leaving the customs union could cause a 4.5% fall in British GDP and a reduction in foreign direct investment of as much as £9 billion, with trading falling by as much as 15.6%?

Brexit is the defining issue of our time, and it is more than apparent that the Government did not have any contingency planning in place to deal with the immensity of the task ahead, so I doubt very much that this will be the last Westminster Hall debate on how the issue affects the north-east of England, let alone the rest of the country. The future prosperity of the north-east of England, and indeed our nation, depends on getting this right. In answering the questions that I have asked today, the Minister will have the opportunity to start to allay fears, provide certainty, promote confidence and offer optimism, and to show vision and belief in our country. We must have the right to stand tall in the world while acknowledging our responsibility to others. I look forward to his response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate runs until 5.30 pm. The guidelines for speeches by Front Benchers are five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesman, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition’s spokesman and 10 minutes for the Minister. There will then be three minutes at the end for Phil Wilson to sum up. I therefore need to start calling the Front Benchers no later than 5.07 pm. Between now and then, the debate is open to Back Benchers. Three Members have stood to catch my eye. There is a galaxy of parliamentary talent before me, and it will be led by Hannah Bardell.
4.43 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am delighted to head up that galaxy of parliamentary talent, as you so eloquently put it, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) on securing the debate. As he says, I am sure there will be many more such debates and opportunities to drill down and have an ongoing conversation. If the Government are not going to have an ongoing commentary on the EU, we Back Benchers certainly will.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the UK’s relationship with the EU is significant for the north-east, which in 2015 exported £7 billion of goods to the EU—58% of its total, which is well above the UK average of 48%. This debate is about the north-east, but I hope he and you, Mr Hollobone, will indulge me if I touch a little on the debate. As he says, I am sure there will be many more such debates and the opportunity properly to scrutinise the plans when they come forward.

Let us take the UK’s membership of the EU customs union and common tariff. Beyond the party political and theoretical points are some gritty IT issues that need to be looked at more closely—we know about the UK Government’s track record on IT. If Britain leaves the EU customs union, it will have to go through its own system of customs declarations and security checks whenever trading with the EU. After the Brexit vote, the EU began looking at increasing its capacity for customs declarations from 50 million to 350 million a year to account for future customs forms from the UK. Changing that system will take time, and before it is finalised we will not know how delays will be managed. I recently met the Scotch Whisky Association, which emphasised the importance of the excise movement and control system, a trading system by which all exports are tracked and managed. Staying part of that is key, but we have had no answers about it. Perhaps the Minister can enlighten us.

On the other side, the UK’s current system for importing and exporting non-EU products, which following Brexit will have to be used for all products, is about 25 years old and due to be replaced. However, its replacement, the customs declaration services system, is expected to be functioning by December 2018, just before the UK is expected officially to leave the EU. The CDS system is designed for managing about 100 million declarations a year, rather than the now expected 350 million that will be required once the UK leaves the European Union. That puts us two years behind already.

Desmond Hiscock, who runs the UK Association for International Trade, said that the system “will not be able to cope and there is not much confidence that the untested and incomplete replacement...will fare much better.”

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am listening to the hon. Lady’s remarks with great interest. She will be aware that two Members of the House who represent constituencies in the north-east also want to contribute and that, within 30 seconds, she is coming up to having used a third of the allocated Back-Bench time. She might, out of politeness, want to think about drawing her remarks to a close.

Hannah Bardell: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I will wrap up my comments, because of course I want to let colleagues in. If the Prime Minister truly wants to find the best trade deal for the north-east and for the rest of the UK, she would do well to engage actively across all parties and all countries within the UK.
4.50 pm

**Julie Elliott** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) for gaining this important, if not crucial, debate for the region of the country that I come from. I was a passionate supporter of the remain campaign—I thought it was in the best interests of my city, my region and my country to remain a member of the EU—but I absolutely respect the decision taken and totally accept that we are leaving the EU. It is important to put that on the record.

There has been much mention in the debate of the automotive sector and the fantastic Nissan plant—it is not in my constituency but in the city where I live. The issues surrounding that plant bring together all the problems faced by the wider manufacturing industry in the north-east in one place. I welcomed the Prime Minister’s statement after she met Mr Ghosn a week ago in which she said she was committed to “supporting the right conditions for the automotive industry to go from strength to strength in the UK, now and into the future”.

That was important. However, the automotive industry is not the sum total of the problem we face in the north-east from Brexit. In fact, it is a very small part of it.

Even if some sort of agreement is made for the automotive industry, it would not necessarily include all the companies in Nissan’s supply chain. Those companies produce many parts for cars built in Sunderland and in other parts of the country but, because they also produce parts for other companies’ manufacturing, they may not be entirely protected by a special arrangement for the automotive industry. We have to bear that in mind when we look at the Prime Minister’s comments. I wrote to her a few weeks ago asking her to address the problems facing Nissan and the wider automotive industry and manufacturing quickly. I have not yet received a response, but I am sure I will in due course.

I want to talk about wider manufacturing not just because it does an amazing job in trade for our region—we have a positive balance of trade and there are fantastic examples of business doing well—but because of the impact down the line on our skills shortage. Those big manufacturing companies in the north-east train lots of high-skilled, high-end apprentices not on two-year courses but on four or five-year apprenticeships. The best go on to do degree-level qualifications. There would be a major impact on that if any of those companies started downscaling—goodness only knows what would happen if they disappeared.

We have to think about the long term, training and the future skills supply. We know that, in engineering, a bubble is coming when there will be a shortage of good, trained young people to replace the people heading towards retirement, but in the short time I have I want to talk about the tariffs problem. The investment uncertainty that the debacle since the referendum is causing is enormous. We know of examples of investment on hold for the north-east and of examples where investment has stopped. Those are the soft things. Let us think of the tariff situation not necessarily for the car industry but for wider manufacturing. Many of the companies involved in manufacturing in the north-east import parts and raw supplies for the things they make, so they will be hit by tariffs. They export right around the world, but in the main they export to the EU.

We also have major international companies in the north-east—names we all know—whose cost centres are in central Europe, which creates a knock-on effect. A rejigging of their business models is going on. I do not want to highlight any one in particular because they are general problems that all manufacturers say they are facing, with an impact across the piece. All the parent companies and boards and most of the manufacturing companies in the north-east are not British businesses dealing with British supply chains that provide all the supplies they need to produce products from the UK, and they are certainly not selling everything into the UK. For them, tariffs are crucial.

If we do not get the situation resolved—at this stage we are talking not about the detail but about the broad parameters of where the Government are going to stop the uncertainty and create certainty in the marketplace—the potential threat down the line is that British manufacturing will become more and more uncompetitive, which means we will lose jobs, the training I talked about, and revenues from taxes. There will be a massive impact on the economy of the north-east and the UK in general.

My preference would be to remain part of the single market. The Prime Minister needs to look at that as a matter of urgency and make a decision. If that is not what she and her Government are going to do, we need to know what is on the agenda. We need to be working on a cross-party basis to get the best deal for businesses in my constituency, the wider north-east and the country as a whole.

4.56 pm

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) for securing this important debate about the future of our region.

Like many here, I made no secret of my preference for the UK to remain a member of the European Union, but a majority of people in my city and in the region voted a different way. Many people who voted to leave did so in the belief that a brighter economic future lay ahead for the UK and for the north-east. If their optimism is to be fulfilled, it is vital that exports from the north-east to the European Union are protected.

Export trade with the EU is critical to the north-east’s economy. The region is unique in England in being the only one to consistently maintain a balance of trade surplus. Last year, more than half our goods exports were to the EU, and the most recent figures from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs indicate that four of the five top export partners for the region are EU countries. Given that the proportion of exports destined for the single market from the north-east is relatively high compared with other regions of the country, those of us who represent north-east constituencies have a particular responsibility to raise concerns about the impact Brexit will have on the region’s economic interests, especially if the Government decide to leave the UK out of the single market as well as the European Union.

As has been said, the automotive sector is central to Sunderland’s and the region’s economy and to the future success that lies ahead. A recent report by IPPR North found that the export of road vehicles, parts and accessories accounts for more than 40% of north-east goods exports to the EU and that the value of those exports grew by
118% in the past decade. Much of that trade depends on the continued success of Nissan in Sunderland and it is clear that future investment decisions by Nissan will play a major role in driving long-term economic growth in the north-east. Let us not forget that membership of the single market has been central to that success. The renaissance in car building in this country also demonstrates what can be achieved when Government pursues a focused, sector-led industrial strategy.

I sincerely hope that the decision on where to build the next Qashqai is a positive one for Sunderland. I will welcome any steps Ministers can take to assuage the company’s fears. What will require greater clarity from Ministers is the degree to which small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency and in the supply chain will be protected. Those businesses are already suffering from the collapse of sterling and the uncertainty that has dogged the economy since June. If Ministers intend to offer the automotive sector special protection from the impact of Brexit, presumably on the basis that they intend to take our country out of the single market, it must have wider coverage and not ignore SMEs in the north-east and beyond.

How do Ministers intend to act to safeguard the interests of the rest of the manufacturing sector in the north-east? What of the growing and thriving tech and software start-ups in my constituency, in Rainton Bridge and elsewhere? The region’s current strong track record on exports is a source of pride, but we still face the highest level of unemployment in the UK and a skills gap that holds back our young people as well as our economy. We can ill afford to see a decline in jobs, wages and living standards. As the North East local enterprise partnership has pointed out, we are a region that needs EU funding more than most—and we have a track record of investing it well. I note the guarantee offered by the Chancellor, but the north-east was originally allocated £437 million in EU structural funds up to 2020. Of that central pot, at present more than £198 million remains unallocated. There is clearly room for improvement.

In the north-east we have long needed Ministers to add some substance to the so-called northern powerhouse—a concept that appears to have fallen out of favour with the new Government. Now more than ever we need the Government to use all of the powers and levers available to them to support our region and its people to fulfil our economic potential in these difficult times.

5.1 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) on securing the debate. We have heard from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on the Floor of the House on many an occasion, given how much he is before the House to answer questions. We continue to have these debates because, unfortunately, no answers are forthcoming. In fact, the most interesting piece of information we have heard today is the determination that Brexit is in the masculine form—“le Brexit”—unless, of course, spoken in Italian. That is the latest up-to-date revelation in relation to the debate.

The hon. Member for Sedgefield correctly spoke about the uncertainty that surrounds the Brexit debate and the importance of the European single market, and said that people did not vote to be poorer or for jobs to be put at risk, so assurances are absolutely essential. That was followed up by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who also correctly said that even if the Government will not have debates in Government time—although I should say that the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box yesterday that there will be debates in Government time, which is very welcome—Back Benchers will continue to discuss matters that are hugely important to our constituents and businesses in our constituencies.

Hundreds of thousands of workers are concerned about what Brexit means for their future. As my hon. Friend said, if the Prime Minister wants the best trade deal she should interact with all parties and all nations across the whole of the UK. The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) spoke of respecting the decision of the referendum, but also of concerns that most major manufacturing companies in her constituency—which also have bases in the EU—have about what it will mean for them. As I say, that is a democracy matter and needs to be addressed. Finally, we heard from the hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), who spoke of the responsibility to raise concerns about how Brexit will affect constituencies and wider regions.

I know the debate is about the north-east, but it would be remiss not to mention that the people of Scotland have been subjected to a Tory Government they did not vote for, a referendum they did not want, and a result they did not vote for. Some 62% of the people of Scotland voted to remain in the European Union, and with that in mind, and in relation to the north-east, we want to work with all parts of the UK that want to retain single market status. To be clear, the Prime Minister and her Conservative Government stood on a manifesto that said: “yes to the Single Market”.

That is the one definitive piece of information upon which we should be as welcome to hold the Government to account. The Scottish National party intends to take all possible steps to explore all options to give effect to how the people of Scotland voted, and indeed for other parts of the United Kingdom that voted in a similar manner.

Key industries in the north-east could be seriously compromised as a result of the uncertainty of a post-Brexit economy. As we have heard so eloquently from all of the speakers in the debate, the UK Government must provide a clear and comprehensive economic strategy that will allow investment to flourish and jobs to be created, and will attract skilled labour. Prior to Brexit, the UK Government were already failing on key economic indicators and have missed the targets they set for themselves as a result of the failing austerity agenda.

The Prime Minister’s inability to answer the simple question of whether she supports continued membership of the EU single market is damaging business prospects and job certainty throughout the UK. Businesses need to know what is happening next for them. We have heard in the course of debates from many Secretaries of State, not least the Secretary of State for International Trade, whose comments have had to be clarified or amended. I wonder if the Minister can demonstrate...
that he has achieved “head boy” status and will not get into trouble for giving us the facts for which we have been asking for so long.

5.5 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) on securing this vital debate. Had he not, I know that my formidable colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) and for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson), who both spoke with such clarity, would certainly have initiated the debate otherwise. It is good to see a strong contingent from the north-east here in defence of their region.

The north-east is the major goods-exporting region of this country, with more than £12 billion of goods exported last year. It is therefore a powerful indicator to the rest of the country about the impact that the Government’s approach to Brexit will have. Let us be clear: 58% of voters in the region voted to leave, and all of us who have spoken from the Labour benches have said that we respect that—and we do. We must now all rise to the challenge of delivering that departure from the EU, but that departure must not undercut our industry, our labour rights or our prosperity. That is our clear message to the Government today. We have heard from several hon. Members about the destabilising effect on industry in the north-east of a divided Cabinet and a Secretary of State for International Trade who is pushing his own ideological agenda that will disrupt investment and threaten jobs in the north-east.

Of the £12 billion-worth of goods exported last year from the north-east, £7 billion were exported to the EU. That is 50% of the region’s total exports, making the region one of the most highly exposed to the uncertainty arising from the Government’s refusal to set out a clear plan and approach to the negotiations with the EU Parliament, or indeed to make that clear to the public. The value of north-east exports to the EU grew 30% from 2005 to 2015, yet in July, after the vote to leave, companies across the north-east suffered the sharpest rate of decline in business activity in four years, leading to scaled-down activity and jobs being laid off. Lloyds bank attributed “post-referendum vote market uncertainty”, which caused the number of new incoming orders to the region to fall at the fastest pace in almost seven and a half years.

We know the Government will not provide a running commentary, and we do not ask for that, but perhaps they will provide some much-needed clarity to business about their futures. That is what I think all Members here are really asking of the Minister. What guarantees will the Government provide to businesses in the north-east about access to those markets in the future, and how similar will those terms be to the current ones? James Ramsbotham, chief executive of the North East England chamber of commerce, said:

“With the automotive sector being such a major part of the business community in the North East the future of the car-making is of crucial importance to our economy and employment prospects.”

What assurances will the Minister provide to car manufacturers about continued access to import parts from the EU to their supply chains, and to export cars, tariff-free, into mainland Europe?

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central raised that issue, but there is also a need for the Minister to answer the question about non-tariff barriers. Country of origin rules may well mean that, in the future, if we are outside the EU we cannot provide goods from this country—indeed, from many of the smaller companies in the north-east that my hon. Friend spoke of—that feed into supply chains in Europe for products that are then sold into third countries. They will not be admitted into the supply chain in the first place. The Minister knows that those supply chains are 18 months’ long, which means that decisions will be taken in Europe within the next six months on whether to source items for the supply chain from the UK. This is of vital and urgent importance, and it is critical that the Minister provides some answers on it for business.

What assessment have the Government made of the contribution that skilled workers coming into the UK will make to the north-east export industries? Skilled workers in these industries are vital. Have the Government conducted a survey to find out what the skills base is in the north-east and to determine how they will continue to ensure that skills supply in the future?

While the weakened pound has given a short-term boost to certain exports, the steel industry is not benefiting from a low pound. The deal to buy the Tata pipe mill in Hartlepool is clouded with uncertainty, and the suggestion is that it would have been completed by now if it were not for the referendum result. That puts hundreds of jobs at risk. We have heard from my hon. Friends about the household brands that are facing difficulties, but we must not forget the small and medium-sized enterprises and the family businesses that are finding it impossible to invest in their own future in the region until the Government provide a clear plan. Ministers continue to drop heavy hints about their preferred—often contradictory—directions of travel. That is causing these businesses absolute turmoil with their investment profiles.

The priorities of manufacturing bodies are clear. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, EEF, the Chemical Industries Association, the British Ceramic Confederation and the UK Petroleum Industry Association—all representing phenomenal industries based in the north-east—are demanding guaranteed access to the single market to continue exporting without the extra costs that will make it harder to keep doing business there. Almost two thirds of the north-east’s exports to the EU are reliant on road vehicles, medical and pharmaceutical products and organic chemicals.

It is not just the goods exporters calling for this. A fast-growing marketing and PR agency based in Newcastle told my colleague, the MEP for the region, Jude Kirton-Darling,

“Creative and digital service industries like ours don’t export in the traditional way that goods companies do—but we benefit just as much from...membership and could be impacted badly by exit” from the single market. Service industries are asking the same questions of Government. What analysis has the Department conducted of the impact on the trading balance in the north-east of different post-Brexit trading arrangements with the EU? Have the Government quantified the impact of losing access to the single market on the north-east economy? Will they do so before making a firm decision on their negotiating priorities? If we default to WTO tariffs post-Brexit, what impact will that have on exporters in the north-east?
Bearing in mind the strong dependence on the single market of north-east exports and the regional trade surplus, what special measures will the Government consider to diversify export options for the region and avoid negative employment impacts that might arise?

The Government must clarify what will happen to the UK’s European Investment Bank status. Will we continue to be a shareholder and have unrestricted access to funding, or will we be considered a third country and thus only be eligible for the 10% of the fund made available for third countries? The Government’s webpage entitled “UKTI North East: helping companies export and grow overseas” was last updated in May this year. It reads:

“We’ve helped...create 346.5 new jobs through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) project”

and

“secure a further 1,014 jobs with our trade support activities for the ERDF project”.

That fund was actually proposed by the United Kingdom in 1972, but it is available only to European member states. We need to know what access we will have to those funds in future, because they are vital for industries in the north-east.

The Government might want to update their website, but it might also help if they provided their new strategy. The Government’s strategy has relied on EU funds to boost exports to BRICs markets and create jobs in the north-east. They must now provide answers about how they will ensure jobs and exports are maintained in the future through support for new projects once we have left the EU. The Chancellor’s guarantee of funding while we remain a member state, and for projects agreed before this year’s autumn statement, does not go far enough in giving answers to families, businesses and investors in the north-east. Can the Government commit to continued investment in trade promotion measures for the region post-2020?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s speech hugely, but he is almost twice over the guideline limit. If he carries on much longer, he will speak for longer than the Minister. He may, out of politeness, want to draw his remarks to a close.

Barry Gardiner: I would not wish to leave the Minister too little time to answer all the questions that my hon. Friends and I have asked this afternoon.

I will simply conclude by saying this. The danger is that the favoured trade model will not give control back to voters who told us that that was what they wanted. If the Government wanted to make the UK a great trading nation, they should make forward options that would decisively cut ties with the world’s largest free trade area. The Government are not pursuing a free trade agenda. It would appear that they are using the vote to leave to embark on a ruthless deregulatory agenda, which will threaten jobs, public services, labour standards and environmental protections in the north-east and the rest of this country. The Minister must provide answers and clarity for business and the public.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): If the Minister could conclude his remarks at no later than 5.27 pm, Phil Wilson will have time to sum up.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): Thank you, Mr Hollobone. May I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) on securing the debate? He has worked extraordinarily hard for his constituency. He did not mention in his speech that he was instrumental in securing the investment from Hitachi in his constituency, which we should all recognise.

It is interesting to speak in a debate such as this. I have to say that I agree with many of the points raised about the debate we had several months ago in the lead-up to the referendum. I think that everybody in this room—with the possible exception of you, Mr Hollobone—was on the same side of the debate on how we should vote in the referendum. It was 58% to leave in the north-east. In my constituency of Wyre Forest, it was 63%, so I hardly failed even more than Opposition Members to secure a remain vote.

I think we are all in agreement that the success of the north-east is entirely relevant to the success of the whole of the UK. We need to work extraordinarily hard to ensure that we get through this process over the next few years and that we are a resilient and strong economic nation afterwards. I will endeavour to address the points raised by hon. Members throughout the course of my speech, but I would like to open by saying a little about the Department for International Trade, in which I am now a Minister, and how we are trying to work with the whole of the UK.

This debate focuses on just one region, but we are representing the whole of the UK, which also involves the devolved Assemblies, so we represent Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales as well. Irrespective of local votes, we are all Brexiteers together. Our aim is for the UK to be a beacon of open trade for the entire world, with the benefits of that trade to be felt from Bournemouth to Belfast and from Aberystwyth to Aberdeen. That means working with our dedicated regional teams, the devolved Administrations, devolution partners, regional chambers of commerce and local enterprise partnerships to ensure that together we build a strong and resilient economy from the bottom up.

It has been mentioned on a couple of occasions that the Secretary of State was an enthusiastic leaver, but it is worth bearing in mind not only that are we all leavers now, but that Ministers in the Department are balanced. The four Ministers—three in the House of Commons and one in the House of Lords—were on both sides of the debate, and all of us bring a lot of experience and views, giving a balanced view. That is important to remember.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): Given the establishment of the Department for International Trade and the importance of our region to trade performance, what additional capacity will the Minister put into the north-east to ensure that we can boost exports further?

Mark Garnier: I hope to be able to answer the hon. Gentleman in the course of my speech, but he can by all means intervene again if I miss his point.

The performance of the north-east is nothing short of exceptional. It is worth bearing in mind that 30 years ago last month, Margaret Thatcher persuaded Nissan
that it should come along and assemble the Bluebird kits. That started off as a relatively small investment and has now turned into a phenomenal manufacturing plant. It is one of the premier auto factories not just in the UK but in the world. The region exported approximately £12 billion-worth of goods in the past year, racking up a positive goods trade balance of nearly £3 billion. That is incredibly important for our current account deficit. The region sold more than £1 billion-worth of cars between April and June alone, as well as nearly half a billion pounds of pharmaceutical and medical goods over the same period. Trade with the EU is important for the north-east—no one is questioning that. The single market is a destination for more than 61% of the region’s exports.

We have heard a lot about Nissan in particular. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has met Nissan and will be meeting Hitachi to try to make sure that the investment that the hon. Member for Sedgefield secured remains in the UK. We are having ongoing dialogue with those large automotive manufacturers. I have met Nissan twice, and my colleagues in BEIS have also met it. We are continuing to make sure we offer it as much assurance about the future as possible.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is being generous with his time. One of the crucial points in my hon. Friends’ speeches was the emphasis on small and medium-sized business and their supply chains. What efforts is his Department making to engage with them?

Mark Garnier: We are certainly engaging with them through the local delivery networks of the Department for International Trade, formerly known as UKTI, and through the local chambers of commerce. That is an ongoing process that will continue. The economy of the north-east is so dominated by big manufacturers that if we get that part right, that should encourage a huge number of small manufacturers.

The hon. Lady raises the right point, which is that we cannot simply look at the big manufacturers. We have a very diverse economy and there are around 5 million businesses in the UK, the vast majority of which employ fewer than 10 members of staff, so we do not forget SMEs.

Mr Iain Wright: The automotive industry and the train manufacturing sector are crucial to the north-east’s economy, but what other sectors has the Minister identified that really make a difference? I am thinking particularly of the steel, chemical and processing industries, but what other sectors has he identified that should be prioritised?

Mark Garnier: The steel industry is in a special position at the moment, as we have discussed in the House over the past few months, for obvious and tragic reasons with the closing down of plants. All sectors are important to the UK economy. We need a diverse economy manufacturing a wide range of products—not just steel but graphene and carbon fibre. Those specialist material industries are also very important.

It is important that over the past 12 months the north-east has sold £4.5 billion of goods to non-EU countries, so it is a region that takes opportunities from the rest of the world. America is behind the Netherlands as the region’s second biggest export destination, not to mention continued significant sales to China and Turkey. There are fantastic local examples of north-east companies finding success beyond the EU. Small companies such as Annie Barr International are delivering vital training courses in China and Hong Kong. Newcastle-based mobile app developers Hedgehog Lab celebrated an amazing 2015, achieving $500,000 of sales in the USA. Those are examples of small businesses that are doing very well.

Our future trading relationship with the EU has yet to be determined, as hon. Members have said, but I will be as clear as possible. When the formal process of exiting the EU has been completed, the sky will not fall on our head. We will continue to trade with the EU. It is our friend, our ally and our trading partner. That will not change. We want to build the strongest possible trading links with our partners on the mainland, which throughout history have brought prosperity to Europe and raised living standards for all Europeans. Trade has always brought us closer together as a continent, fostering a common identity that will never diminish, regardless of whether the UK is in or out of the EU. We want the EU to succeed. It is really important to our country that our nearest neighbours are a success story.

A UK outside the EU can now reset and enhance its trading ties with the rest of the world, which already recognises that products made on these shores are synonymous with heritage, quality and innovation. Our Ministers are travelling the world, and the extraordinary demand for British brands in places like the far east and America, and across the whole world, is truly remarkable. Let us take the example of cars. Today, a car manufactured in the UK and sold to India would face tariffs of up to 100%. The tariff for selling the same car to Brazil is less at 35% and for China it is 25%. We can do deals with those markets and find opportunities for cheaper tariffs there. A UK in full control of its trading arrangements can start to address the barriers that exist. There is untapped potential in the global economy that the UK is primed to take advantage of.

One or two points were made about delivering a manifesto for leaving. The hon. Member for Sedgefield said that there had been a promise of £350 million a week. He and I remember that that was checked by the UK statistical authority and there were questions about it ever being delivered. Dare I say, Mr Hollobone—I would not want to upset your sensibilities—there was a lot of hype that might be difficult to deliver on, but the Government must deliver the right outcome.

The shadow Minister talked about tariff and non-tariff barriers. Tariffs are probably relatively easy and straightforward to negotiate, because the outcome is numerical. We must be careful about non-tariff barriers, but we are all working extraordinarily carefully in trying to get to the right answer.

We talk about what sort of model we want. One of our problems in this debate is that people try to force the argument into a pre-determined shape: will it be a Swiss model, a Norwegian model or a Turkish model? The answer is that we will try to achieve a British model, which will achieve the best possible outcome that we can imagine. We will not try to do a deal that looks like someone else’s, because we can do our own deal. That is our starting point.
When it comes to the issue of a running commentary, I take a slightly different view. We are all aware of the argument that no one lays all their cards on the table when playing poker—why would they do that? The important point is that we must be extraordinarily careful. We have heard from many people about the importance of businesses not misunderstanding what is going on. They want clarity, but I think it would be more dangerous were we to give the wrong idea about what is happening than no idea. If businesses start chasing false hares, they could head off in the wrong direction, and that would be dangerous, so we must be very careful.

I want to reassure businesses in the north-east and investors around the world that in our future trade negotiations, we will fight to ensure that the UK’s sector strengths, be they automotive, aerospace, professional or financial services, remain as competitive as possible. We will achieve the best deal for the UK. I and my colleagues will continue to speak to businesses and investors, and the Secretary of State will meet big investors in the UK on more occasions.

A thriving north-east is vital to the long-term economic health of the whole country. It is a timely reminder that Britain still makes things the world wants to buy. The British people’s decision to leave the EU does not mean that we will abandon or neglect our manufacturing prowess. We have opportunities. I was on the wrong side of the argument a few months ago, as was everyone else in the Chamber with the exception of you, Mr Hollobone, but that does not stop me being optimistic about the future for Britain. We are a great nation, and we are very enterprising and innovative. A big, economically disruptive event is happening, but I believe that with the Government’s help, when we can provide it, businesses will take advantage of the opportunities.

5.27 pm

Phil Wilson: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, especially my colleagues from the north-east of England. I want to make one or two points. The Office for National Statistics may have said the £350 million figure was wrong, but people believed it. They did not consult the ONS’s website to see whether it was accurate, they just accepted it.

I picked Nissan as an example of the issues that will arise. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) said, the north-east is about the automotive sector, steel, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and research and development. It is on the coast, and we have two ports facing Europe. Europe is important, because 80% of the raw materials and parts we need for industry comes from there. Brexit is a big issue, and I worked tirelessly to try to ensure that we stayed in Europe. This is bigger than party—it is about more than just the Conservative party and the Labour party. It is about the future of the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) said that the issue is partly a cross-party one. We must hold the Government to account, but we must also work together when necessary, because this issue is for all people whether they voted to remain or to leave.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the effect on exports from the North East of the UK leaving the EU.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 26 October 2016

[Mr Christopher Chope in the Chair]

Libya

[Relevant document: Third Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Libya: Examination of intervention and collapse and the UK’s future policy options. HC 119.]

9.30 am

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered British engagement with Libya.

That this House has considered British engagement with Libya.

It is a great pleasure to introduce a debate of such importance—it is a wonderful privilege as a Member of Parliament to have the opportunity to raise subjects of international importance. We all know, given where we have come from with the debates on Brexit, Heathrow and all the rest, that we focus a lot on domestic issues. We particularly focus on European issues, but the situation in Libya is of enormous importance for the country and the wider picture in the middle east. The waves of migration we are seeing in Europe are in many ways a direct consequence of the total collapse of order and civic administration in Libya. I do not want to exaggerate that and suggest that Libya is in a complete state of anarchy, but there is no doubt that there have been many failures of omission in Libya, as the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), and his team have pointed out.

We have had five years in which it has been unclear what the future political make-up of the country will be in terms of its institutions. Muammar Gaddafi saw his end five years ago, in October 2011. It is disconcerting to see that there is no single constituted political entity or Government in Libya. Instead, there are two Governments and various militias. The country is divided geographically between the east and the west, with their respective centres of power in Tobruk and Tripoli. The Government of National Accord have been backed by the United Nations, by us and by the international community, yet when we read reports on what is happening on the ground in Libya with the militias and military activity, the striking thing is that the GNA’s forces do not seem to be making much impact. In fact, I rarely read about what they and their military forces are doing.

I want to address precisely that point in my remarks. There seems to be a complete disjuncture between what we want to happen with the people we want to back for our own reasons—they could have a legitimacy or legal primacy—and what is happening on the ground. That has been a constant feature of the western approach to the area. We have our own ideals and beliefs about the process, the rule of law and what we think should happen, but when we look on the ground at the instrumentalities as Woodrow Wilson used to call them, we see a complete mismatch. The people whom we want to be in charge—the people whom we believe have legitimacy—have very little capacity to enforce their will and ensure that their writ is run through the country we hope they can rule. That fundamental problem always comes up.

There have been dark rumblings in regard to Haftar. We have read many times that the French secret service is supporting him. They are rumours, but it is important that we know what is being said. We also know that allies, including our friends in Egypt and the Egyptian Government, are openly supporting Haftar. The United Arab Emirates is broadly in support of his objectives. Many of our allies are openly or covertly supporting General Haftar, yet we stick to this idea, perhaps rightly, that the GNA is the legitimately constituted Government of Libya.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am pleased that my hon. Friend is spending time talking about General Haftar. Our Government’s line has repeatedly been for the past five years, “We must wait for a Government of National Accord and national unity.” It is clearly evident after five years that that will not happen, and it is unrealistic to expect it. We should support General Haftar to bring peace and stability to the country.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I am trying to say—in many ways, it is the crux of this debate and nearly any debate about the middle east—that we have our own ideals and our own sense of what the rule of law and due process are, yet the realities on the ground in many instances bear no relation to the theoretical aspirations and structures that the international community constructs. I am trying to grope towards some way in which we can accommodate or harmonise our intellectual construct and method with what is happening on the ground.

The reality is that there are something like 1,700 militias. General Haftar is probably the biggest military presence, and many of our allies openly support him. My hon. Friend asks an interesting question: why do we not just support General Haftar? I do not propose to answer that definitely today. It is a difficult question and there are lots of balancing factors. The fact is that General Haftar is not universally popular. We have big issues with militias in Misrata. A number of other tribes on the western side have said openly that they are not prepared to tolerate rule by him. Their belief is that, if we support Haftar, we will be substituting one military dictator for the former military dictator, Gaddafi.
Be that as it may, I want to talk about my hon. Friend’s suggestion. Our strategy has not moved the country forward in five years. The financial situation is such that whatever oil reserves Libya had are rapidly dwindling. Libya’s GDP was something like $75 billion in 2011 and is now something like $41 billion—it is roughly of that order; that figure is from a couple of years ago, but it is the latest we have. We are talking about an economy that has essentially halved in five years. GDP per capita was something like $12,500 in 2011, at which point Libya was one of the wealthiest countries in Africa. It was seeing some degree of material progress. Today, GDP per capita is about $7,000. No country in Europe has seen such a diminution of its wealth, including Greece. That has huge implications for the security situation in the region and outside.

Not only have people become a lot poorer, but the political institutions in many instances have broken down. Whatever Gaddafi’s strengths and weaknesses were—let’s face it, he was a tyrant—he had a degree of control over the country’s borders. Those who know geography will know that Libya is an enormous country with something like 4,000 miles of borders. To stem the flow of migration, it was very important that a centrally constituted Government—a central authority—could control the borders. That has now completely collapsed, which is why hundreds if not thousands of people come from very poor countries in sub-Saharan Africa through Libya and find themselves on boats in the Mediterranean going to Italy, in many instances ending their lives there.

I did not want to talk about the EU—we have had plenty of debates in this place about it—but one of the failures it needs to address is the lack of a co-ordinated plan for Libya. There is no point pretending it is going to go away, because it is not. The problem will get worse.

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this timely, topical debate. Does he agree that, although focusing on Libya’s coastline is very important to prevent the tragedy of human trafficking, it is also important to look at Libya’s southern borders, where people are coming up from sub-Saharan Africa? Perhaps we could be doing more to understand what is going on there and to tackle trafficking at its source.

Kwasi Kwarteng: As is often the case, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. That goes to the heart of the question. There is no centrally constituted Government or central power to hold the country together and control the borders that she talks about, which are pretty porous.

I secured the debate because I have spent time in Europe speaking to German colleagues and MPs and politicians from other countries, and I am struck by the fact that there does not seem to be any real plan of action. Nothing has happened for five years. The country is not in a state of chaos—that would be an exaggeration—but it is certainly not stable. Its oil reserves are dwindling. It is still fairly rich by African and developing country standards, but its wealth is being depleted, and if it diminishes further the problem will get worse. It is no use pretending it is simply going to go away, because it is not.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): One of the biggest problems is that when the United Nations or outside organisations such as the European Union try to help one side or the other, they are regarded with the deepest suspicion by a large number of people in Libya. That is one of the reasons why the latest plan seems to have failed.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend makes a fair point, but I am told that one of the reasons why the Libyans view western involvement with such scepticism is that 2011 was not this country’s finest hour. I agree substantially with many of the findings in the Foreign Affairs Committee report. We went in there, but we did not have a plan or a follow-through. Given that context, it is not surprising that Libyans are sceptical.

Our ideals—what we want to happen—and what we can actually do are often completely different. I completely understand the support for the Government of National Accord, but it is difficult to see how we can empower them to take control of the country. None of the militias that one reads about—Haftar and Operation Dignity, Libya Dawn, ISIS and various al-Qaeda militias—are GNA forces. They are not under the control of the Government of National Accord, yet we carry on in a fantasy world in which they are the official, legal Government and we are going to support them. I totally understand those pious words, but nothing is happening on the ground.

We can go on like this. I am sure that in five years’ time, I, or some new MPs, will take up the issue. We can go on forever and a day talking about what is going on, but in this debate I want to say, “Look, this is a big problem. What are we going to do about it?” I do not propose any definitive answers, but it is highly important that MPs have the opportunity to speak and think about these issues. We do very little thinking in this place; we do a lot of talking, posturing and virtue-signalling, but as parliamentarians we need to engage our minds critically with these problems.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. Friend said that 2011 was not our finest hour. May I remind him—I am sure he remembers this very clearly—that only one Conservative Member of Parliament voted against military action: our colleague from the Foreign Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron)? Does he agree that we need to learn from that terrible mistake? We saw on our television screens constant coverage of the alleged bloodbath that would ensue if Gaddafi was not stopped. We reacted quickly without thinking about the consequences and without the follow-through that was needed.

Kwasi Kwarteng: That is a very timely intervention, because that is exactly the kind of thing I am talking about. For far too long, we have had emotional responses to situations. I remember the debate very vividly, although I was a new Member of Parliament and less experienced and less versed in issues relating to the middle east then. We talked a lot about the humanitarian crisis and what we needed to do to intervene to stop the potential bloodbath. All of that was well understood, but we did not stop and think.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I apologise for not being able to stay for the whole debate to hear what the Minister has to say in response. May I gently remind
my hon. Friend that simply to dismiss our intervention in Libya as an emotional response and to say that the Government and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office did not think through the consequences is not fair? That does not adequately describe the work that went into Libya afterwards, which included intensive work with politicians to create the opportunity for elections. In recognising what happened, which is immensely difficult, he might pay tribute to the work of the Foreign Office, our diplomats and our ambassador, who worked so hard to try to create something. He must not assume that it was simply an emotional response without regard to the consequences.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** I fully appreciate my right hon. Friend’s point. He was at that time a Foreign Office Minister largely responsible for the middle east, and he served in that post with considerable distinction. I fully appreciate his efforts.

My phrase “emotional response” might be a little dismissive. It is very brutal and horrible to have to say this, but we have to look at the consequences of what happened. We have to look at the situation, put our hands up and say, “This is not a good situation.” I appreciate that there were lots of motivated, highly skilled diplomats, and that lots of thought went into the intervention on the ground. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the NATO Secretary-General said that, if we just look at the means by which we carried out the intervention, it was effective, but I am afraid that the judgment of history is that it was not particularly successful, based on the consequences of our actions. At some point we have to be hard on ourselves and look at the outcomes. We can say, “We discussed this endlessly, we met all these committees, we had all this planning and we got votes through Parliament”, but—to use that old phrase—the proof of the pudding is in the eating. If the pudding does not taste very good, something has gone wrong, and we have got to accept that.

**Alistair Burt:** While we are looking at our intervention in Libya in 2011, perhaps we might also look at the consequences of the vote on Syria in 2013. Perhaps my hon. Friend will agree that deciding whether to intervene or not is very difficult. The same consequences can arise from both because we are not fully in charge of all the circumstances.

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** The conclusion—one does not require the brains of an archbishop to reach this—is that when we intervene, we should have a plan for the follow-through, perhaps for up to 18 months. I am not one of those people who is against all interventions, but I am against interventions the consequences of which have not been properly considered, or properly planned for. That is not a radical thing to ask.

**Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, which is the latest in a number of debates on Libya, in this Chamber in particular. I agree with a lot of what he is saying. One of the consequences of the chaos in Libya and the lack of any centralised Government is the failure, or inability, to get to grips with getting justice and compensation for the victims of Libyan-inspired IRA and other terrorism. That is a major problem. Many of the victims are getting older and they wait in great frustration for our Government to do more, and to get what they are entitled to. Does he agree that that is another aspect of what is happening?

**Kwasi Kwarteng:** Absolutely. For those who study the outbreak of the second world war, the question then was always, “Who do you call in Berlin?” or “Who is actually responsible for the action?” and that is exactly the kind of question that we need to ask about Libya. If we want to start the compensation process, who on earth do we call? Yes, the GNA is in control of the central bank, but they are not in control of the oil production or the generators of wealth, so it is a legitimate question.

To wrap up, our foreign service’s capabilities in diplomacy are second to none, as a country, but once in a while we have to admit, “We might not have done this very effectively. We might have got things wrong.” After all, President Obama, our closest ally, said that Libya was the worst mistake of his presidency. He had the honesty and candour to put his hand up and admit that and, if we are to proceed as a more effective player or counsellor in the politics of the region, we have to have the courage to admit when we get things wrong.

The report from the Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate did that—although perhaps it cast blame too narrowly and was not overly generous in its interpretation of what happened—but we have to recognise when we get things wrong. We have to be more realistic about what we can achieve when we intervene. We also have to be realistic about the kinds of players involved and with whom we have to deal. My hon. Friends have mentioned General Haftar, and he is clearly an important figure. There is no point pretending that he will disappear because he does not constitute a legitimate authority, so he can be ignored—he cannot be ignored. He is a fact in the Libyan scene who needs to be dealt with.

In conclusion, I am grateful for the opportunity to have this debate. I am interested to hear what colleagues have to say about the situation and, if I were to summarise the kind of conclusion that I want to reach, the kind of thought that I want to stimulate, it is to ask how we are going to marry our ideals with what is happening on the ground. How will we do that? We have endless debates, but perhaps we have to shift our ideals and to compromise if we cannot reach a solution. There is no point sticking our heads in the sand and saying, “Well, this is the legitimate Government”, but then nothing happens. That is a complete waste of time.

I beg for consideration of this. I beg right hon. and hon. Members to spend time thinking about how to move forward and to marry ideals with what is happening on the ground in Libya, and about what we as parliamentarians and broader supporters of the Government and of our country can do to bring some degree of stability and order to a country that for far too long has lived with a level of chaos that none of us would accept in our own lives and in our own country.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair):** The wind-ups will start at 10.30 am, but there is quite a lot of interest in this debate, so I hope Members will tailor their remarks accordingly. I call Jim Shannon.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me, Mr Chope. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on his excellent contribution, which set the scene so well. No one in this Chamber should be under any illusion about the fragile situation in Libya. The Foreign Affairs Committee reported on the situation in Libya in September 2016, and the report was eye-opening. The summary alone is enough to demand a reconsideration of the Libya situation and our involvement.

I am known to be someone with a positive nature. Rather than focusing solely on a problem and apportioning blame, I like to see what the solution is—in other words, I like to see a glass half full. I cannot, however, skip past a part of the Foreign Affairs Committee’s report that needs to be addressed. I will quote it, because it sets the scene clearly:

“In March 2011, the United Kingdom and France, with the support of the United States, led the international community to support an intervention in Libya to protect civilians from attacks by forces loyal to Muammar Gaddafi. This policy was not informed by accurate intelligence. In particular, the Government failed to identify that the threat to civilians was overstated and that the rebels included a significant Islamist element...The result was political and economic collapse, inter-militia and inter-tribal warfare, humanitarian and migrant crises, widespread human rights violations, the spread of Gaddafi regime weapons across the region and the growth of ISIL in North Africa. Through his decision making in the National Security Council, former Prime Minister David Cameron was ultimately responsible for the failure to develop a coherent Libya strategy.”

In response, the Minister will emphasise that we have a new Prime Minister—we are glad to see her in place and the changes that she has brought and is bringing—but that cannot take away from the fact that the Government are failing in their engagement with Libya and that things need to change. I respect President Obama, even if I largely do not agree with his policies, and Parliament and the Government must address his daunting accusations with regards to Libya.

The USA cannot be absolved of all responsibility for the situation. A sore point for me is that the US Government were actively working hard to secure compensation for their citizens, one must wonder why they are unable to step in and make a difference in the current climate. It is incumbent on me as a representative of the Democratic Unionist party, on behalf of the victims of Libyan-sponsored terrorism, to ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Office again for an update on the situation since it was last discussed in the House. I trust that steps have been taken to make a stand for our victims and to see their pain acknowledged in a tangible way.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend is elaborating on the distinction between the success obtained by the American Administration for their victims of terrorism and the unfortunate lack of success by our Government in getting compensation for victims of terrorism in the UK, many of them in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that we need to see progress in Libya, for the people of Libya, but that in return we need to see those legacy issues resolved, so that people here are more satisfied with our Government’s input than they have been to date?

Jim Shannon: I am coming on to some of those things, and my hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need the Government to be responsive and to help our people.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is referring to the legacy issues affecting many people in Northern Ireland. I join our colleagues in Northern Ireland in campaigning on such an important matter, and I am very disappointed that the Government have not made more progress. May I ask him to support action on the other key outstanding legacy issue, which is the murder of a serving British police officer, PC Yvonne Fletcher, who was shot outside the Libyan embassy? To this day, we have still had no indication of who her murderer was, and he has not been brought to justice.

Jim Shannon: It is good to be reminded of that case, which has never been resolved from an investigative point of view and for which no one has been held accountable. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We want that issue, as well as other outstanding legacy issues, to be addressed. It is such a major issue that I will not do my constituents the disservice of ignoring it and failing to take the opportunity to call for the wrong to be righted as far as possible, which is what the Government appear to have done. I hope that they will not continue to do so.

The IRA terrorist campaign led to the deaths of 3,750 people, not only in Northern Ireland but in Brighton, London, Manchester and other places. Libyan involvement is undisputed. Compensation has been paid to the families of Americans who lost their lives as a result of that involvement, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) referred to, but the loss of British lives has not led to similar aid or support. I have said before in this place that our citizens are not second-class citizens and that they deserve the same justice as the Americans, and I stress that essential point about British engagement on behalf of my constituents.

Chaos reigns in many parts of Libya. I am aware from the Library briefing that in August, the Royal Navy supported the removal of potential chemical weapons materials from Libya. There are a lot of issues to be addressed there. This is not about winning a war; it is about seeing how we can influence the country and help
to rebuild it from a dictatorship into a democracy. However, many external factors are taking control, and we must decide what the appropriate action is in that scenario.

The United Nations has brokered the formation of an inclusive Government of National Accord, but as seems to be the norm, the people the UN seeks to support have no regard for its regulations. There is substantiated evidence of the GNA having been undermined by people flouting the United Nations arms embargo and using Libyan militias as proxies. I have some good friends who work in security in the middle east and have been in Libya, and they have informed me that Libya is awash with illegal arms, some of which have made their way to terrorist groups in Europe. If we want to address terrorism in Europe, we must address the availability of arms in Libya.

Libya has descended into lawlessness since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, giving groups such as the self-proclaimed ISIS free rein to attack Christians. The Minister would expect me to make this point, because I take the opportunity to do so whenever one comes my way. We all know that Libya has a deep Islamic culture, so Libyan Christians must keep their faith completely secret. Churches for Libyans and Christian literature in Arabic are forbidden. Although migrant Christians are allowed to practise their faith in Libya, many have paid the ultimate price: in 2015, dozens of Christians from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Egypt were kidnapped or killed by extremists in Libya. Several of those cases have been well expounded upon and were in the papers and on TV at the time. For example, a brief search for links to news stories related to Christian persecution and Libya returns the following headlines: “Christian woman in fear for her life”; “IS kidnaps 86 Eritrean Christians”; “Islamic State capture more African migrants”; and “IS kill 30 Christians, destroy churches”. Those are just some of the things that happen. Continued persecution is an important factor that must be considered in any discussion of our role and involvement in Libya.

I am conscious of the time and your direction, Mr Chope, so I will conclude with this comment. We face a massive problem. We must first determine our role in solving it and working with others who seek to absolmely other rather than help solve the issues. We must try to bring stability to an area that desperately needs it, for the benefit of Christians, citizens and neighbouring countries, simply for the fight against terrorism, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) referred to, for the ordinary people of Libya—the mothers, families, children and hard-working people. We must be wise and effective. Our actions must be co-ordinated to ensure that there is a global response that is felt by those who continue to seek to bring the country to its knees. We in this House have a duty, but we are not alone in that, and we must ensure that all the key players have a role in bringing stability to Libya.

10.3 am

Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). People always refer to debates as timely, but this debate has special merit because it shines a light on an area that is often forgotten in the shadow of the atrocities in Syria, but that has a huge role in the region’s stability.

I did not vote for a no-fly zone in Libya in 2011; I abstained. I wondered then whether that was to my shame. Sadly, on balance, I do not think that it was. Back then, as a new MP, I was not sufficiently confident that there would not be mission creep. I could not see a concrete plan for what Libya would look like were there to be mission creep, and I looked at the west’s track record of removing nasty dictators, and it was not good. It is easy to be wise after the event and rehearse mistakes that were made. We can say that lessons will be learned—that cliché is often used—but we can perhaps best demonstrate that we are going to learn the lessons by tackling the situation properly and realistically now.

I am often surprised that Libya does not feature more in the media and political discussion, particularly on compassionate grounds. Libya is well known as a haven for people traffickers, who often traffic people to their deaths in the Mediterranean. When I was in Sicily last year helping to redecorate and renovate a migrant hostel, some young men from Africa told me that they were kept locked like animals in storage containers in Tripoli for two weeks and were basically forcibly starved. One man speculated that that was to ensure that they were smaller so the traffickers could fit more people on the boats. Those are the kinds of human atrocities that are happening, but they do not seem to be attracting Twitter hashtags commensurate with appalling human rights abuses. What are we doing on Libya’s southern border to prevent such atrocities from happening at source? Once people are at the coast, it is in a sense almost too late, although we must of course take action there too.

Libya is obviously of strategic importance. We know that it has become a fertile breeding ground for IS and other violent Islamist groups. It would be a mistake to limit our attention solely to Daesh. We might eradicate Daesh, but the ideology that it espouses will be articulated in another way. Let us not be simplistic and attach ourselves to defeating just a name and not an ideology. The chaos—some call it chaos; some call it deep instability—in Libya is deeply destabilising for neighbouring nations. The last thing that we want is a destabilised Egypt, which has its own challenges. Having a neighbour in such a situation as Libya is in is deeply destabilising for Egypt. As a nation, we are partially responsible for creating that situation, so we have a responsibility to engage energetically in trying to return some form of stability to Libya.

I am far from an expert, and I am aware that I am in the company of far greater experts, so I will make a few observations and then ask some questions of the Minister. We backed a revolution, which is always a risky business. Revolution is very different from reform. In many ways, having taken the actions that we took, we cannot be surprised that we are where we are in Libya.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend mentions that we backed revolution. That is precisely the point: we had no idea what was going to come after the revolution. We simply thought that things would right themselves on their own, and that once we had stabilised the situation, Humpty Dumpty would somehow just come back and reform almost spontaneously.

Charlotte Leslie: My hon. Friend refers to a nursery rhyme; I was going to say that we have a slightly short attention span and in many ways a fairytale view of
foreign policy—“It’s all going to be fine and everyone will live happily ever after once we’ve done the nice thing that the Twitterati will approve of.” We are where we are.

We in the west in general—I do not intend to label any one person as responsible—make two mistakes. First, we tend to see situations in a binary way. We are quick to call the good guys the good guys and the bad guys the bad guys. That has led us to be allies with questionable people just because we want to defeat Daesh. Does that really mean that we should align ourselves with Islamists who perhaps have ideas not that different from Daesh? The reason that they are anti-Daesh may be that they see it as a competitor in the region, not that they share our values.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I remember that those who advocated attacking Iraq back in 2003 pointed to an atrocity that Saddam Hussein had undeniably perpetrated against the Kurds in Halabja some 15 years or so before as a pretext for launching strikes. Do we not have to be clear that there is an ever-present opportunity in the middle east to make a horrendous situation full of human rights abuses even worse?

Charlotte Leslie: Absolutely. A theme that has arisen again and again in this Chamber is the tension between stability and freedoms, and the extent to which we match our concern with alleviating human rights abuses with a concern with maintaining stability. Once stability goes in a country, there are an awful lot more human rights abuses, however many there were beforehand.

Daniel Kawczynski: My hon. friend was far too modest in her analysis of her abstention in 2011 when she was a new MP. I was not aware that she had abstained; I focused on my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who voted against the no-fly zone. I pay tribute to her for effectively scrutinising the situation. Does she agree that we must learn from the mistake of the speed with which we reacted to the crisis?

Charlotte Leslie: I thank my hon. friend. For his very kind intervention. Yes, we must learn lessons, but we do that not by sitting in this Chamber saying that we will learn lessons, but by doing things better, starting from today.

The second mistake that we often make, which feeds into the reference by my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne to nursery rhymes and fairytales, is that we forget that the middle east is not Tunbridge Wells, if hon. Members will forgive me for labelling that area of the country. The models of democracy and methods that would work in the home counties will not work in the middle east. It is a very different scenario. We seem constantly to make the mistake of putting ideology and our own ideals of how the world should be ahead of how it actually is.

I have just a few questions for the Minister that are based on observations. I am not an expert on this subject at all, but it seems to me that pursuing a 100% inclusive settlement for a Libyan Parliament is fantasy. It will not happen. I worry that, in failing to realise that, we risk making the best the enemy of the good. How possible does the Minister think it is for a sustainable majority to be gathered to govern—I am talking about bringing in recalcitrant Islamists and those in Misrata—such that Britain can then engage in maintaining the human rights of the minorities that are left outside?

It seems very hard to play the active role that we want to play in helping to reconstruct Libya if we have our diplomatic service based in Tunis but making forays—flying visits—into an occupied Tripoli. Is the Minister looking at putting an expeditionary diplomatic presence back on the ground in Tripoli, so that we actually have skin in the game, and so that we can perhaps stand alongside a Libyan Parliament in the same way as we did early in 2011, which is what we should do if we really want to see it gain traction and force?

What assessment has the Minister made of the effects of our efforts to displace Daesh from Sirte on the wider political situation in Libya? Has he made any assessment of the risk of our efforts on the ground boosting one side—the Misratan militias—and the potential effect of that, if it is happening, on the Parliament and the army? It would be a shame if unintended consequences from our efforts to displace Daesh from Sirte contributed to the destabilising situation that gave birth to it in the first place.

I am aware that we have limited time, but in the absence of clear and effective practical leadership in the country, I would value the Minister’s thoughts on our relationship with General Haftar. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne rightly said that we cannot just ignore him and airbrush him from the picture because he does not fit in with our ideal of a GNA-led democracy. Whatever we think of General Haftar, he is really the only man who has managed to keep the army in one piece against an array of Islamist attacks. As my hon. Friend said, he is a controversial figure, but I struggle to think of any figure who has maintained any stability in the middle east who is not controversial. If we are looking for an uncontroversial leader to provide stability, we may have a very long wait.

To start to wrap up, I will borrow words reported to me by the former head of the British embassy office in Benghazi, Mr Joseph Walker-Cousins. He recalled words uttered by Salwa Bugaighis, a leading Libyan human rights lawyer. She had represented Islamists oppressed under the Gaddafi regime and had previously disagreed that Islamists posed a significant threat to Libya. Mr Walker-Cousins recalled how, shortly before she was assassinated by the Islamist militia group Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi on the day of the general election in June 2014, she said of Haftar: “I hate that man. I hate everything he stands for. However, I have come to understand that he is the only one capable of containing and then destroying the extremists.”

Under threat of death, Salwa Bugaighis returned to Benghazi to take part in the elections and tweeted a picture of herself with an inked finger at the polling station. Her last tweet was of a convoy of Ansar al-Sharia breaching the gates of her villa compound. She was found the next day murdered in her kitchen, and her husband, a leading pro-democracy politician in Benghazi who was in line to be elected leader of the Benghazi local council the next day, was missing, presumed dead.

I ask the Minister what our vision is for Britain’s role in Libya. Will we regain skin in the game back on the ground with expeditionary diplomatic engagement and
perhaps push for UN pro-consul level international engagement? Will we seek to work with General Haftar and the army, which are realities on the ground that we cannot ignore, or will we seek to step aside and create space for Russia to step in and start making decisions in Libya in the same way as it is now calling the shots in Syria? I would welcome the Minister’s thoughts on that.

I will finish with a quote attributed to Churchill: “United wishes and goodwill cannot overcome brute fact”.

10.15 am

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am grateful to my very good and hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) for getting this debate going. I take issue slightly with the comments on the decision in 2011. I felt that we had no choice but to save the people of Benghazi. We did not think of the consequences; we had damn all time to look downstream. I felt that the decision was quite right. My experience of watching people die when there is military inaction was why I supported military operations against Gaddafi.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) raised this matter. It is very sad that, throughout the middle east, stability and safety and a normal society so that children can go to school often seems to require a strong person, normally or even always a man, to be in charge of the country. Democracy such as we have in this country is only a serious long-term wish.

Alex Chalk: Is there a lesson from British history? If we go back to a time before there was a civil service, before there were all the organs of the state, it required a strong man in the form of the King to keep the King’s peace. That is a lesson from our own history that we would do well to observe.

Bob Stewart: I entirely take that point, which in fact reinforces the point I was making. It seems, therefore, that people such as Saddam and Gaddafi sometimes work for the majority of people in a country. For some, of course, they do not. Libya is seemingly ungovernable at the moment. Some say that there are two Parliaments, and huge numbers—thousands—of militias and generals running around. It is a ghastly place. My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne mentioned 1,600 militias—goodness, that is a heck of a lot. However, with apologies to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West, I shall concentrate on Daesh and what it could do in Libya.

I have no intelligence information on this—it is all open source—but I am told that Daesh started moving into Libya in about 2014, when it was looking for an alternative place. It found that in Sirte. When we talk about Sirte, I, as a military officer, am always reminded of David Stirling and his SAS raids on Sirte airfield, which other hon. Members are nodding about, and the gallant actions of those young men, who were mainly from New Zealand, in those days. [ Interruption. ] I am so sorry; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminds me that the Irish were there, too. We are always reminded of the Irish, Mr Chope, because they apparently have more Victoria Crosses than the English, the Welsh and the Scots put together. Mind you, I have to say, just to add a lighter note, that I am quite sure they were a bit pickled when they won them.

According to open sources, there are about 4,000 to 6,000 Daesh people operating in Sirte and around there. What is the threat? What threat are these guys going to make against us? I think that it is not as bad as it could be. They are stuck in an enclave in Sirte. Perhaps they are being hellish inside it, but if I were a Daesh commander, I would not put my operatives into a leaky boat full of migrants or refugees, with scant chance of making it across the Mediterranean. I am also sure that when they do get to Europe the security forces of the country check them out thoroughly before they get ashore.

I would not take that course of action, so how else do they get into Europe? To the east they would be going into Egypt. President Sisi is adamantly determined to wipe out terrorist groups such as Daesh, and has set the armed forces and security forces firmly against them. Again, he is a strong man in the middle east. Tunisia, after the tragedy of Sousse and Tunis last year, has decided to put up a great barricade across the border. That is being done fairly effectively, although it is not complete. Algeria is 1,000 miles away, but the Algerians too are effective at chasing down Islamists trying to cross into their territory. It is not easy to get into Europe. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West mentioned going south across the Sahara, but that is a pretty dodgy route to try.

I am thinking about the threat to us from the people in question—being a member of the Defence Committee, of course I am thinking in that way. They are holed up, but it is quite clear that we have to eliminate them. We will support anything that helps with their elimination. The objective of eliminating Daesh and other terrorist organisations in Libyan society is crucial, but, as other Members and particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West have suggested, Daesh is just one. If it is squashed, it will come out in some other form. Somehow, politically, Libya has to find a way. Whether that involves a strong person or not, I am sure of one thing: it took us 800 years to get to our imperfect democracy, and it cannot be imposed quickly. As others have suggested, there will be a Libyan model. I hope it comes quickly for the sake of the decent, normal people of Libya.

10.22 am

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on securing the debate, which has given us time to think. I heard a remark of Henry Kissinger’s about a month ago; he said that the problem these days was that when politicians came to see him they asked what they should say, not what they should think. My hon. Friend has provided us with an opportunity to think, and in the time available to me I want to deal with just one issue. I want to take on the slightly concerning chorus of voices saying that General Haftar—or Field Marshal Haftar, as he has now been styled by the House of Representatives—might somehow be the solution.

Given the enthusiasm for strong men in the middle east, my colleagues might do well to reflect that such men both create and perpetuate the conditions that make them necessary. I was slightly surprised at the intervention of my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), who was, of course, with us on the Select Committee visit to Tunis, when we sat down with Imhemed Shaib, the first vice-president...
of the House of Representatives, and a number of his colleagues. At that time, in March, they were trying to put together a House of Representatives vote to support the Government of National Accord. Our brilliant ambassador, Peter Millett, and the team of other international diplomats there have worked hard on that, to try to create what the Committee concluded was the only show in town to avoid the descent into civil war.

It was clear from the discussion that the Members of the House of Representatives had been intimidated and practically prevented from gathering together to vote so that they could support the new Government of National Accord. The House of Representatives had no votes between January and August this year, and indeed by May or June the United States had decided to sanction the Speaker, Aguila Saleh, as an obstacle to putting together support for the Government of National Accord, which all nations are formally signing up to as the best vehicle to take things forward.

It is undoubtedly true that Field Marshal Haftar commands the most substantial military force in Libya, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne mentioned, he is getting aid of one sort or another, covertly from the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere, and almost overtly from Egypt, where a degree of air power of course gives him military superiority. In the end, the solution is in the hands of Khalifa Haftar: will he place himself under the civilian authority of a Defence Minister appointed within the Government of National Accord? If that were to happen, we would begin to see the possibility of Libya finding its way through the appalling crisis that it has been in since our intervention in 2011.

The international community should be making sure that all our allies are not playing a double game in their own interest. They should instead be playing a game in the interest of the whole international community and the people of Libya, to find the best way of getting a Government who will bring all the people of Libya together. To my hon. Friend who are contemplating what I might describe as a Haftar shortcut, I would say that it would be a shortcut to civil war. The people of Libya have suffered enough. We should do everything in our power to try to prevent such an outcome.

Kwasi Kwarteng: It is all very well to say that things will descend into civil war, but in a country with 1,700 militias at the latest count, and two Governments, there is effectively civil war now.

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend is correct, but if there is to be a unification of the forces of the west against the military forces under Field Marshal Haftar, we shall see civil war on an even greater scale, with a greater scale of human misery, than we have now.

The issue for us and our interest is the collapse of central authority in Libya. That is why there is no control of the littoral, and why there is now uncontrolled emigration out of Libya and the appalling trafficking of people from the south up to the north. I add my voice to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) on what is happening on the Libyan southern border. Some of the migration trails need to be interdicted at that point, but that will be immensely more difficult if we cannot establish a decent central authority in Libya. It was the conclusion of the Foreign Affairs Committee that the Government of National Accord was the only game in town. In my judgment, we should all be focused—including through our leverage over other members of the international community—on supporting its efforts. All the alternatives are far, far worse.

10.28 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on securing the debate. He gave a substantial and comprehensive introduction to it. I do not know whether he remembers that we first crossed paths in 2010, at a young person’s “Question Time” broadcast on the BBC. He was considerably more successful in that election than I was, but I am delighted to have begun to catch up with him, at least.

Barack Obama has admitted that military intervention and the mishandling of the aftermath in Libya was the worst mistake of his presidency. In many ways that is a brave and admirable statement to make, and is evidence of a politician willing to learn from his mistakes. Unfortunately, when our previous Prime Minister has been offered the opportunity he has not been willing to show similar contrition. More worryingly, the Government still seem unwilling to learn lessons from a situation that they have helped to cause and that continues to unfold.

I will look briefly at some of the findings of the Foreign Affairs Committee and the opportunities for the UK Government to take responsibility, to learn lessons and to work for a peaceful solution in Libya, and perhaps to address some specific questions about Government policy going forward. The contribution of the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), was substantial. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) thoroughly welcomes the opportunities he has had to contribute to the work of that Committee, but its membership is predominantly made up of Government Members.

The Committee’s report is pretty scathing with regard to the actions of the former Prime Minister. It found “no evidence that the UK Government carried out a proper analysis of the nature of the rebellion in Libya.” It also found that they had no defined strategic objective, which meant that a “limited intervention to protect civilians drifted into a policy of regime change by military means.”

Furthermore, it found that there was no attempt to pause military action when Benghazi was secured, and that “the UK Government focused exclusively on military intervention” at the expense of stabilisation and rebuilding.

We have heard some more substantial and thoughtful ways that we could move forward from the hon. Member for Reigate and other Members, but the biggest example of failure came in an answer to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife, which revealed that the UK Government had spent 13 times more on bombing Libya than on rebuilding it post-war. The eight-month UK military intervention cost £320 million, but the money set aside for rebuilding totalled just £25 million. The consequences of that are there for all to see and have
been outlined by a number of Members. The hon. Member for Spelthorne outlined the impact on GDP, infrastructure and the general collapse of governance. The hon. Member for Islington North (Fabian Hamilton) spoke quite movingly about human rights abuses that she has witnessed.

The Government must support the UN’s efforts to mediate a political solution and dramatically improve the effectiveness of the EU’s practical support to the interim Government. There are still opportunities for the UK Government, working with the international community, to make a positive contribution to the outcome in Libya. The Scottish National party condemns the recent coup attempts by opposition factions in Tripoli and urges all factions to work constructively with the interim Government and the UN to end the fighting, reach a lasting political settlement and build stable state institutions that serve the people of Libya.

In the midst of ongoing military intervention in the form of airstrikes by the US, Turkey, Egypt and other regional actors, the UN has taken a lead in working with the various competing factions in an attempt to reach a viable and lasting political agreement. It must receive all possible support in doing so. The SNP urges the UK Government to channel their efforts in Libya in that way. Instead of wasting any more time or energy planning further ill-conceived or poorly planned military intervention, they should seek to work with the international community—notably the European Union—to provide proper support to the capacity-building of the Libyan state institutions and police force.

There is a particular lesson that needs to be learned from the experience in Iraq, which is the need to support the interim Government in ensuring that oil revenues are not misappropriated and are instead used for the benefit of the people of Libya. Libya has been granted an exemption from cuts in oil production by OPEC, and as competing factions within the Government seem to have reached an agreement, however fragile, on resuming oil exports, the mistakes from Iraq must not be repeated. The UK and the wider international community must work with the interim Government and the private sector to ensure that oil revenues are properly invested in rebuilding infrastructure and in supporting stable state institutions for the benefit of the Libyan people, rather than lining the pockets of corrupt Government officials or unscrupulous businessmen. In that way, perhaps at least one lesson from the debacle in Iraq will have been learned.

There are ongoing questions about the possibility of the deployment of troops. I understand that the proposed Libyan international assistance mission is on hold, but the Government need to confirm that, if UK troops were ever to be deployed in Libya, it would not happen without parliamentary approval. I am also interested in something that happens in a number of conflict situations: the continuing mismatch between Home Office guidance on the settlement of refugees and asylum seekers, and Foreign and Commonwealth Office guidance on traveling to the country in question. The FCO advises against all travel by UK citizens to Libya; the whole country is shown as red on the FCO guidance page. However, section 2.3.10 of the Home Office guidance issued in June 2016 for people seeking asylum or making their way here through some horrific situations.

“In general conditions across the country are not so poor that removal would be a breach of Article 2 or 3” of the European convention on human rights.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I did not wish to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I am conscious that I have only limited time at the end of the debate to cover everything, and this is an important issue. The advice from the Home Office deals with Libyans who need to go back. There is a different set of circumstances in place for westerners and Britons, who are a target for extremism and so forth. The hon. Gentleman is comparing apples and pears.

Patrick Grady: I am afraid I must disagree with the hon. Member. This is a matter of basic human rights and of our responsibility for the safety of individuals who have made their way here through some horrific situations.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Surely the hon. Member for Spelthorne said, we have heard from other hon. Members, for the UK Government to say it is safe to deport those people back to a country that they are not willing to advise their own citizens to travel to is, frankly, rank hypocrisy. I thank the Minister for his intervention and for making the Government’s continued position clear, but we will have to agree to disagree.

Hon. Members from Northern Ireland raised the issue of compensation for victims of terrorism. Again, a peaceful and diplomatic solution to that must be found.

In short, the UK Government must take responsibility for their failure to plan for the aftermath of their military intervention in Libya, and they must demonstrate a willingness to learn lessons from that failure. Sadly, there is little evidence of that so far, given that the objectives for military action in Syria do not appear to have materialised. Later today the House will discuss the situation in Yemen, where the Government refuse to admit any complicity, despite Saudi troops being trained in the UK, being accompanied by UK military observers and allegedly using weapons manufactured or sold in the UK. As the hon. Member for Spelthorne said, we have debates such as this and Select Committee reports for a reason. It is not too late for the Government to follow the example of Barack Obama, admit to their mistakes and set out how they intend to make amends.

10.37 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who is the Scottish National party’s spokesperson on foreign affairs and international development.

Back in 2005 I had the opportunity to visit Libya with the Foreign Affairs Committee. It was very different in those days. Gaddafi remained supreme, and I found, as we all did, the country to be a paranoid place, covered with posters of Gaddafi—“the father of Africa”—with his portrait stemming out of a map of the whole of...
Africa. It was a deeply disturbing place; there were no street signs or even road markings because they were so scared of invasion. We did not have the opportunity then to meet Colonel Gaddafi—I never met him, thankfully—but we met his deputy, Musa Kusa, who was one of the most sinister people I have ever met. During the revolution he “defected” to the west and came to live in Britain. I do not know if he is still here, but he gave us a portrait of Libya in 2005 that was worrying to say the least, given the human rights abuses and the absolute authority of Gaddafi and the way he dealt with opposition.

Daniel Kawczynski: My understanding is that Musa Kusa did not come to live in the United Kingdom. I believe he is currently living in the middle east.

Fabian Hamilton: That is interesting to learn; he certainly survived, although he was clearly Gaddafi’s henchman and de facto deputy.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) on raising a really important issue in the debate. It is something Parliament has not paid sufficient attention to, and the Government have not paid sufficient attention to it either; I am sure the Minister will contradict that when he winds up the debate in a few minutes’ time. I also commend the Foreign Affairs Committee—I served on it for 10 years—under the leadership of the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt)—I think he is a right hon. Member now.

Crispin Blunt indicated dissent.

Fabian Hamilton: No? I am baffled by that. In the hon. Gentleman’s contribution, he showed his detailed knowledge of the current machinations of Libya’s internal politics and said quite clearly that the British Government should not support General Haftar, otherwise the country will descend into civil war. It is hard to see how much worse it can get, given some of the things we have heard today.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne made some important points about the two Governments, about the GNA being backed by the international community—something that the Foreign Affairs Committee certainly agrees with—and about the economic situation, which is very alarming indeed. In fact, the United Nations human development report ranked Libya as the 53rd most advanced country in the world, with a GDP per person similar to a number of European countries. That was in 2011. Five years later, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, that has halved, and it continues to fall precipitously. That is extremely worrying for not only the people of that country but Libya’s place in the region and the rest of us, including in terms of migration, which the hon. Gentleman pointed out clearly. He asked in his conclusion how we can marry the ideals of what we would like to happen and what is actually happening on the ground. I am sure the Minister will address that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly wanted an update on the lack of success in getting compensation for victims of Libyan terrorism from the Government of Libya, though we do not know who the Government of Libya really are at the moment. He said that chaos reigns in many parts of Libya and pointed, as he often does—rightly so—to the continued persecution of Christians in that country, as in so many other parts of the world.

One of the best contributions today was from the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie)—not just Bristol North; I often get called the hon. Member for Leeds North, not the hon. Member for Leeds North East. She displayed an extraordinary knowledge of the area, with some extremely pertinent observations and questions that I will leave the Minister to answer.

One point that has come through in this debate is the proliferation of small arms in Libya, as in so many other parts of Africa, which fuels death and destruction and the different militia groups roaming the country trying to claim territory and their superiority, or the superiority of their particular ideology. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimated that out of a total Libyan population of 6.3 million, half have been impacted by the armed conflict, with 2.4 million in need of some form of protection and humanitarian assistance. More than 400,000 people have been displaced since the conflict started.

Reference has been made to our British ambassador, Peter Millett—a man who I have come to know well in his former roles in Jordan and Cyprus. He is one of our best diplomats. If anybody can do the work of the British Government in Libya, it is Peter Millett and his excellent team. However, as the hon. Member for Bristol North West pointed out, the team is based in Tunis. I spent some time in our embassy in Tripoli. We have some very good buildings and a very good estate there. I appreciate that it is not a safe place to be right now. It did not seem that safe under Gaddafi, to be honest. Constant threats were being made against the British mission there, even at that time, but I share the view that some kind of mission needs to be based in Tripoli. Is the Minister prepared to comment on the possibility of that happening soon? As I say, if anyone can do it, it is Peter Millett and his team.

It is estimated that there are more than 3,000 Daesh fighters in Libya at the moment. That is what the then Foreign Secretary, the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, said in his report in 2016. The US intelligence agencies believe that number could well be considerably higher. It continues to increase, as many of the fighters go to Libya, instead of Iraq and Syria, to join Daesh.

The Minister has stated that the international community needs to rally together and be ready to “provide service and support” to the GNA. The UK Government have stated that the security agenda in Libya must be “owned and led” by the GNA, but how do we actually make that happen? The British Government have also discussed the deployment of approximately 1,000 ground forces as part of an Italian initiative with Spain, France, Italy and other nations, but only at the invitation of the GNA. The previous Foreign Secretary, the current Chancellor of the Exchequer, said on 19 April:

“Libya has Africa’s largest oil and gas reserves and a population of... six million”...

—the population that existed before the civil war. Currently, only 200,000 barrels of oil per day are being produced. The UK is assisting Libya, I understand, in attempting to bring that number up to 700,000 barrels a day, but oil is the main source of revenue and international finance in that country. The country did, of course, have a
sovereign wealth fund—the Libyan Investment Authority—that used the proceeds of oil revenues prior to 2011, but those funds have been frozen ever since the conflict started.

Reference has been made to removing chemical weapons still in existence in Libya and the risk they may have to the population of that country, to the wider region and to Europe. The current Foreign Secretary said in August this year:

“The UK, in close co-operation with our international partners, is taking practical and effective action to eliminate chemical weapon risks in Libya.”

Will the Minister tell us a little more about what is being done to neutralise and remove those very dangerous chemical weapons that could be a threat to so many? I understand that in August the Royal Navy assisted in the removal of a batch of known materials that could be used in the manufacture of chemical weapons, but what more are we doing?

The Minister has quite a lot to follow up on, so I will wrap up. Let me quote something that President Obama said earlier this year, which has already been quoted this morning but is worth saying again:

“When I go back and I ask myself what went wrong, there’s room for criticism, because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya’s proximity, being invested in the follow-up.”

He went on to say that the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, was “distracted by a range of other things”.

Can the Minister tell us what, in practical terms, the Government are prepared to do to try to reduce the flow of weapons and weapons currently in circulation in Libya, and to bring about further concerted support for the GNA, which, as many Members have said, is really the only hope for rebuilding Libya?

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to what has been an important debate. I will put out a written ministerial statement on this matter. It is clear there is an awful lot of information that the Government are aware of, but there is also a lot of disinformation and confusion. I will also make a recommendation to the Foreign Secretary that, as with Syria and Iraq, an oral statement is made to the House on a regular basis, updating colleagues on what is happening here. Today’s debate is pertinent and it is a pleasure to respond to it.

Many discussions on Libya go straight into the details. That needs to be done, but I want to step back for a second and look at the context in which this is playing out. It is often seen through the prism of Gaddafi and the consequences of his removal. Seeking solutions to today’s challenges requires a deeper understanding of what is happening and the character of this north African piece of land. Going back to the 7th century BC, Libya has been occupied or run by the Venetians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs and the Ottomans, each of them carving their own personality unto the three regions of Libya: Fezzan, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

During the interim war period, it was occupied by Italy, and then by us and the French after the second world war. Then came independence in 1951, under King Idris, who was removed in the coup that we know led to 40 years of misrule by what started off being Lieutenant Gaddafi—talking of promotions, he promoted himself to Colonel because he was trying to emulate Colonel Nasser further to the east. That 40 years of misrule destroyed any tribal relationships that existed. It stifled any political representation and undermined the development of institutions. That all came about and was laid bare in the 2011 revolution.

Sadly today—we have heard a little of this in the Chamber this morning—some people are attempting to rewrite recent history, linking the 2011 decision for the west to intervene with the very difficulties we face today. That glosses over important events in between. We must not forget that the decision to intervene was international and supported by UN Security Council resolution 1973 and by the Arab League. We took action to prevent attacks on civilians that were about to take place. There would have been a bloodbath if we had not intervened. Even before Gaddafi went into hiding, more than 60 countries, with the African Union, recognised the National Transitional Council—the body of Libyan people based in Benghazi who were looking ahead to a post-Gaddafi world.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I will give way briefly. I have only a short time left.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am sure my hon. Friend’s skill will enable him to make a more concise speech than the one written for him, or that he wrote himself.

Why would President Obama say this was the worst mistake of his presidency if everything were as hunky-dory and rosy as my hon. Friend suggests?

Mr Ellwood: First, I confirm that I write my own speeches and I am happy to place that on the record. Secondly, if I may, I will come to the aftermath and what is happening in relation to international views later.

I stress the point about the context in which things happened in 2011, which was made by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), a former north Africa and middle east Minister, who is no longer in his place. There were elections in July 2012 and the General National Congress was formed. Libya was starting to take charge of its own destiny. In 2014, there were elections for the new Council of Deputies.

It is recognised today that perhaps we did not do enough. Perhaps the west could have done more, but many agencies, including UN agencies, were asked to leave Libya because the Libyan people wanted to take ownership of the path they wanted to pursue without interference from the west. Could we have done more? Of course we could have done more. That is what President Obama is looking at and why he is making those comments.

I certainly believe that, with the disparate society we are dealing with that had 40 years of misrule, not enough happened during Gaddafi’s reign for society to develop. I politely disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne that nothing has happened over the past five years. Elections have taken place; there is a Prime Minister in place and there is astructure, including a Government of National Accord, a Presidency Council, which needs to be confirmed and put in place, a House of Representatives and a State Council.
Those important infrastructure institutions must be given the opportunity to work. It is right to say that they are not working as efficiently as they should, because there are spoilers and stakeholders who are choosing to follow their own agendas. The challenge facing us today is getting them to realise who benefits if they do not support that infrastructure—the criminal gangs that move the migrants through and the extremism that flourishes in that vacuum.

The Skhirat process helped to empower the moderates and the Khartoum process brought together countries around Libya to ensure that they secure their borders and provide support to Libya—that was raised as a concern in the debate. International countries have come together. I have sat in many meetings discussing how better to co-ordinate our international aid and our work to improve governance, and to ensure that that happens. The issue came to the fore in December 2015 with the agreement that rolled into Security Council resolution 2259 formally recognising the Government of National Accord as the sole legislative body to take Libya forward.

I will pose a question, but I do not want to go down this rabbit hole. Which countries can intervene when something very bad is happening in another part of the world? I take hon. Members back to Rwanda and what happened there. The world blinked while a travesty took place. Is it right that the international community glosses over things and asks who in the world can step forward and which nations have the ability and commitment to do that? There are very few and they can be counted on one hand, but we are one of them. What would colleagues do if they were in No. 10 and Benghazi had tanks on the outskirts that were about to roll in? Would they have a plan for what happens next? They would have to think about that, and also about our duty as a permanent member of the United Nations interested in supporting international security and stabilisation and decide whether to act. That is exactly what David Cameron did and I believe it was the right decision.

Libya’s governance structure today is not as strong as it should be, but we must give our support to Prime Minister Siraj. I believe that the Libyan political agreement is the framework to enable things to move forward and make that happen. We want the Libyan Government to submit promptly a revised list of Ministers which the House of Representatives must endorse and we need a more unified command structure under General Haftar. He is a general and he needs to answer to civilian governance structures. That is very important indeed.

We must address the challenge of Daesh and people traffickers. If there is time I will come to that.

The conflict is unique and very different from all the others. There is a lot of plate-spinning in the middle east and north Africa, but this is different because there are working institutions. Oil is flowing—there are up to 500,000 barrels a day—and that money is going into the central bank. It is paying people who, ironically, are fighting on both sides of the argument. The salaries of teachers, doctors and nurses are being paid because those basic structures are in place. However, we certainly need to do more and that is why we have allocated £10 million to provide technical support for the Government of National Accord.

Operation Sophia was mentioned a couple of times. It is important to stem the flow of migrants choosing to make an horrific journey in an attempt to get to Europe. Unfortunately, we can work only in international waters. We cannot get into territorial waters at the moment because the Government are not fully in place to give us that permission and Russia is denying us the ability to use military capability in that space. We must answer that, otherwise we are encouraging people to come here. When ships pick them up, which British ships have done, those people are taken to Italy, so we are still not breaking the chain. We are now working to train a local coastguard to break that chain so the boats never leave Libyan soil in the first place.

Several hon. Members mentioned Daesh. It is absolutely right that we are concerned about the vacuum. Its numbers are down to 200 or 300 in strength and many are indigenous local people choosing to join that gang because that is where the money is. That is where the guns come from and where the success seems to be. That is why it is important that the Government offer something different to fill that vacuum of governance. It is important to recognise what we can do, but also where things are in the country. It is not as bleak as some of the comments today have suggested, but we are not there yet in any sense whatever.

In conclusion, Libya is extremely complex, as has been highlighted by colleagues today. It is dynamic and certainly challenging. The process of building trust between communities, confidence in political institutions and willingness to compromise for the common good will not be easy. It is up to the political leaders of Libya—I stress this—to make this work. We remain committed to supporting them, but also to working for peace and security in Libya, not just for the sake of stability in the region where the UK has important interests, but for the sake of the Libyan people.

I very much welcome this debate and look forward to the closing comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne. I will seek to provide a full and regular oral statement so that the House is informed as progress moves forward.

10.59 am

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am grateful for the Minister’s remarks. We have covered many of the issues that bedevil Libya and have a huge impact on our safety and security here in Europe, with particular regard to the question of migration. I conclude by saying this is not the end of the matter, but the beginning of a fruitful and, I hope, effective engagement with many of the issues that have been raised this morning.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered British engagement with Libya.
A34 Safety

10.59 am

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered safety on the A34.

I am grateful for the opportunity to hold this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. This is an important opportunity for me and my colleagues to describe the importance of improvements to the A34, which is a major arterial trunk road that runs from the south coast up through Hampshire, west Berkshire and Oxfordshire to the midlands. It is a vital economic route that is also used by many thousands of commuters—in fact, some 79,000 vehicles a day use the road.

May I put on record my gratitude to the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), who as a Back Bencher campaigned vigorously on this issue and secured £50 million towards road improvements in the previous Parliament? She cannot be at the debate today, and as a Minister she would not be able to speak in it, but I know she will continue to work and lobby on this issue of importance to her constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who also unfortunately cannot be with us today, has been extremely active in campaigning for improvements. Many of my hon. Friends and colleagues in the Chamber who also unfortunately cannot be with us today, has been extremely active in campaigning for improvements. Many of my hon. Friends and colleagues in the Chamber will no doubt wish to intervene or make remarks in the course of this short debate.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It will be useful for my right hon. Friend to note that the A34 runs through a bit of the north of my constituency, near the constituency of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood). My right hon. Friend can rely on me to help campaign for the changes he wants to see on the road, which I am sure he will come on to shortly.

Mr Vaizey: I am grateful. My heart always lifts a little when I am on the section of road that runs through my hon. Friend’s constituency. Given his track record in working for his constituents I know that he, too, will play an important part in a campaign that, although I expect it to be long-running, we hope will lead to some significant improvements.

The central point of my remarks, and no doubt that of colleagues, is that the A34 is no longer fit for purpose. It is a dangerous road, and the delays and accidents that happen regularly on it are having a significant economic impact on one of the most economically productive areas of the country.

The road is dangerous: there were almost 2,000 accidents on the A34 between 2010 and 2014. On the stretch of road that runs between the M4 and the M40 through Oxfordshire and west Berkshire, 32 people have unfortunately been killed. In the past four months, there have been two fatal accidents and numerous injuries both serious and less serious. I am sad to say that one recent fatal accident claimed the lives of four people, including three children, and the most recent accident resulted in the tragic death of a three-year-old child. Action is therefore long overdue. The urgent need to improve road safety alone would justify a significant investment of money and time from the Department for Transport and Highways England.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate in what seems to be a sauna this morning. Will he acknowledge that while the statistics he outlined are alarming, they are even more alarming if we add in the accidents that take place at intersections with other roads? For instance, I am concerned about the junction of the A303 and the A34 at Bullington Cross, which by about 100 yards is not in my constituency but which is used nevertheless by my constituents. A significant number of accidents there are reported as A303 accidents but relate to the junction between the two roads and could be attributed to either road.

Mr Vaizey: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. I focused solely on the accidents on the small section of the A34 that concerns me as the constituency MP, but he is quite right that if one takes the statistics along the whole of the A34 and for accidents attributed to other roads in close proximity, I am afraid the toll is higher. That again leads to the central point about the need for a clear strategic plan for the whole of the A34, to improve road safety.

Having started with the most important issue of keeping people safe on the A34, it is also important to highlight the economic impact that the delays and accidents are having on my constituency, and no doubt the whole of the region. For example, I am privileged to represent Harwell Campus, which is the one of the world’s leading scientific research centres. Its director, Angus Hornor, wrote to me recently and said:

“I often witness dangerous conditions on A34... Immediate term safety improvements will be strongly supported by thousands of us at Harwell Campus... The A34 is operating far beyond its designed capacity and major infrastructure investment should be allocated right now to substantially improve its capacity.”

He continued:

“In a broader context, it is essential that the UK maximises the potential of its world leading knowledge economy... UK hotspots must be properly connected... Better vehicle flow along A34 would have a substantial positive impact at Harwell by facilitating even more collaboration with our neighbours at University of Oxford, plus tens of thousands of other regular research visitors and hundreds of companies who use A34 to access Harwell’s ideas and £2 billion of international labs.”

I also have the pleasure of representing Milton Park. On that business park there are 250 companies employing 9,500 people. The park is located right next to the A34, and its productivity is being severely affected by delays on the road. Its director, Philip Campbell, wrote to me and said that “the A34 is central to maximising future success of this unique and vibrant area. A safe, free-flowing A34 is critical, for our area’s future growth and prosperity and for the resilience, health and wellbeing of residents.”

He signs off with a flourish:

“The A34 needs an A1 plan!”

Our local enterprise partnerships are closely involved in campaigning for improvements. Oxlep, the Oxfordshire LEP, and the Thames Valley Berkshire LEP have written a joint letter to me and my hon. Friends in which they say:

“As a key transport artery through our respective areas we believe it critically important to address the capacity issues of the A34 now; to help mitigate the serious and all too often tragic incidents that have taken place over the last five years and to support economic growth.”
Kit Malthouse: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case for the A34, and its economic impacts in particular. Does he agree that another impact—I am interested in whether he experiences this as well—is that when there is the slightest delay on the A34, the alternative routes, which are more rural in nature, become completely jammed with lorries trying to avoid the traffic? In my constituency those routes include the A343, which runs down from Highclere through Hurstbourne Tarrant to Andover.

Mr Vaizey: That is an excellent point. All too often I have witnessed the A34 at a complete standstill. Sometimes I am lucky and I am witnessing that from a distance when I am not actually on the road. As my hon. Friend points out, one then witnesses the traffic overspill that naturally results from that, with large lorries and a lot of commuter traffic using rural roads that are clearly unfit for purpose and go through villages and small towns.

The Oxford local transport plan, which is part of the county council’s initiative to look at improving transport in the area, notes:

“The A34 is particularly congested and adversely affecting journey time reliability. This is particularly due to its high proportion of HGV movements, which account for above 20% of daily trips.”

The Road Haulage Association has written to say that it is “constantly hearing complaints from members of deliveries failing booking times and the cost of delays with drivers running out of their legal driving and duty hours, due to delays on the A34.”

It cited the case of a small company whose 15 vehicles get stuck in traffic for 30 minutes every morning and evening. It loses about 4,000 man hours a year, which it has calculated costs about £150,000. With that comes an environmental cost, which is the third element that should enter our thinking when looking at improvements to the A34.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): My interest in today’s debate is that I use the A34 a lot, and have done over the past five years, because I have an interest on the south coast. From my constituency in Coventry, it is one of the main routes via the M40 down to the south coast, especially Bournemouth and the surrounding areas. I have witnessed a lot of accidents and been in a lot of traffic jams on the A34. In the right hon. Gentleman’s opinion, is over-capacity the only reason why there are so many accidents?

Mr Vaizey: Over-capacity is the reason why there are so many accidents. In this case, over-capacity means that the road itself—being a dual carriageway and not a motorway—does not have any capacity to deal with accidents. We have not so far had what we need, which is what the Government are now considering: a strategic plan for the road network for the whole area, particularly the links between Oxford and Cambridge, which will have a knock-on effect of improving the A34. If that strategic study goes ahead, it will have an impact.

It is important that I mention the work of the A34 Action Group, which is a group of my own and my hon. Friends’ concerned constituents, including those who have lost loved ones and people who regularly use the route to commute. It put forward a manifesto that encapsulates some of the small, immediate improvements that can be made, specifically focusing on safety. They include a full risk assessment of the road; evidence-based—that is important to emphasise—traffic-calming measures, such as average speed cameras or chevrons in the right places; and improved flow mechanisms, such as a crawler lane or, in particular parts of the A34, no-overtaking areas. We are not saying that there should be a blanket ban on lorries overtaking, but there are certain parts of the A34, in particular on steep inclines, where no-overtaking areas would be suitable. The suggested improvements also include refuge and rest areas and a hard shoulder. That goes to the point made by the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), because when there is an accident on the A34 there is nowhere for anyone to go. If there were a hard shoulder where people could pull over or HGV drivers could rest, that would have a massive impact.

Improved junctions, which I know are of concern to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse)—we were discussing it earlier today—are also important. There has been a fantastic improvement at the junction with the M4, and my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon secured £50 million to help improve junctions at places such as Pear Tree, Hinksey and Botley, as well as East Ilsley in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury. What is needed is, for example, longer slip roads for easier access to and from the M4. The Botley and Pear Tree junctions have already been redesigned as a result of that funding. A driver information system to alert commuters to problems ahead, a number of CCTV cameras and other technology improvements, such as detection loops, are also being introduced with that funding.

Measures are under way, and we now have the Oxford-Cambridge expressway strategic study, which was published this summer. It calls for a “strong case” for “strategic transport interventions” and identifies the A34 as a key part of the jigsaw in improving east-west links between Oxford and Cambridge. It notes, as so many have done, that the problem is not going to go away and is simply going to get worse. There are 100,000 new homes planned for Oxfordshire in the next 15 years and a prediction of 85,000 jobs being created there over the next 10 or 20 years, so the strain on roads and infrastructure is simply going to increase.

I know that my right hon. Friend no doubt has a desk full of the many proposals to improve strategic road networks. Only today, I saw that a group of my colleagues from Kent had been to the Chancellor to seek improvements on the A2. I know that money is limited, but I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to look at the case of the A34. In post-Brexit Britain, where we are looking for infrastructure investment and it is a matter of national debate, we need strategic infrastructure investment that has an immediate impact on our economic prospects. We could not find a better area in which to make improvements than the south-east around Oxfordshire, west Berkshire, and Hampshire, where we have such a concentration of innovative, future-looking companies that need that investment in order to keep growing.

I know that the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) wants to make some short remarks, so I will conclude. I look forward to his remarks and to hearing from the Minister. May I also put on record how grateful I am that he has agreed to meet me and
colleagues at the end of November? I am also going to meet Highways England with colleagues in November to discuss this issue.

11.15 am

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate my colleague, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vazey), on securing this debate and on his speech, and I thank him for providing time for me to make a brief contribution.

Although the A34 does not touch my constituency, it is used by thousands of my constituents and local businesses every day. It is, indeed, not fit for purpose and is dangerous, as the recent horrific record of traffic accidents shows. As the right hon. Gentleman said, the problems are the volume of traffic—in particular, heavy lorries on what is a national strategic route—limited capacity and the speed of vehicles. Like other Oxfordshire colleagues, I have been pressing for safety and capacity improvements and I, too, call for the measures that he mentioned today.

The problem we face is that the A34 is fulfilling a motorway role without motorway capacity or safety features. Last month, in response to my written questions, the Minister assured me of A34 scheme improvements between Chieveley and the M40, including vehicle detection loops to inform electronic traffic signage, CCTV and driver information systems. Those would be welcome, as would distance separation chevrons, safer stopping places and further junction improvements. Perhaps the most significant thing the Minister told me, however, was that Highways England intends to start work by March 2020 and that his Department is not minded to carry out a further review of the route at this time. That simply is not good enough, and I urge him to think again. Measures need to be started now if the risk of further accidents is to be reduced, and there needs to be a major review of the whole route.

John Howell: I fully support all the measures that the right hon. Gentleman has mentioned and think they would be extremely useful, but will they not come to naught unless the A34 is turned into a motorway?

Mr Smith: That is the logical conclusion of what I said: it needs to be motorway standard to guarantee the safety and capacity that we all want to see. The problems are only going to get worse as the economy grows in the future. As well as a major review of the whole route, we need to look at options for getting traffic across from the A34 to the M40 south of Oxford, to address the additional problems caused by the A34 being both a strategic route to the midlands and the north and a local access road and Oxford bypass.

I feel sure that the Minister will want to reflect on the points made today. I am glad he has agreed to a meeting at the end of November, and I would very much like to be part of the delegation meeting him.

11.18 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): It is a great pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Chope, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vazey) on securing it. He is a doughty champion of his constituents and a great friend of mine.

As my right hon. Friend described, the A34 has been of concern for a considerable length of time. He was right to draw attention to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), who raised and discussed this issue with me just this summer, following the tragedies that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage drew to the Chamber’s attention. It is absolutely right, at the outset, that I offer my condolences and sympathies to all those affected by those dreadful events he has highlighted today. Sympathy matters, but support matters more. It is really important, for those people and others, that we show that support; I think Disraeli said that “justice is truth in action.”—[Official Report, 11 February 1851; Vol. 114, c. 412.]

We need action, because it is just and right that we give proper consideration to the A34.

First, let me deal with a matter that the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith) raised—I have lots of notes here but I will refer to them only fleetingly, because I do not want to lecture people who already know more than most about details relating to the A34. However, I want to say, following his remarks, that I will review safety on the A34. I will take a close look and commit to a study of safety on the road. I have been thinking about the issue for some time; discussing it with my officials, given that this has been a matter of detailed concern, as I say, for a considerable time; and I have reflected on representations that have been made to me by Members in this Chamber and others and feel that we now need to look at safety on the A34.

Secondly, I am absolutely committed to the meeting that has been mentioned twice. It needs to be with all interested parties—by that I mean not only all colleagues who have a direct involvement and interest in these matters because of their constituency responsibilities, but Highways England and my officials. This round-table meeting should involve a genuinely open-minded debate about what more can be done.

A series of steps can be taken, so let me rehearse those in detail. I have no doubt that further technological improvements that we can make to this road will make a difference. Having looked at the map of the area, I am particularly conscious of the problems in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage because of its topography. This is a relatively small road with hilly terrain, carrying a large number of HGVs, not least to and from the port of Southampton and the south coast. For that reason, it is sometimes a difficult road to navigate.

There may be further technological changes we can make. I am happy to write to hon. Members following this short debate to rehearse in detail some of the improvements that have been made. Many safety improvements have been made over the last five or six years by the Government, Highways England and prior to that, the Highways Agency, as hon. and right hon. Friends and Members know. However, we may be able to go still further with technological changes, by which I mean such things as interactive signage, gantries, and more information being provided to drivers that will compensate and mitigate some of the challenges associated with the topography that I described.

That being the first thing, the second thing was referred to by my right hon. Friend. We are, of course, looking at the Oxford-Cambridge expressway, which is part of...
Mr John Hayes

The Government’s roads strategy. He made clear that the provisional study—the interim report—was published in August and he will know that the final report is due to be published later this year. Inevitably, that will include considerations about this stretch of road and will give us the opportunity to think through what more can be done in a reasonably short time. I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Oxford East about 2020 and know that hon. Members, local authorities and others will want more urgent work. When we have that report, I am prepared to look, on the back of the round-table discussions, at what more urgent work could be committed to as part of the road investment strategy phase 1 and consistent with the Oxford-Cambridge expressway report.

However, I want to go further. The call has been made for a still more strategic piece of work—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) described this as “a motorway”—and I think we need to think that through. I suspect that would be part of the road investment strategy as it moves into its second and third phases, because it requires a different scale of work, but none the less, the significance of the road is not lost on me. We may be able to look in the road investment strategy as it moves forward at that still more fundamental piece of work on this stretch of road.

Safety and congestion are the two issues that have been raised in this debate, and they relate closely to each other. A road that is congested does not only cause inconvenience to the local traffic, and hon. and right hon. Members will know that we are committed to a number of local schemes in Oxford. We are working with the LEP, which I emphasise is absolutely at the heart of making representations on this matter, and alongside local authorities to ease congestion around Oxford. However, the safety issues are there and further south on the road, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage and beyond. Looking at the separate but related issues of safety and congestion requires the lateral, innovative thinking that I have tried to illustrate and outline in this brief response.

In summary, we will continue to work with all the interested parties concerned and continue to invest in the local schemes that ease congestion around Oxford; I agree to the round-table, open-ended meeting of the kind that I described to seek views from all those who know and care about this road; I am happy to review safety on the road—there are criteria for that, but I have never been a man who is constrained by criteria imposed by others, as you know, Mr Chope. I am prepared to say that I have made the decision and announce now that I will institute that safety review. I am also prepared to look at further technological change to improve safety on the road; happy to consider what can be done in the road investment strategy in its first phase to mitigate some of the risks associated with this route; and prepared to consider what more strategic changes might be made at a later stage of the road investment strategy as it moves to phases 2 and 3.

I thank my right hon. Friend for drawing these matters to my attention once again. I hope he feels that the debate has been worthwhile in pressing a Minister who is not reluctant to use these kind of debates to reconsider Government thinking, and in pressing this Minister to take action necessary not only to avoid the tragedies that I mentioned, in amplifying my right hon. Friend’s words of sympathy at the outset, but to improve the wellbeing of the people in this part of our country.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.
Disclosure and Barring Service

[SIR DAVID AMESS in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of the Disclosure and Barring Service.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I sought this debate because, since being elected last year, I have been approached by a significant number of my constituents who have experienced serious personal consequences as a result of delays in the processing of enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service checks.

When I asked written parliamentary questions on the subject earlier this year, two things happened. First, the answers to my questions did not provide any comfort or confidence that the problems were in hand. Secondly, many more individuals, voluntary sector organisations, care providers, public sector employers and others got in touch with me to say that they had had problems, confirming my view that there is a significant problem with far-reaching impacts. Today I will discuss the nature of the problems with the DBS, the impact on individuals, the reasons behind the poor performance, the Government’s response, and the key issues of the current non-portability of DBS checks.

The DBS is a vital part of the safeguarding process. The process began under the Criminal Records Bureau established by the Labour Government, and I support it wholeheartedly. It is absolutely right that the checks take place and that anyone who, because of a previous conviction, is not a safe person to work with children or vulnerable adults can be prevented from doing so. However, the service must be run in an efficient and effective way, and it is clear that there are major problems in many parts of the country. Performance levels depend on the DBS itself and on the relationship between the DBS and the police forces across the country that are charged with delivering 25% of checks that come through the police character inquiry centres. The DBS and the police must work hand in hand to deliver a good service.

I will discuss that in further detail shortly, but I want to be clear about the impacts that the current delays in processing enhanced DBS checks are having. In November 2015, I was contacted by a constituent who was a student nurse and who needed a DBS check to be completed so that she could take up her student placement. She made the original application in August 2015. She did not receive her DBS clearance until December 2015, as a consequence of which she missed the first term of her nursing placement.

In March 2016, I was contacted by another constituent, who was seeking to complete six months of clinical experience in hospital and voluntary sector settings before enrolling on a programme of doctoral study in clinical psychology. He had submitted three applications for the three settings in which he was undertaking placements. That is an issue in its own right, to which I will return. The first application was made in October 2015, with two subsequent applications shortly thereafter. In anticipation of beginning his placements six months ahead of the commencement of the doctoral programme, my constituent resigned from his job only to wait several months for his DBS checks to be finished. That happened only in July 2016, far too late for the placements to be completed in time for the start of the course in September. My constituent has been forced to claim jobseeker’s allowance and to delay the commencement of his studies by a whole year as a consequence of the delays.

I have also been contacted by a healthcare worker who was unable to take up a job offer for five months; a parent-run nursery that is in breach of Ofsted regulations because it cannot appoint the required number of trustees until they have all been DBS cleared; a care agency that is unable to recruit a sufficient number of careworkers quickly enough to meet demand; and schools and hospitals experiencing frustrating delays in being able to fill vacant posts.

There are harder cases, including my constituent who is an ex-offender and has found it very difficult to find work. In May 2016, he was offered a job that he was keen to take up. He contacted me about the delay in processing his enhanced DBS check. Despite my office contacting the DBS a number of times and receiving assurances on three occasions that the case had been escalated, my constituent is still waiting for his DBS check more than five months later and the rare offer of employment has been withdrawn. When people are doing their very best to do the right thing and to turn a corner in their lives and move on, it cannot be right that the Government are placing an unnecessary barrier in their way.

The Criminal Justice Alliance—a coalition of 110 charities working across the criminal justice pathway—contacted me to say that, in recent months, the performance of the DBS, particularly in London, has been having a severe impact on its capacity to deliver services, delaying rehabilitation work for many prisoners. The Local Government Association is concerned about the national impact of DBS delays on the social care sector.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), who is unable to attend the debate, contacted me with examples from her constituency of people who have been forced to claim benefits and use food banks, and who have even been issued with eviction notices, because they have been unable to take up employment as a consequence of DBS delays. In Sheffield, as elsewhere in the country, taxi drivers must undergo annual DBS checks. That is particularly important given the links that there have been between the taxi trade and child sexual exploitation in some parts of the country. However, the DBS is so slow in Sheffield that taxi drivers are sometimes unable to work for a third of every year as they await their certificate.

My point is that the consequences of the poor performance of the service are far-reaching, can be devastating, and can result in additional costs to the public sector and important posts in our public services and elsewhere remaining unfilled. I have sought to illustrate the impact on individuals, but what do we know about the bigger picture? The Government have not published any official data on the performance of the DBS since July, and have published no data at all on the most severely delayed cases, meaning those delayed beyond 60 days.
In July, of 51 police forces, only 32 had achieved the target of processing 85% of applications within 14 days. At the Metropolitan police, only 14% had been processed within that time. In North Yorkshire, the figure was only 12%, and in Nottinghamshire, it was just 7%. There is enormous variation in performance. Also in July 2016, the average time taken by the Metropolitan police to process an application was 128 days, while the average time taken in Norfolk was 1.8 days.

The Government website acknowledges that there are delays and states that action is being taken to address them but, in my view, the lack of comprehensive performance data, including the absence of any data at all on the most severe delays, combined with the lack of any substantive or detailed information about the plan for recovery, is not acceptable. The Government owe it to the many people suffering the severe adverse consequences of DBS delays to be much more transparent about the scale of the problem and the action being taken to address it.

I have spoken with the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents 12,000 members based in the Home Office, including those working in the DBS, and more than 6,000 members in the Metropolitan Police Service. The PCS told me that, in February this year, the Metropolitan police character inquiries centre had a backlog of 70,000 applications waiting to be processed, with an average weekly intake of 6,000 new applications. That amounts to a 12-week backlog. The problem got so bad that DBS customer services staff were provided with guidance on what to do when they received calls from customers who were suicidal, which were becoming a more frequent occurrence.

The PCS acknowledges that some management action has been taken, including changes of leadership in the Metropolitan police team responsible for the character inquiries sector; increases in staffing; an increase in the short-term nature of the funding; and streamlining of the process. That action led to some reduction in the backlog but it is clear that some of the problems are structural. Those include long-term understaffing and the short-term nature of the funding provided by the DBS to the police, which results in high levels of temporary staff and job insecurity, and means that experienced staff often find more secure work elsewhere. There are also problems with computer software.

Although I am strongly supportive of the role of the DBS, it is important that progress is made towards delivering a fully portable certificate. In my constituency, as across the rest of the UK, people move jobs, often work for more than one employer, or use valuable skills from their day job as a volunteer in the evenings or at weekends. All those circumstances lead to multiple applications that add to the workload of the DBS. I place on the record my support for the many employers and voluntary sector bodies calling for the development of a fully portable certificate.

Finally, I have personally been very disappointed by the responses I have received from the Government and the police when I have raised the issue of the poor performance of the DBS. Although I acknowledge that there is a problem, their responses across the board have failed to reflect the serious impact that the poor service is having on my constituents and on residents across the country. They have failed to convey any sense of responsibility for the failures. It simply cannot be the case that a system designed to protect our most vulnerable residents has the effect of punishing many entirely innocent citizens. That situation must be addressed.

In closing, I ask the Minister to answer the following questions. Will the Government publish full performance data for the DBS, arranged by individual police force, including data on the most severely delayed applications? Will they publish the recovery plan for the DBS, including the performance targets it is working towards? Will they consider bringing the DBS back within the Home Office? Will they review the funding arrangements for the police, with a view to providing a more stable funding environment to enable the police to resource DBS checks properly? Will the Government commit to compensation for those who have lost earnings as a consequence of DBS delays? Will they publish plans to progress fully portable DBS checks? Finally, will they commit that, in situations where someone’s offer of employment is in jeopardy as a consequence of a DBS delay, their application will be escalated and dealt with within a fixed timescale of no more than three working days to prevent further hardship and cost to the public sector through the benefits system?

2.41 pm

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for securing this debate. This is an important matter and something that we perhaps come across even more in London than elsewhere. I am a barrister and have dealt with a number of cases where the police have resisted challenges to DBS refusals. I have also gone through a DBS check myself as a school governor—I am pleased to say that the check was negative.

Like the hon. Lady, I have received correspondence about DBS checks in my postbag and inbox. Teachers, nursery workers, care providers, charity workers, taxi drivers and even members of the police and the security services have to go through these checks and have suffered delays. Some people, particularly those who have been offered short-term or temporary work, have had their offer of work disappear because they simply have not received their clean bill of health from the DBS quickly enough.

DBS checks and the DBS system are, of course, vital, as the hon. Lady recognises. There are two elements: the DBS has to issue the certificate, and the individual police force has to feed in the information for the DBS to assess. That leads to two potential areas where delay can creep in and, as she says, that is not acceptable for people who make such applications.

There were problems with the Metropolitan police when the hon. Lady and I were first elected, and the Government posted a statement on their website in October 2015 acknowledging that there were problems and that there was a backlog where the service standard of 60 days had not been met. Steps have been taken to reduce that backlog, and every application that went over the 60-day service standard is automatically escalated. I have seen a reduction in the number of cases that have come to the DBS from a local MP, but the problem plainly has not gone away. The cases are still coming, just not in the same volume. I am sure the Minister will be able to update the House on the steps that have been taken.
A twin-track application process that allows for urgent applications where there is a job offer on the line or where someone is starting work early should be considered, but in most cases the guidance is that people should make their application well in advance, knowing that it will take a long time to process.

There are cases where individuals want to challenge a refusal by the DBS, and they will either make that challenge to the DBS via judicial review or they will try to challenge a police force for providing the information, which can sometimes slow down the process. Overall, this is an important area that police forces and the DBS have to get right because of the potential consequences for the vulnerable adults and children who use the services provided by employees who are required to have DBS checks. The checks are also important for employers of people who want to work in these sectors, and whom we need to work in these sectors, because we do not want people to be turned away by an overly onerous and lengthy process.

This issue has frequently come up in my postbag, and I commend the hon. Lady for bringing it to the House’s attention. I commend the Government for the steps they have taken to expedite the process, particularly with the Met police, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister what further steps can be taken and what options there might be for expediting the process, particularly where there is a time-sensitive application.

2.45 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate on an important issue that probably affects many more people than today’s turnout suggests.

I have a few short remarks—I will not speak for long—about my constituents’ experience of the Disclosure and Barring Service over the past year, which has not been good. The delay in issuing DBS certificates is not just an administrative problem; it can cause people to turn down work or to lose an income on which they previously relied. It is vital that the delays in processing applications are brought under control.

Like other hon. Members, I have had many cases in Manchester, Withington of people who are ready to work but who are left waiting, sometimes for months, for their DBS certificate to be processed. These are people who have worked hard to find a job and have been successful at interview but who find themselves in an administrative limbo that means that, in the worst cases, they cannot take up the job. I will highlight a couple of cases that show the impact of such delays.

The first case is of Nazim Uddin, a taxi driver in my constituency who submitted his DBS renewal application on 4 June, well in advance of the September date when his hackney carriage licence expired. He eventually received his certificate on 28 September, 120 days after his application and after his licence had expired.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing this debate. My constituent had a 94-day wait. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) agree that that is an awfully long time to wait and could have a detrimental impact on this individual’s financial situation?

Jeff Smith: I absolutely agree. The case is similar to that of Nazim in my constituency. Despite my office raising the issue both with the DBS and with the Government, he became unable to work because his licence expired, which understandably caused him and his family a huge amount of stress and some financial hardship.

The second case is of Angela Gallagher, a constituent of mine who lost a job as an occupational therapist because her DBS certificate was so delayed. She spoke to me about her constant phone calls to the DBS for updates only to be told to be patient and that the DBS was working through the backlog. She could not understand why, after she had been offered a job, the system was putting such obstacles in her way. She described how it affected her family’s finances—at the time, she was forced to sign on to out-of-work benefits—and how her mental health was affected by the stress caused by the delay and by her inability to access the job.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point and an excellent speech. One of my constituents told me how, although she knew there was nothing in her background that could possibly come up, the stress of waiting made her worry that somebody had made something up about her that was going to come to light. Waiting for weeks and weeks for a resolution added to her mental ill health.

James Berry: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important for the DBS to give an accurate estimate of the time the process will take, even if it is a very long period of time, so that people do not suffer the additional stress that the hon. Member for West Ham (Lynn Brown) just mentioned?

Jeff Smith: I agree absolutely that in principle we should be trying to do that. I appreciate that the DBS itself is not always the cause of the delay, because the backlog is often at the police checking stage, and that the DBS often cannot give a proper estimate of the delay with any real accuracy. Even for people who live in Manchester, the backlog is often down to delays from the Metropolitan police, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood pointed out. Constituents of mine who have lived in London have come to me with real problems with the Met’s performance. Let us face it: the Met does not have a good record on processing the system properly.

The Met backlog is a real problem. Government cuts to the police have left the Met unable to cope with the increase in demand; since 2010, it has lost 1,300 staff. That is not as many as the Greater Manchester police—we have lost more than 1,800 since 2010—but it is tough all the same. Those cuts have clearly affected the internal flexibility that the Met needs to deal with changing demands on the force. Ministers have said that the Government are training extra staff to cover the gaps, but there will be a significant time lag before we see
quicker turnaround times. In the meantime, people across the country who rely on the Met to process DBS checks will suffer delays, leading to the problems I have outlined. Those problems have shown that cuts to police funding are a false economy because their consequences have been felt right across the public sector. It is not just about police forces; those police forces are struggling to complete the necessary checks on people whose job is to safeguard children and the vulnerable.

Care home associations have said that delays are forcing care homes to recruit expensive agency staff. The Royal College of Nursing has reported students turning down places because of the delays, as we heard earlier in the debate, or losing their bursaries for the academic year. We have all heard examples from schools, hospitals and childcare providers that show that the delays are making already difficult recruitment issues even more difficult. If there is a lesson to be learnt, it is that the Government cannot just cut police numbers without expecting problems down the line, not only for the police but across the public sector, for businesses and services, and most importantly for constituents such as Nazim and Angela who have experienced these problems through no fault of their own.

I ask the Minister to think about several things. First, will she give serious consideration to how to stop these delays? Secondly, we have not fully discussed how constituents can get redress for their difficult experiences; as I understand it, redress is available if the DBS is at fault for the delay, but if the police force is at fault, there is no redress or compensation for the people who suffer. Surely that situation needs to be rectified. Thirdly, I reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood about the possibility of a portable certificate; obviously it would need safeguards, but it would be a major contributing factor to a solution. Finally and most importantly, a process must be put in place to escalate cases in which jobs are at risk and to reinforce the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) for Dulwich and West Norwood about the possibility of a portable certificate; obviously it would need safeguards, but it would be a major contributing factor to a solution.

As my own mailbag can attest, delays occurring in the Disclosure and Barring Service are making life exceptionally difficult for many workers in this country. Frankly, Minister, we need to sort that out. As we know, the DBS enables employers to make safer recruitment decisions by identifying candidates who may be unsuitable for certain types of job. The service plays a vital role in keeping our young people and vulnerable adults safe. Having access to DBS certificates is essential for people who want to pursue careers working with vulnerable people and groups, and for organisations such as hospitals and schools, which need to recruit staff.

One of my constituents, a qualified teacher working with children with special educational needs, informed me that her DBS check had been stuck with the Metropolitan Police Service for three months, despite the fact that it has a target of 18 days. Since her DBS expired in February, she has been offered a number of roles but has been unable to start work because of the delay. Without work, she is now in arrears with her rent, her car insurance and other monthly bills.

In May 2016, it was reported that 10% of the staff of one primary school in north London were unable to fulfil their roles because of the delays. The headteacher said:

“Under official guidelines you can do a risk assessment based on the DBS from someone’s previous job, but they have to be supervised at all times...In one case we had to wait four months for a check to come through. There’s already a teacher shortage in London so this is a headache we could do without.”

That is the real impact of the delays: schools with teacher shortages are unable to recruit staff, unemployed teachers are falling into debt and employees are left waiting anxiously for months. That is simply not good enough.

These delays cause real anxiety, as my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington attested. Employees are expecting to hear back within eight weeks, and as the weeks pass they become really anxious that the delays are the result of a complication with their check. The problem is made worse by the fact that application processing times seem to be entirely arbitrary. People in that situation understandably fear that their job offer will be withdrawn. I also know from my constituents that people from the same area who apply at the same time will sometimes get radically different response times.

James Berry: The hon. Lady will be probably aware that in some of these cases, the fact that an individual has moved a number of times and a number of different police forces have to be contacted can explain the longer delay, even if they have applied at the same time as another constituent. Six police forces having to do checks will involve a much longer process than just one.

Lyn Brown: I accept that point, but the hon. Gentleman must accept that that is a symptom of living in London. My constituents have not all lived in West Ham all their lives; they have travelled from all over the country, and yet they are still given an arbitrary response time. I would really like the Minister to explain whether there is a system for prioritising some checks over others—or does she have another explanation, as the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) does, for the vastly differing response times that constituents experience?

The DBS states that it aims to deal with 95% of applications within eight weeks. It is currently at 93.8%, which is below that target but not far off. However, that figure masks what is actually a deep problem in some parts of the country: the severe delays that kick in when some police forces get involved in the process. As we know, there are five stages to a DBS check. The majority of delays occur at stage 4, when individual police forces check their records to make sure that the potential matches are not missed.

Police forces have targets to process 85% of applications within 14 days and 90% within 18 days. In July 2016, the Metropolitan Police Service hit its 14-day target just
14% of the time. Things do not get much better for its 18-day target, which it met just 19% of the time. In April 2016, the then Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), revealed in a written answer that the Metropolitan Police Service took on average 85 days to carry out stage 4 of the DBS process.

Let us recap: the whole process from stage 1 to stage 5 should take eight weeks. However, the Metropolitan Police Service is taking an average of 85 days to do its part of the process—that is just over 12 weeks. In those circumstances, it is literally impossible for the DBS to meet its eight-week target because one of the five stages is taking longer than the total target time. No wonder I, as a London MP, receive so many complaints about the service from my constituents.

Having researched the details, it is of little surprise to me that the Metropolitan Police Service is struggling. Just look at what has happened to its support staff, which have been cut by a third since the Conservatives came to power: down from 14,179 in 2010 to 9,521 in 2016. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood rightly said, those cuts have had consequences. Under the strain of falling staff numbers, a substantial backlog of applications has emerged. All police forces have a target of having no more than 12 days’ worth of work on DBS checks at any one time, meaning that if no new applications were received, police forces would be able to deal with all existing applications within 12 days. The most recent figures available show that it would take the Metropolitan Police Service 60 days to complete the pile of DBS applications it is sitting on, and only if no more came in. That is five times the target.

This is not only a London issue. In Nottinghamshire, the 14-day target for stage 4 of the process is currently being met just 7% of the time, while in North Yorkshire the target for both 14 and 18 days is being met just 12% of the time. In fact, according to the Government’s July 2016 red, amber or green assessment, 17 of the 50 forces were judged to be providing a second-rate service or worse. Something has to be done to improve the situation, and fast. We cannot have potential employees and potential employers waiting for so long. I want to know what the Government will do about it. It is unfair on both sides and it is causing financial damage.

This is not a new phenomenon. Research by the House of Commons Library revealed that the Met has not hit its 14-day target since February 2008. That is more than eight years for which my constituents, and other people living and working in London, have had to put up with a substandard service. For six of those years, the Minister’s party has been in government. A Government press release from earlier this month stated that they have been “working very closely with the Met to help improve performance and good progress is being made to reduce applications in progress.”

If that is true, it is very welcome, but I am yet to see any evidence that good progress is being made. The most recent figures show a service struggling to keep up with demand, and people having to wait far longer than they should to have their applications processed.

Will the Minister inform the House of precisely what steps the Government have taken in the short term to help police forces to clear their backlogs? Will she also tell us how long she anticipates it will take for the service to return to an acceptable level? Some undefined time in the future is simply not good enough when people’s livelihoods and careers depend on their being able to get these checks carried out promptly.

The police missing their time targets is not the only problem. The DBS has failed to meet its accuracy targets in each of the last three months as well. I am told that the failures are administrative, such as spelling a name wrong or placing an inaccurate date of birth on the form, but that is not clear from the DBS business plan, which explains the performance indicators, because an inaccurate check is not defined. I am not told that it is administrative; I am not told that it is a small issue; and I am not reassured that inappropriate people are not getting DBS certificates, or that people who should be given certificates are not being refused. Will the Minister assure us today that the accuracy failures are largely administrative? Can she give us a figure for them, or a percentage? Can she give us any reassurance whatever? Will she prove to the House that inappropriate people have not been receiving DBS certificates to which they are not entitled?

I do not want to downplay the importance of administrative failures. They need to be rectified because they really do have knock-on effects. Take another of my constituents, who contacted me earlier this year about her DBS check. She informed me that after waiting six months for her application to be processed, her certificate, when it finally arrived, was inaccurately filled in, as it failed to include a previous name. As a result of delays and inaccurate information, my constituent was unable to take up employment as a childminder and has lost significant earnings. These are legal documents and they need to be filled in as accurately as possible so that people can use them.

Will the Minister inform the House of the steps the Government have taken to make sure that the accuracy of barring decisions improves in future? I really would like to be reassured that she takes this matter seriously. My hon. Friends the Members for Dulwich and West Norwood and for Manchester, Withington asked a number of pertinent questions in the course of their contributions. They asked for detail, and I hope the Minister will be able to provide it today, but, if not, will she commit to answering us in writing within the next week or so?

Let us face it: the longer delays to DBS checks are the result of cuts to our police services. The Metropolitan Police Service and other struggling police services are simply overburdened with the number of applications they are receiving. They do not have the resources they need. We know that since 2010 the Met has seen police support staff cut by 33%, and today we have heard about the reality of those cuts: poorer services and people missing out on jobs. That is, I am afraid, the Government’s record on the DBS.

3.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sarah Newton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I sincerely congratulate the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) on securing the debate. There is no doubt that the Disclosure and Barring Service is vital, but we have heard powerful speeches about the impact on people’s lives and on employers if it is not right.
I welcome this opportunity to address the issues that have been raised and I hope that, by the end of the debate, Members will be assured about the progress we are making. If not, and if I am not able in the time I have remaining to address all the points that have been made, not only will I of course agree to answer them in writing, but I am happy to invite Members into the Department to meet me and my officials and go through in more detail the important issues that have been raised.

Protecting the public is certainly a priority for me and for the Government. We will not compromise on safeguarding children and vulnerable adults. The DBS plays a vital role by enabling organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors to make better-informed and safer recruitment decisions. It provides proportionate access to criminal record information, allowing employers to determine whether an individual is unsuited to certain kinds of work. It also manages two lists of those barred from working with children or vulnerable adults.

I maintain a close interest in the DBS’s performance and receive regular reports. I visited the DBS office in Liverpool earlier this month, and it was clear to me that the staff are professionals, effective and passionate about their role in protecting the public. I saw an organisation with a culture of continuous learning and improvement that seeks to put its customers, and protecting the public, at the heart of everything it does.

On the barring side, the DBS makes complex, evidence-based decisions, weighing a person’s rehabilitation against the need to keep the public safe. More than 61,000 people are now prevented from working with children, vulnerable adults, or both.

Most people come into contact with the DBS when it issues disclosure certificates, which have been the subject of most of the discussion in the debate. Certificates can be applied for by people in a range of occupations, including teaching assistants, doctors, taxi drivers and social workers. Last year the DBS issued more than 4 million certificates, with nearly 95% provided within the eight-week timeline. It is important to focus on that.

The DBS asked customers how happy they were with the service, as we would expect of any arm’s length Government organisation. In the year to May 2016, 89% reported that they were satisfied with the service they had received. However, I am aware from the letters that I have had, and from today’s debate, that some people have experienced very long delays in receiving their enhanced disclosure checks. I do not underestimate for one minute the impact that that has on the lives of not only those individuals but the organisations affected, and I agree that it is totally unacceptable.

Although I recognise that disclosing criminal records information is complex and that checks must be thorough, I am clear that delays absolutely must be addressed. The DBS works with various partners, particularly the police forces that provide the data on which checks are based and assess what non-conviction information from their locally held information should be disclosed as part of the enhanced check. That may require the DBS to send search requests to more than one police force. The vast majority of checks should be completed within two to four weeks, and the DBS monitors performance closely, assisting any forces that are not meeting their targets.

It is important to make it clear that police disclosure units are fully funded by the DBS, so the issue is not about the general funding that police forces receive. Each year the DBS agrees budgets and expected numbers of disclosures with police forces and funds them. Where police forces run into difficulty, as the Met indisputably has, the DBS will provide extra resources.

Helen Hayes: The issue that has been raised by the PCS and others is that of annual funding settlements, which mean that there is a great deal of insecurity for staff working on DBS disclosures within police forces. Temporary contracts and insecurity are part of the problem. What is needed is a fully staffed, professional service with some continuity and longevity in the length of time people stay in their jobs.

Sarah Newton: I completely understand that if there is job insecurity, that makes it difficult to retain good-quality staff. I visited the Metropolitan police unit only a few weeks ago and witnessed the training process. The decision-making process is complex, and it takes time to train staff. Even when the DBS sits down with the Met or any other police force that is having difficulty and agrees extra funding, it takes at least six months to train someone so that they can carry out the checks.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood is right that the PCS union has acknowledged that there has been a change of leadership at the Met. The Home Office has provided considerable support to help improve processes, and the DBS has funded more than 100 new staff, so there has been a huge amount of progress under the hon. Lady, understands, as I do, that more of the staff have now been given full-time contracts. The DBS sits down with the police forces each year and agrees the contracts based on the anticipated number of checks. If the number of checks requested goes up, more staff have to be recruited. Sometimes it is efficient and right to have temporary staff; on other occasions we need more full-time staff. Such contractual decisions are made between the DBS and the police forces. I have also seen that no stone is left unturned. The Met has asked for support from other police forces that have a surplus of staff with the right expertise to help. So I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that every effort has been made between the DBS and the police forces to get the necessary resources in.

Only two police forces are not meeting their timeliness performance targets: the Met and Surrey. In the case of Surrey, a relatively small number of people are affected and a recovery plan has been agreed with the DBS, which is going well. I can share that information with the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood is a long-time supporter of the DBS. I have now been given full-time contracts. The DBS sits down with the Met or any other police force that is having difficulty and agrees extra funding, it takes at least six months to train someone so that they can carry out the checks. Opposition Members have quoted extensively from data on the DBS’s own website. That addresses one of the issues that the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood is absolutely right. I look at such data on a daily basis.

Lyn Brown: I am struggling with what the Minister is telling us. First, we know there has been a problem in the Met since 2008. We know that the delays in the Met are massive. If the DBS has been placing money in the Metropolitan Police Service so that it can get the checks done, then it must have been
significantly underpaying the Met for several years in order for us to have got to the current situation. I am afraid I cannot accept what the Minister is saying about that.

The Minister also tells us that only two police forces are not meeting the timescales, but in the Government’s own assessment, on the red, amber and green scale, 17 of the 50 forces were judged to be providing a second-rate service or worse. It is not only two police forces; by the Government’s own admission, it is more.

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady raises a couple of points. The data I am referring to are the most recent. We will get another tranche of data this month, so she will be able to see for herself what the information is.

On how the Metropolitan police or any other police force is funded, the fact is that the DBS funds police units to do police checks. Whether they have received adequate funding over a certain period of time is a fair question. I have been to Liverpool and had conversations with the DBS, and I am monitoring the situation on a weekly basis. I will go back to the DBS to make sure that all the recovery plans we have discussed are implemented. I can say no more to reassure the hon. Lady about how seriously I take this issue. I and my officials are focused on it, and I am regularly involved with the DBS to make sure we tackle it.

As I have said, I visited the Metropolitan police unit recently. The hon. Lady has acknowledged that significant extra resources and changes in leadership have been put in place, and the unit is processing 20% more applications than it receives. That gives me some confidence that it will reduce the backlog over time. If the unit was processing only the number of applications that it was receiving, we would not have any confidence that it was dealing with the backlog, but it is, and 20% is significant. I am therefore confident that it will make significant progress.

It is important that the DBS continues to work closely with the Metropolitan police and any other police forces that are having difficulties to make sure that they are given the necessary resources to do the job. I know that the Metropolitan police take the matter seriously. I have been to Sidcup and spent time with the team there, and they talked me through what they were doing about it. They know full well that I will be back again to personally check up on their progress.

I will go through the range of other questions that the hon. Members asked me on issues from portability to escalation and redress.

James Berry: Although DBS checks are clearly a weak spot for the Metropolitan police, I am pleased to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister is doing personally to ensure improvements. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that, over the past six years, we have seen a sustained fall in crime in this country, largely due to the fantastic work of our police forces, particularly here in our capital, including in Kingston, which is now the safest borough in London.

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Getting the checks right is an incredibly important crime prevention measure. The top priority is to deal with the possibility of people doing harm to vulnerable adults and young people. As delays can be, the safety of individual people must be uppermost, and it must have played its part in those cheering results showing a drop in crime.

To return to the questions that were put to me, employers and individuals are encouraged to use the update service. An online subscription service allows individuals to demonstrate that their DBS certificate is up to date. That would prevent their having to make multiple re-applications. With the applicant’s permission, organisations can check a certificate online, free of charge, which allows them to see whether any relevant information has been identified since the individual’s certificate was last issued. There are more than 800,000 subscribers to that service. I encourage the hon. Lady to ask constituents to register for the online service at the same time as they apply for DBS checks. If they move jobs, they will not have to go through repeated checks, because once they sign up for the service the employer, charity or wherever they were working could freely go online to see whether any information needed updating.

I may have got the wrong impression, but the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) seemed to be telling me that the certificate of one of her constituents had expired. It is simply not possible for certificates to expire because they do not have a set period of validity. If that constituent were signed up to the updating service they really would not be affected. It is important to set the record straight.

When there are delays, employers can, during the wait for DBS check results, consider whether it would be appropriate for an individual to begin work, with appropriate safeguards, depending on the nature of the role and the assessment of potential risk. For example, DBS Adult First can be used in cases where, exceptionally, and in accordance with the Department of Health terms, a person can be permitted to start work with adults before the certificate is obtained. There are appropriate ways of safeguarding while people are waiting so that they can avoid the dreadful situations that have been described today, where they cannot take up jobs, and where they incur financial hardship, and where organisations miss out on good employees.

Customers can track their application online and call the DBS helpline for support. There were questions about how the DBS prioritises applications. It does so in date order, but if an applicant can make the case that there will be undue hardship and they will suffer in some way, the DBS will do everything it can to expedite an application. It will contact a police force and do all it can to reduce the time.

I want to clarify the point about redress, which was mentioned. The DBS will consider cases. If there has been hardship and the DBS can be proved not to have acted appropriately, there is a system of redress. There is not a nationwide system for the police, but individual police forces can be held accountable. If they have not acted in a timely and appropriate way, redress can be considered.

I hope I have covered all the questions. I am not at all complacent. Getting the service right is central to protecting the most vulnerable people in society, and I am determined to do that. I understand that we need an efficient process to enable people to take up the sorts of jobs we need them to do. I shall continue to monitor what happens on a regular basis. As I have said, if any colleague wants to come into the Department and go through the matter with me in more detail, they are welcome to do so.
3.24 pm

Helen Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (James Berry) and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), for their contributions to the debate. I am also grateful to the Minister for her response and for the interest she shows in the matter. She has clearly set out the steps she is taking to address the problem.

I should be grateful, however, if the Minister could follow up in writing on my questions. I do not consider that all of them were fully answered today. I was in particular a little disappointed that I did not hear much from the Minister in acknowledgement of the distressing cases I raised, and the serious impact of delays on my constituents and those of my hon. Friends. We brought up several specific examples of shocking hardship and distress as a consequence of delays in the service. The Minister set out some aspects of the service that are in development, and steps being taken to deal with the problems, but I do not feel that she properly addressed the seriousness of the consequences. I should be grateful for some further information in response to my questions.

My hon. Friends’ points about cuts in police resources were pertinent and well made. There is more work for the Minister to do to make certain that the police are being resourced on the necessary basis for them to undertake their important work. On the question of annual funding settlements from the DBS to the police, the context in which, as the Minister explained, it takes six months to train someone to do the job when they may have job security only for another six months, sounds like a false economy in the public sector. It also sounds like a context in which it is difficult to recruit and retain high-quality staff. I welcome assurances that the Minister is considering the issue, including how more staff can be put on a permanent, secure footing in their employment, and how the DBS and police can plan for the longer term.

The advice that the Minister gave about the helpline for employers, and steps that employers can take, puts too much emphasis on employers in the process. It is the Government’s role, through the DBS, to undertake the checks, and employers should not have to take steps to compensate for delays in a process that should work efficiently and effectively. Finally, the Minister did not address my point about the need for rapid escalation to a secure and committed timescale for individuals whose employment is at risk as a consequence of DBS delays.

Sarah Newton: I am sorry that I did not adequately communicate how seriously I take the impact on individuals. I thought I had. This is a further opportunity for me to underline the fact that the cases I heard about are clearly very distressing for the people concerned. However, I pointed out that individuals as well as employers can call the DBS, which will make every effort to deal with a case. If there is hardship, distress or concern, that service is available.

Helen Hayes: I am grateful to the Minister. As I pointed out, my office called the DBS on behalf of a constituent on several occasions. On at least three of those occasions assurances were made that the case would be escalated and dealt with, but that did not happen until the offer of employment had been withdrawn. Processes may be in place, but they do not always work—I assure the Minister of that. There is a need for a service standard in the DBS, guaranteeing that, if an offer of employment is contingent on receiving a DBS disclosure in a given time, the DBS will meet that requirement. We cannot continue with people’s employment being put at risk as a consequence of delays in the service.

I am grateful for the interest that the Minister has shown and the work she is doing on the matter, and I look forward to following up on it in future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the performance of the Disclosure and Barring Service.

3.29 pm

Sitting suspended.
Highways England Compensation: Broadway in Chadderton

[NADINE DORRIES in the Chair]

4 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Highways England compensation payments for residents of Broadway in Chadderton.

This is my first Westminster Hall debate, Ms Dorries, and it is a pleasure to speak in it under your chairmanship. I will set out why I felt it was necessary to call for this debate, and the history of the scheme, before asking the Minister to respond to the concerns expressed repeatedly by residents living in the area. The issue has been going on for some time, and was previously dealt with by the right hon. Michael Meacher, before he passed away. I have come to it towards the end of the scheme. I am hoping that my speech will be received positively. People affected by the scheme might be watching the debate, and they are hopeful of some conclusion to a long-standing issue.

To provide some context, Oldham is a young town, and demand for school places is significant. A determined effort by the local council has seen many new schools built, with the support of Government. The John Henry Newman College is one of them. It was formed from Our Lady’s School in Royton and the St Augustine School in Oldham. The new school is now home to 1,400 pupils.

The new school site at Broadway was selected after a thorough assessment and, despite legitimate concerns about the impact on traffic and highway safety, local people by and large supported the project. The issue has been long and drawn out, however, with delays over site selection, the possibility in 2010 of funding being cancelled and, after the eventual building of the school, the ongoing fight for compensation payments by residents living near the site.

The scheme consisted of the construction of a signalised junction to create a new access to the site of the school that was being built. To facilitate that, the road needed to be widened with additional lanes, and a cutting had to be made into the parapet where the properties are in a significantly higher position than the road. The scheme required dedicated turning lanes and new signalling works, lighting and road markings. However, no measures to reduce noise or the visual impact of the scheme were put in place. As we can imagine, for example, the headlights of cars exiting the site shine directly into the windows of the house opposite, where previously there had been no road junction.

The road, to put it into perspective, is the A663, a busy trunk road that becomes the A627(M) motorway, which in turn connects the M60 Manchester orbital motorway to the M62. The road carries about 30,000 vehicles a day and, according to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs noise chart, the location under discussion has prevailing road noise levels in excess of 70 dB both day and night.

The properties in which my constituents live have been the subject of previous compensation claims. Those properties are predominantly brick-built, semi-detached houses with pitched slate or tile roofs, usually dating from the post-war period. As the House will appreciate, where properties are so close to the road and at a higher level, they are particularly affected by noise, including the noise of cars standing at the traffic lights with their engines idling. That noise travels up—a problem in addition to the headlight problem I mentioned.

Those affected by the scheme rightly sought compensation under part I of the Land Compensation Act 1973. Evidence was supplied of previous Lands Tribunal decisions by professional experts highlighting similar schemes, including two that were agreed with the solicitors of some Broadway residents and the Highways Agency working with other residents. Evidence of other schemes for which property devaluation agreements were in place was supplied.

I had hoped to meet Highways England staff, but I am afraid that I was put on a Bill Committee because of my new Front-Bench responsibilities, which did not allow a meeting to happen. Notwithstanding that, a long series of correspondence took place between the highways body and Michael Meacher, when he was here. Local councillors who have been leading and supporting local people have been involved.

In similar schemes, the loss of value of properties has been accepted. No two schemes are the same, and any assessment of compensation payment will always look at the individual scheme on its own merit—I accept that completely—but it is important to highlight nearby schemes in which A-class roads have been widened and traffic lights installed, resulting in compensation payments. The Lands Tribunal decision on a new junction for the Parrs Wood scheme in Manchester returned a maximum of 7%; on a road widening scheme just up the road at Hunt Lane, Broadway, the maximum was 5%; further on again, on a road widening towards Middleton Road, Broadway, the maximum was unknown; and on the new junction improvements on the A56 Chester Road at Helsby, the maximum was 7%.

Given the location under discussion, clear evidence suggests that properties have reduced in value as a result of the road widening scheme. I will refer to two properties in particular—properties A and B. Property A is an extended and substantially modernised four-bedroom, semi-detached house, which sold for £175,000 on 20 March 2014. The same property sold for £200,000 on 14 August 2007. Between 2007 and 2014 that property had decreased in value by £25,000—that is a matter of public record. Property B, also on Broadway, is a three-bedroom, semi-detached house, which sold on 18 October 2013 for £156,000. On 6 January 2008, it was purchased for £165,000. That property too was sold for less than its purchase value only a few years earlier as a direct result of the market conditions following the road widening.

Moreover, the residents applied for their council tax to be re-evaluated to take into account the change in the neighbourhood. In 2012, the valuation office made the decision to reduce the council tax banding. The Highways Agency was aware of that, but refused to acknowledge any relationship between the road widening and that decision, which is contrary to the correspondence that took place at the time.

To conclude, I am hoping that the issue is straightforward. The scheme should have been really positive—a brand-new school was constructed, which provides a fantastic educational facility for local children, with 1,400 of our
young people benefiting, but it required engineering that has affected people who live nearby. Local people accept that the school is a positive contribution to the town, but if their property value has been affected as a result, clearly compensation payments should be made.

The school and the necessary engineering works required public investment of about £30 million and, given that context, the compensation payments requested are minor, but for someone whose property value has been affected the amount is significant. The issue has gone on for far too long. Today, I would like to make progress and to get some resolution so that residents can get on with their lives instead of entering a drawn-out tribunal process, which will cost them quite a lot of money and take even more time, when this is a straightforward matter.

4.8 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr. John Hayes): It is, as ever, a delight to be in your presence, Ms Dorries, and to serve under your diligent chairmanship. It is also a delight to welcome the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), as a newish Member, to his first debate in the Westminster Hall Chamber. I congratulate him on securing the debate, which follows the work of his predecessor, a distinguished Member of this House who served his constituents for a very long time.

Ms Dorries, might I offer the hon. Gentleman, through you, some advice that he seems already to have followed, even if he has not heard it? When approached by constituents about these kinds of things, you and I try to put ourselves in their position. We try—I know that this is true of the way that you serve your constituents, if I might say so, and it is certainly the way that I serve mine—to imagine how we would feel in similar circumstances. We ask, “What would we feel like if this were our home, our community and our family’s interests?” That is precisely what he has done in bringing this debate to the Chamber, and I commend him for that. It seems that he did not need my advice, but I offer it anyway, as a more experienced Member to a newer one.

Given the overtures that were made by the hon. Gentleman’s predecessor, this case is familiar to Highways England and my Department. As he says, it concerns the A663 at Broadway, a busy urban trunk road linking the M60 with the A627(M) and the M62. It is an important link between Oldham and Manchester and forms part of the strategic road network, for which Highways England is responsible.

As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the local authority, Oldham Council, constructed a new school, the John Henry Newman College, on previously disused land close to the road-widening scheme. It is wonderful that the college should be named after that great man, who by the way is one of my heroes—we do not have time to discuss that at length. None the less, the council, having agreed in response to local demand to construct that new school, was obliged to make changes to the road, and those changes are the alterations to which the hon. Gentleman referred. The changes were designed to allow safe access to the site, and the council took powers under section 6 of the Highways Act 1980, which allows local authorities to make such changes to the strategic road network where such a development is taking place.

It is worth listing the improvements that were made. They included the construction of a new signalised junction, giving access from the A663 to the new school; the widening of the carriageway and the construction of a new footpath; the creation of dedicated turning lanes into the school from both northbound and southbound directions; and the construction of central islands to help pedestrians cross the road. Improvements were also made to the road itself. The junction between Broadway and Foxdenton Lane further south of the school was improved, including by widening the carriageway on all four arms of the junction and improving pedestrian refuges.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, all those alterations were completed by around September 2012.

Following the completion of those works, a formal submission was made by a land claims agent representing the interests of 32 households. Compensation was claimed under part 1 of the Land Compensation Act 1973 for residents living close to the new access to the school. On that occasion, Highways England did the proper thing and sought advice from a valuation consultant on the changed property values. Indeed, it went further than that and sought advice from two experts in that field, because it felt that that was the right thing to do.

Jim McMahon: The Minister is quite correct in his assertion that two separate experts were selected, but can he confirm that those experts were both in-house, not independent of Highways England?

Mr Hayes: They were valuation consultants, who are accustomed to dealing with these things and in so doing adopted the appropriate empiricism—indeed, that is their stock in trade—to gauge whether the changes in the values of the properties that the hon. Gentleman has suggested took place could be attributed to any of the environmental factors that would entitle the 32 households to compensation, such as increased vibration, increased noise or even light pollution from headlights shining into homes. Those experts would have taken those things into account, though he will have some good news at the end of my short but fascinating speech along the lines that he has just implied.

The problem is that when those tests were applied, the claim was found wanting. The hon. Gentleman has made the case that the value of the houses has fallen, and I am not in a position to dispute that.

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. If anyone in the room would like to take their jacket off, they should feel free to do so. The heating is apparently broken. The temperature is about 25° and I think it is going to get hotter, so please feel free to disrobe.

Mr Hayes: Ms Dorries, I never remove my jacket, except in the most extreme circumstances. One of those is playing competitive sport, and as I am not doing so, I will not remove my jacket, but I am grateful for your typical generosity and indulgence in giving me permission so to do should I wish to.

As I said, the valuation that was done does not necessarily contradict the hon. Gentleman’s assertions. He has provided evidence that values have indeed fallen, but I suppose the point that I was making—for the sake of emphasis, I make it again—is that according to the expert analysis, the criteria on which compensation
could rightly have been paid, according to the basis that applies to all similar schemes, were not met. In essence, that means that there was no loss in property value as a result of the physical factors—I described them earlier as environmental factors—arising from the alterations to the A663. The question is really whether any loss in value met the necessary terms and conditions set out in the Land Compensation Act 1973. In truth, the A663 was already a busy urban route, and a signalised pedestrian crossing was already in place on that road before the roadworks were undertaken. The new access to the school is not in constant use but is used largely at the beginning and end of the school day, as can be expected.

The hon. Gentleman understandably made a point about council tax banding. I was aware of that point. However, it is clear from the council tax decision notice issued by the local authority that the rebanding was due to the presence of a new school rather than the road improvement scheme. Highways England fully accepts its obligations under the 1973 Act and never seeks to deny the payment of compensation that is due, but it has no power to pay compensation that it does not consider to be payable statutorily. Highways England has accepted the views of its valuation consultants and no claim has been paid with regard to the A663 junction improvements, and he will know that the claimants were advised accordingly in March 2015. He made reference to the possibility of appealing, and he will know that the Act allows a claimant who disagrees with the amount of compensation offered by the relevant authority—in this case Highways England—to refer their claim to the lands chamber of the upper tribunal for independent determination. Claimants have until 25 September 2019 to make reference to the tribunal in this case.

As is my wont, I am going to go a little further than I have been advised to do. As I said at the outset, I have been impressed by the hon. Gentleman’s diligence in bringing this matter forward, and I was an admirer of his predecessor, as I have also made clear. If I—like you, Ms Dorries, and the hon. Gentleman—put myself into the place of those affected, I feel a duty to share his and their perspective as much as possible. My second piece of advice to the hon. Gentleman, therefore, is that he obtains a further independent assessment of whether the alleged loss of value can in any way be attributed to the work that has been done and therefore fits the criteria laid out in law. If he brings that to me directly and personally, I will commit to looking at the matter again. That would not oblige the residents to seek a tribunal hearing, which I appreciate is expensive, and it would give him an opportunity to take the matter further. If the criteria cannot be met—or if evidence cannot be brought that they may be met—it will clearly be difficult for me to help him or those residents.

The hon. Gentleman wants to do the right thing by those residents, and I do, too. These debates must have a purpose in holding Ministers to account and encouraging them to go the extra mile to support colleagues from across the Chamber in representing the wellbeing and interests of their constituents.

Jim McMahon rose—

Mr Hayes: That was my pre-peroration. Before I move to my exciting peroration, I give way once more.

Jim McMahon: I thank the Minister for giving way. Given that I do not get to come back at the end of the debate, I should take the opportunity to say that I find that very constructive. I am thankful on behalf of the residents of Chadderton for the opportunity to present that assessment at a future date.

Mr Hayes: It is my willingness to be constructive that has built the solid reputation I enjoy on the Opposition Benches, in which I take such great pleasure. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his complimentary remarks and look forward to hearing from him further on this important subject for his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.


**AEA Pension Scheme**

4.26 pm

**Sir Oliver Letwin** (West Dorset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the advice given to AEA pension scheme pensioners.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Minister, who is indeed honourable and a friend and a Minister. As I mentioned to him outside the Chamber, the gist of what I want to say is more directed towards the Cabinet Office than his Department, but it is useful to have this opportunity to put a flag in the ground. I should say right away that the purpose of the debate from my point of view, and I think that of those Association of Accounting Technicians pensioners who have been affected by what I am to describe, is to lay the grounds for an amendment we will need to move to the forthcoming ombudsman Bill to remedy a particular problem to which I shall come.

For the sake of anyone who happens to read **Hansard** in due course, I should begin by telling the story in brief. Incidentally, this is a story that has been told by many hon. Members from both sides of the Chamber. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) held a debate on a connected subject. Others who have taken a great interest include my right hon. Friend for giving way so early in the debate, my hon. Friends the Members for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—the latter is indeed honourable and a friend and a Minister. As I mentioned to him outside the Chamber, the gist of what I am going to describe is the advice these pensioners were given at the time they decided to make the transfer. I will go into that in some detail in just a moment.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I thought I would get this in now before my right hon. Friend gets into his flow. My constituent, Dr Keith Brown, wrote to me quite some time ago, saying:

“Our main complaint is that official information provided to us at the time of privatisation did not tell us that the new pension scheme was at a much greater risk of failure than our old UKAEA scheme.”

That seems to be the nub of the problem: what they were and were not told.

**Sir Oliver Letwin**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: that is the nub of the problem—and the nub of the solution is related. It is a good idea to have solutions that relate to problems, and I am going to propose a solution to that particular problem, but let me first enlarge on the point both of my right hon. Friends have just raised, because this is where we get to an extraordinary sequence.

At the time when the pensioners in question were choosing whether to transfer their existing accrued rights from the Government-backed UKAEA scheme into the commercially-backed AEA Technology scheme, they were offered advice by all sorts of people. They were told various things by AEA Technology, the new firm. Needless to say, AEA Technology said the new scheme was wonderful because it wanted to attract people into it. It wanted to do that because anybody who knows about final salary schemes—there are people here who are genuine experts on that—knows that it is necessary to have a large number of employees in such a scheme to make it remotely viable, so AEA Technology had an interest.

I do not know, and I do not suppose we will ever find out, but I suspect that the UKAEA employees—who are not just any old set of employees, they are highly skilled professionals; some of them are extraordinarily clever people—would quite easily have been able to account for the undoubted bias in the advice coming from their prospective employer, so let us forget about that piece of advice. They were also, I think, given a certain amount of steer by UKAEA itself. This is where it gets a little trickier, because UKAEA is a Government body and it had some kind of duty to give people dispassionate and neutral advice. However, UKAEA was in the course of trying to spin off AEA Technology, so it had an interest, too. I genuinely do not know the extent to which the employees did or did not pay attention to whatever they were told by UKAEA. Luckily, for the purposes of the debate, I do not want to dwell on that either, because there is a much more serious issue at stake.

The third set of people from whom the employees received advice—we do not have to speculate about this because it was written, and I am going to describe exactly what it said—was from none other than the Government Actuary’s Department. That is not just...
any old body. It is the most august body, so far as advice on pensions and pension matters is concerned, in our country. It is exactly what its name says on the tin; it is the Government Actuary’s Department.

The Government Actuary’s Department now has a statement of practice, but at the time it issued that advice it did not. It issued a paper, a copy of which I have in my hand, that discussed transfers from the UKAEA superannuation scheme to the AEA Technology pension scheme. In section 3 of that paper, particularly in subsection 3.2, the Government Actuary’s Department listed what it describes on the contents page as “Advantages of preserving”, which means the advantages of remaining in the UKAEA scheme. Another section describes “advantages of taking a special transfer value”—namely, the advantages of moving from the UKAEA scheme to the AEA Technology scheme.

The first strange thing about that is, in section 3, in which the Government Actuary’s Department lists the “Factors to consider in making the decision”, and in particular describing the advantages of preserving the UKAEA scheme benefits—looking at what might influence the employees to remain with the public sector scheme—it said:

“Whilst it is unlikely that the benefit promise made by either the UKAEA Scheme or the AEA T Scheme would ever be broken”—, and it went on to say that it is even more unlikely that both promises would be broken.

The important point is that not just any old person but the Government Actuary’s Department said it was unlikely that the benefit promise would be broken by either the Government-backed scheme, UKAEA, which is undoubtedly true, or the AEA Technology scheme. I have no doubt that, so far as it went, that statement was accurate, if looked at from the perspective of the date on which the Government Actuary’s Department wrote that it was “unlikely” that the benefit promise would be broken by AEA Technology. Incidentally, I hope the Minister and others will trust me; I am sure the Minister has read the whole thing because I know he has been assiduously preparing for the debate.

What is clear is that nowhere in the rest of the document does the Government Actuary’s Department say what was also patently true—that the risk of the pensioners losing a large part of the value of their pensions if they remained with their accrued rights in the UKAEA scheme was zero, or as near to zero as human beings get. A triple A-rated guarantee from HM Government attended that scheme. No such security was available under the AEA Technology scheme. Commercially-backed schemes do not have a triple A-rated Government-backed guarantee that pensioners will get their money as promised. That is a material difference between the two schemes, and the Government Actuary’s Department, in offering advice to pensioners, had a clear duty to bring out that difference in risk. It did not, and that is the starting point for the compelling argument I will make.

Stephen Crabb: It is true that pensioners were encouraged to seek the advice of a qualified independent financial adviser, but that adviser could never advise on the overall risk of company failure and, therefore, the failure of the scheme, so my right hon. Friend’s point is exactly right. There was nothing in the documentation that pointed to the risk of the scheme failing altogether.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am glad that my right hon. Friend raised that point. It has been said in previous debates and in correspondence with successive Ministers that the point about the availability of independent financial advice is material. To the argument I am making it is not material, because even though the pensioners could have sought independent financial advice, and even if it were the case—as a matter of fact, I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire is right that it would not be the case—that the independent financial adviser had advised them about the overall risk profile of the two possibilities, we would still have to ask why advice was given by the Government Actuary’s Department. If the pensioners were meant to rely exclusively on independent financial advice, the only appropriate posture for the Government Actuary’s Department would have been to say, “We’re not offering you any advice. This is not for us. Go to an independent financial adviser.”

On the contrary, the Government Actuary’s Department very unusually constructed a paper, of which we all have copies, and handed that to highly intelligent people with the intent of persuading them that it described the situation, which is the only presumption we can make. Why else would the Government Actuary’s Department give someone such a paper?

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in effect, what the Government Actuary’s Department has done is to give a subtle inducement to those who were in the UKAEA scheme to move across? At the end of the day, the Government should have some responsibility for exposing those pension plan holders to risk as a consequence of what has happened.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I agree that there was probably a subtle incentive, but I will come on to that in more detail in a moment. At this stage of the argument, all I am saying is something that I think is unchallengeably certain: the Government Actuary’s Department gave advice that did not bring to light the material difference in risk between one situation and another. That is fact. Beyond that, one can speculate, but that is fact.

When I say that the Government Actuary’s Department had a duty to highlight that difference of risk, I am again not speculating. Although at the time it did not exist, the Government Actuary’s Department now has a statement of practice. I have a copy of it in my hands. Under the heading “Security”, the statement of practice—essentially a code of conduct—says:

“It is recognised that the security of a private sector scheme cannot be provided in the same form as that applying in the public service”.

It is practically impossible to imagine that the Government Actuary’s Department would offer advice now in the form it did then, because it would be guided by its own code of practice. If it were not, I imagine rapid action would be taken to correct it, because if a Government Department issued a code of practice and then did not follow it, that would lead a Minister quickly to do something. Therefore we know that the Government Actuary’s Department had a duty, which unfortunately was not at that time written down in the code of practice, that it did not observe to bring to light the difference in security between the two positions. It did not do that.
It is important to make one last point about what the Government Actuary’s Department did. A freedom of information request has revealed an interesting sequence of events about which I intend in due course to write a little monograph, because it is very instructive about what happens inside Government and agencies when they engage in commercial transactions. The FOI revealed that there were exchanges of drafts between the Government Actuary’s Department, UKAEA and AEA Technology. The drafts went back and forth, and the various parties commented.

When the draft of the very section to which I am referring, which was at that time labelled 3.1.1 instead of 3.2.3—I will come on to that point, but it is ipsissima verba—was sent to AEA Technology, the person looking at it from AEA Technology noted in handwriting, “Delete”. So even an observation that it was possible the AEA Technology scheme might conceivably go bust, or that the UKAEA scheme might not deliver, was objected to by AEA Technology. It tried to get that deleted. To be fair to the UKAEA people and the Department then in charge of them, which is effectively now the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, that did not get deleted.

I mentioned, however, the numbering, which is also instructive. Section 3.1.1 became section 3.2.3 because UKAEA supported the AEAT proposition that the advantages of preserving—in other words, staying in the public sector—should not be presented before the advantages of transferring, as it was in the original draft, but vice versa. Indeed, that change was made. That whole sequence of events illustrates very clearly that AEA Technology and UKAEA had a joint interest in trying to get as many pensioners as possible to transfer into the AEA Technology scheme—not because they were evil schemers, but because they wanted that scheme to be viable. They were putting as much pressure as they could on the Government Actuary’s Department, to get as close as they could get it to go to telling the pensioners that that was a good thing to do.

To be fair to the Government Actuary’s Department, it did not say that that was a good thing to do, but it also did not illustrate the fact that if we looked at the risks, it was a very bad thing to do. That is a very important point. The Government Actuary’s Department did not just fail to point out the risks; it failed to point out the risks under conditions in which some pressure upon it was being brought not to reveal those risks in full.

I want to make one last point about the advice from the Government Actuary’s Department before I move on to the law. The role of the Government Actuary’s Department, which comes out clearly in the whole of its advice, was to look at the benefits of the two possibilities—remaining or transferring the accrued rights—and to see whether, on an actuarial basis, one was superior to the other or the other to the one. The Government Actuary’s Department concluded that there was not really anything to choose between them. That was translated into the view that all in all, the benefits were as good in the one case as the other. Of course, for a particular individual—this was pointed out—it might be different, but by and large, people got the same kind of benefit in the two cases.

We have the word of the Government Actuary’s Department that there would be no financial difference for pensioners, by and large, whether they stayed or went to the AEAT scheme—except, of course, that there was a huge difference. In the one case, they were getting the same benefits guaranteed, and in the other case they were getting the same benefits not guaranteed, because they were supported only by a commercial firm that could have gone bust and did go bust, and whose pension fund could have been in deficit and was in deficit—and lo and behold, they have indeed suffered.

Under pressure from those responsible for the transaction, the Government Actuary’s Department assessed the two schemes as being of equal value to employees without taking account of the difference in risk. It failed to point out that difference and therefore led the pensioners to believe that there was nothing particularly wrong with transferring their accrued rights to the AEAT scheme. They could have had the benefits guaranteed permanently had they remained in the UKAEA scheme, but they did not ever realise that great difference in risk.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has pointed to advice from the Government Actuary’s Department about a privatisation. There was a period when many other Government businesses were being privatised. Has his research identified whether the advice was similar in other cases, or was this piece of advice unique to the circumstances of AEA Technology?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I do not know whether my hon. Friend brilliantly waited until this moment to ask that pertinent question, but he has asked exactly the right question at exactly the right moment. It was generally the case that undertakings were given—I was involved as a financial adviser in many privatisations—about the solidity of the pension scheme that was going to be available for pensioners if they transferred to the new undertaking. I strongly suspect, although I cannot prove, that many of the AEA Technology pensioners who later suffered imagined at the time, not least because the Government Actuary’s Department did not say anything about a difference of risk, that such undertakings were available.

Moreover, the pensioners were probably led to have greater faith by the accident that the provisions of the law that gave rise to the transfer of the undertaking suggested—although did not say, if we read them carefully—that it would be just as good a pension scheme as the one they were leaving. In fact, in this case there were no such undertakings, and therefore there was a difference between this and many other privatisations. That was never brought out in the documentation, and the Government Actuary’s Department did not refer to it. That further strengthens, to my mind, the point that the Government Actuary’s Department advice served to mislead the pensioners.

I apologise, Ms Dorries, for the fact that that was all just the shaggy dog story, and now I am coming to the actual point of the debate. Everything I have described is a series of allegations by a Back-Bench MP—namely me—about what I think the Government Actuary’s Department did, and who the hell cares whether a Back-Bench MP thinks the Government Actuary’s Department behaved well, badly or indifferently? There is another body that judges these things that is much more important than a Back-Bench MP for these purposes, and that is
It is arguably clear that that is maladministration that the parliamentary and health service ombudsmen should be able to adjudicate on. It would require only a small amendment to section 4(1) of the 1967 Act in the forthcoming parliamentary ombudsman Bill to remedy that. We would then be able to go back to the ombudsman and say, “Now you have the power to look at what the Government Actuary’s Department did, whether it constituted maladministration and whether in your view that maladministration was material in having an effect on the pensioners, the choices they made, and hence the losses they incurred.” Then, as with Equitable Life—I threatened to go on hunger strike if the then Government did not bring in the ombudsman and agree to follow its ruling—it would be possible to introduce a scheme with compensation proportionate to the extent to which the losses to the pensioners were caused by the maladministration.

We all know that the Equitable Life scheme is not perfect and does not fully compensate the pensioners, because much of the problem was due to the directors and not the regulators. However, to the extent that it was due to the regulators, there has been a compensation scheme exactly like my proposal. We could do that in this case if we changed section 4(1) of the 1967 Act.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I, too, have constituents who are affected by this issue. My right hon. Friend set the problem out in detail and helpfully, and is now getting to the solution. Is there not a difficulty, in that it would have to be retrospective, or are there ways around that to help his constituents and mine?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am delighted that my hon. Friend raises that point. I do not think it would be retrospective in any noxious meaning of the word. The decision that the incoming coalition Administration made on Equitable Life in 2010—to implement commitments that the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats had entered into in opposition that we should follow the ombudsman’s ruling—was post facto. It was after all the damage had been done to the pensioners, and it was not regarded as retrospective. We implemented the scheme, and many Equitable Life pensioners have received compensation.

The case I am talking about is exactly the same. The ombudsman could rule ex post—not retrospectively, but simply with a ruling about what occurred. That ruling would undoubtedly be followed by the Exchequer in constructing a proportionate scheme. That is what we need to achieve.

I see that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) wants to take part in the debate, and I welcome that. I will sit down, because I have made the points I wanted to make.

4.54 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this debate, Ms Dorries. I have never had such an immediate effect on my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and I relish the moment. I think I missed the hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) and mine?
I will be as brief as possible because I know the wind-ups are about to begin. We have been pushed from pillar to post. I went to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Pensions Minister before the last election. I went to the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and was told to go to the ombudsman. A full complaint was made to the ombudsman, who decided not to take any action. A case worker in the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman’s office, Oliver Forrester, wrote back—he has since moved on and there is no one to talk to—and stated:

“By law, we cannot investigate complaints about superannuation (including public sector pensions) in relation to employment under any authority to which our legislation applies...Nor can we look at service in any office of employment or any contract for services...As this complaint is wholly regarding the advice you were given by these two organisations about your pension options, unfortunately, we are legally barred from looking at it further.”

I am not sure I agree with that, but I note what my right hon. Friend says: in any event, there is scope to amend the law in order to have clarity.

At the heart of this is a plain and simple fact: my constituents and those of other right hon. and hon. Members were clearly misled in the advice that they were given. They were in effect given cast-iron assurances that their pension would be as secure in a private pension scheme—the accrued Government pension, I hasten to add. We are not arguing about the private pension from the moment they became employees of a private company. They were told that the accrued Government pension would be as secure when it was transferred to a private pension scheme. None of the risks was flagged up to them. As my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset says: in any event, there is scope to amend the law in order to have clarity.

I welcome the new Pensions Minister to his post. He has an unparalleled reputation in the House. I will now sit down, hear what the Opposition have to say and look forward to the Minister’s remarks.

5 pm

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on winning this debate. He has provided a detailed analysis of the issues impacting on the lives of many people in Scotland and elsewhere who are AEA Technology pension scheme members.

We know that AEA Technology was formed in 1996 as a privatised offshoot of the UK Atomic Energy Authority. Crucially, we also know that the Atomic Energy Authority Act 1995 detailed the conditions for AEAT’s creation, including specific provision for the pension arrangements of transferring staff. Those specific arrangements included a statutory reassurance and statutory duty to provide a pension scheme that was “no less favourable” than the UKAEA scheme. In November 1996, the Government Actuary’s Department issued a note outlining the choices available to members of the UKAEA scheme: to leave their preserved benefits in the UKAEA pension scheme, which as we have heard was a public service pension scheme; to transfer them to the AEAT scheme; or to purchase a personal pension. According to evidence
submitted to the Pensions Ombudsman Service, the
Government Actuary's Department not only highlighted
the three options that I have just noted, but specifically
stated at the time that it was unlikely that
"the benefit promise made by either the UKAEA scheme or the
AEAT scheme would ever be broken."

Sadly, the companies that made up the AEAT Technology
group did fail and went into administration in November
2012. At that time, the AEAT pension scheme entered a
Pension Protection Fund assessment period. The PPF
was set up under the Pensions Act 2004 to provide
compensation to members of defined-benefit pension
schemes that wind up underfunded on the insolvency of
the employer. Unsurprisingly, because of all this, AEAT
Technology pension scheme members now feel very
aggrieved and misled by the advice that they were given
by the UK Government.

It is clear that the UK Government are now abrogating
their responsibilities towards the AEAT Technology pension
scheme members. It is equally clear that the circumstances
surrounding the information provided by the Government
Actuary's Department at the time of the transfer, or the
lack thereof, warrant thorough investigation in the light
of AEAT Technology being unable to meet its commitments.
That could perhaps be undertaken by the ombudsman,
as suggested by the right hon. Member for West Dorset.

Sadly, this affair is another in a long line of pension
crises facing UK taxpayers in the last few years. They
range from BHS, through the Scottish and Northern
Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation and the civil
nuclear constabulary, to the Women Against State Pension
Inequality campaign and more. Indeed, many people
affected by the AEAT pension scandal are also affected
by the arbitrary changes in the retirement age. That is a
completely different take on the "pensions triple lock"
of which the UK Government have boasted.

It would be helpful and honest for the UK Government
to reinstate AEAT Technology pension rights as promised
by the Government at the time of privatisation and to
launch immediately a thorough investigation into the
pre-pack insolvency of AEAT Technology that will scrutinise
the roles of interested parties, including the Pensions
Regulator, the PPF and the trustees. Pensions are a contract,
not a benefit. Those who pay in deserve to receive their
promised entitlement, and it is the responsibility of the
UK Government to secure that entitlement and provide
dignity in retirement to AEAT Technology scheme members.

5.5 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a
pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries.
I congratulate the right hon. Member for West Dorset
(Sir Oliver Letwin) on bringing this—

Nadine Dorries (in the Chair): Order. Mr Blackford, I
should have said that there is five minutes each for you
and the Opposition spokesman and 10 minutes for the
Minister, so if you could limit your remarks to five
minutes, that would be great. Thank you.

Ian Blackford: I will do so, Ms Dorries, as I was
intending to.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for West Dorset
on securing this important debate. He has been assiduous
in pushing the case, and his suggestion this afternoon of
looking at amending the law as it affects the ombudsman
certainly has some merit.

I also congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage
(Mr Vaizey). He has very accurately shown what happened
with the advice that was given, some of the deficiencies
that were there, and the possible interference from
AEAT in that process and the advice that was given.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland
and Easter Ross (Dr Monaghan) said in his concluding
remarks, we need to remember that pensions are a contract,
not a benefit. Those who have paid in to pension schemes
deserve to get their due entitlement. It is the responsibility
of the UK Government to ensure that there is confidence
in the pensions industry throughout the UK. We all
look forward to a time when people can save in pensions,
secure in the knowledge that they will get their due
entitlement. We need to have that confidence, and it is
the Government's responsibility to ensure that the Pensions
Regulator and the ombudsman discharge their obligations
to ensure that the consumer interest is protected.

It is clear that pension scheme members in this case,
as we heard last week in a debate in the main Chamber
on the BHS scheme, are not fully protected—they are
not protected to the extent that they should be. Lessons
must be learned and appropriate action taken. Whether
that is done through the ombudsman or the regulator is
a moot point and we can come back to it in due course.
What needs to be remarked on today is that, with the
AEAT scheme ending up in the Pension Protection
fund, those who worked for the company when it was
in the public sector have, among others, lost pension
entitlement. The Government cannot walk away from
their obligation to what were public sector workers.
That is not acceptable.

It is clear from its conduct that the UK Government
Actuary's Department has ducked its responsibility to
the AEAT pension scheme members. Liability has to lie
somewhere. As discussed in a Westminster Hall debate
on this topic in March last year, the Government Actuary's
Department was the author of a leaflet designed to
inform pension scheme members of their next course of
action in the light of the creation of AEAT. According
to evidence given to the Pensions Ombudsman Service,
that leaflet suggested three options, but also said that it
was unlikely that the UKAEA scheme would fail or that
"the benefit promise made by either the UKAEA scheme or the
AEAT scheme would ever be broken."

That was in my book an inducement and assurance to
the scheme members. Who will stand behind the scheme
members who were made those promises? Will the
Minister accept that the Government at least have a
moral and ethical responsibility?

Richard Fuller: I heard the hon. Gentleman make
these points in the British Home Stores debate last
week. Does he not think that it will be very difficult for
the Government to take action on employer behaviour
that seems to fall below the norms that they would
expect if they do not keep their own ship in order?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman makes a very
valid point. I argued last week and argue again today
that we must learn the lessons of the failure that has
taken place. We have to ensure that we create confidence
in pensions—that is what emerges, whether we are
talking about BHS, the AEAT scheme or many others.
We have to look at the responsibility that the regulator
and the trustees have, but it is a responsibility, ultimately,
that we all have as legislators.
The pensions ombudsman said that the scheme's post-privatisation survival, and hence scheme benefits, were not guaranteed:

"AEAT was a private sector company and so there was a risk of the company getting into financial difficulties or failing altogether."

It is clear that the circumstances surrounding the information provided by GAD at the time of the transfer, or the lack thereof, warrant thorough investigation in the light of AEAT being unable to meet its commitments. If it is the case that vital information was left out of the leaflet, it is a serious matter and must be treated as such.

This would certainly not be the first time that a UK Government Department has been found guilty of misinforming pensioners. The shambolic handling of the notification process for the WASPI women has meant that thousands of women born in the 1950s face hardship, having unexpectedly to push back their retirement by years. The members of the AEAT scheme deserve a full and thorough investigation that incorporates the timelines from the creation of UKAEA to the present so that mistakes can be identified and those responsible held to account. When hard-working employees are promised a pension and it is not delivered, there should be a concerted effort to establish a thorough and independent investigation to determine accountability and all avenues that can be explored to protect pension rights.

The Scottish National party has long called for the establishment of an independent pensions commission to build the architecture to ensure that employees’ savings are protected, and that a more progressive approach to pensions is taken. Will the Minister commit the Government to doing that today? There are far too many issues affecting pensions policy and they need to be addressed in a holistic manner. Establishing a pensions commission would be an important step in ensuring fairness in pensions policy, dealing with problems such as this one and building confidence in pension saving.

In summary, I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response. For the first time in his capacity as Pensions Minister, I welcome him to the debate, and also welcome the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham).

5.11 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I, too, congratulate the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on securing the debate. I am told he is quite a champion on these matters.

As others have mentioned, the AEAT scheme is a defined-benefit final salary scheme set up when AEAT was floated on the stock exchange in 1996. At that time, under the Atomic Energy Authority Act 1995, a condition of the privatisation agreement ensured that the benefits received by the scheme members were “no less favourable” than those they would have expected to receive from the UK Atomic Energy Agency pension scheme, set up when the Government were their employer. A month or so later, in November 1996, the Government Actuary’s Department issued the note that has been mentioned, outlining the options available to scheme members. However, those scheme members believe that they were actually encouraged to transfer into the new scheme. Sadly, as we know, in 2012 AEAT Technology entered into administration and the pension fund was entered into the Pension Protection Fund.

It is worth adding that the pension benefits accrued before 1997, which would have been for all those who acted on the basis of the Government’s original commitment in the 1995 legislation, are not eligible for index-linked uprating. That is why pensioners believe they have been misled and, as a result, will be worse off. In effect, that means that those scheme members who decided to transfer their pensions following advice that their benefits would be “no less favourable” back in 1995 suddenly find themselves with a smaller pot, the real value of which is eroded by inflation every year. The campaign estimates that some members could lose half their pension pot.

Despite that, a determination by the pensions ombudsman found that the original commitment to ensuring that benefits were “no less favourable” did not amount to a guarantee against future changes to the pension benefits owing to financial difficulties. Surely the Government have responsibility to ensure that promises made to members of the UKAEA pension scheme were fulfilled, and have serious questions to answer about whether the Government actuarial note amounted to impartial guidance. Furthermore, in a Westminster Hall debate last year, the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) raised important questions as to whether the scheme received sufficient funds from its mother scheme properly to protect it against later risk of deficit. That mother scheme was apparently operating at a surplus, and some of that money disappeared into the Treasury—I wonder whether the Minister knows how much it was.

We have heard that the Government actuarial note actively encouraged members to transfer their funds to the new scheme. Although the pension scheme group notices and recognises that the note certainly did outline arguments both for and against the transfer, it believes that it dismissed all of the arguments against. That was best highlighted by the right hon. Member for West Dorset, particularly in relation to the fact that they were leaving behind a scheme that was backed by the Government.

In future, we have to ask whether scheme members can be expected to take responsibility for moving their pension savings on the basis of what has been described as impartial advice. Has the Minister examined the evidence in question? If it is apparent that amendments were made to obscure the risks of changing the offer and moving the scheme, will he agree to take action? Last year, the then Pensions Minister argued that the Government could not possibly act without setting a precedent for other formerly state-owned enterprises. I do not see that that needs to be the case. Given the points made about alleged amendments to the note from the Government Actuary’s Department at the request of the UKAEA, surely these pension fund holders are in a unique position.

Clearly, pre-package administration deals are sometimes necessary to ensure that the process of insolvency can be managed quickly and effectively in a rapidly evolving insolvency situation. As we have seen recently, for example in the case of Bernard Matthews, there are instances where pre-package deals have negatively affected employees’ pension entitlements while allowing parent companies
to walk away from insolvency with very large sums of money. What plans does the Minister have to look more closely at an expanded role for the Pensions Regulator to intervene earlier in the process when a number of warning signs are triggered? How will the Minister ensure that pre-package administration deals are not used as a vehicle for employers to reduce their pension responsibilities?

Given the promise made by Government to ex-Government scheme members that their benefits would be protected, the criticisms made of the guidance offered by the Government Actuary’s Department note, and what many believe to be the failure to properly resource the new scheme to ensure it would be put on a sustainable footing, will the Minister agree to consult scheme members to explore all avenues for redress? Will he also agree to strengthen the governance of defined-benefit pensions schemes to ensure that scheme members’ pensions are better protected in future cases of insolvency? I recognise that this may not be a simple matter, but if the advice that was given to the pensioners was flawed, someone needs to take responsibility for the members’ losses. I hope the Minister will now do that.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Dorries. I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions.

As a junior Minister in Government until July, I recall that one of the great fears we all had, for very good reason, was of being summoned before my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). When he applied for this Westminster Hall debate, I realised that it was an issue to be taken very seriously. I hope that after my remarks he will agree that the Government do not believe that we have anything but sympathy for the constituents who have suffered in these circumstances. There is absolutely no question about it; that is reflected by the morality of the issue and by the fact so many people have come to hear this debate and other debates that have taken place.

I hope to shed some light on the Government’s position, but I am not in a position to answer the questions in the way that my right hon. Friend and other contributors to the debate might expect, which is to provide a solution to the problem. The Government do not believe that we should compensate members of the AEA Technology pension scheme above what is being provided by the Pension Protection Fund. That is very clear. I would rather not be grey about it; that is the Government’s position. We do not accept that the loss of the pensions was the Government’s fault.

As my right hon. Friend said, the note has been widely circulated. I read it. Whatever it may or may not be, the note clearly states at the beginning that it was a note by the Government Actuary’s Department on the options available in respect of accrued benefits. It states that clearly. I do not wish to be pompous about the word “advice”, which means different things in the financial services world than in the general context of conversation between people and in guidance given by someone else to be advice. It provides three options and outlines the main factors that people should take into account when reaching their decision on which option to accept.

I accept that on behalf of the Government I may select particular pieces from the note, and other right hon. and hon. Members may select pieces that suit their argument. That is natural and I have tried not to be like that when considering these comments. However, the note specifically and explicitly said that it did not intend to suggest that one course of action was better than another, and that if anyone was in doubt, they should seek independent financial advice. It stated that very clearly in the final note. It said that the intention was not to suggest one option was better than the other.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I entirely understand that the Minister needs time to reach the rest of his argument, but he has hit the nub of the question. Does he accept that if the Government Actuary’s Department calculated on an actuarial basis that the two schemes were equivalent financially, and if it stated, as he rightly said it did, that it was not suggesting that one was superior to the other, but if it was, in fact, the case that one was risk-free and the other was risk-bearing, it follows as a proposition of business logic and economics, as taught in any business school, that the thing that is financially equivalent but is risk-free is superior to the thing that is financially equivalent but risky? Therefore, it should have suggested that one was superior to the other—namely, that remaining was a superior option, because it was.

Richard Harrington: I thank my right hon. Friend for those comments. It is certainly true to say that the area of risk is not discussed explicitly and it is reasonable to argue that there should have been a box with a health warning saying that one piece of advice—or not advice, but information—was different from another because of the risk element, but it is also fair to say that the note does not attempt to assess risk. It may imply by default that one was less risky than the other, but it certainly does not say anything that could be interpreted as misleading the people who received it, in my view.

I understand the position of constituents in the Public Gallery today, some of whom are understandably shaking their heads, given their views about what I have just said, but it is very easy, years later, to pick pieces out of documents. If it said that this was advice, that would be one thing, but it clearly says that people should take independent advice.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, said that independent advice would not cover the risk of transferring. Please do not misunderstand me: I am not saying that I have no reason to believe him, but I cannot understand why an independent financial adviser would be more or less likely than anybody else to comment on the risk or the lack of risk in giving advice. As I said, I accept that it is easy for us to say things all these years later, but the note does not seem to me to be intended to cover every eventuality. It was eight pages long and it was not intended to cover everything. It does not completely ignore the subject of insolvency.

Richard Fuller: I am struggling with something that the Minister said. He indicated that the advice of the actuary was able to be second-guessed by someone then going to an independent adviser. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) talked about the role of the PHSO and said that it did not
investigate the rulings of the actuary so that it could not second-guess the advice the actuary gave on liability. So which way should we have it?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend knows very well that I did not say that. I said that an independent adviser is no more or less likely to consider the idea of risk. I was actually referring to the view of my right hon. Friend the Member for Presel i Pembrokeshire that suddenly Government advisers did assess risk, but independent advisers could not possibly do so. I will have to make progress, because we are running out of time. I believe that the note was intended as a helpful starting point but did not constitute advice for members.

I will move on to the parliamentary ombudsman—I must deal with the ombudsman service generally and the choice of ombudsman, because they are so important in this case. It is correct that the actions of the Government Actuary’s Department fall generally outside the parliamentary ombudsman’s remit. I understand, however, that is only one of the reasons that the parliamentary ombudsman gave for deciding not to investigate. I hope I am not misrepresenting what she said—I have tried to look into this in some detail—but it seems to me that her decision was made partly on the basis that the complaints were not about the actions of a Government Department in relation to a citizen, which is what the ombudsman service is for. She has concluded that the complaints are about information provided in relation to employees and employees’ pension rights. That is why it is not the concern of the parliamentary ombudsman. If that is a correct interpretation of her opinion, changing the legislation to allow her office to have greater oversight of GAD would not solve the difficulty raised in this debate.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I really think I should make progress.

As for the pensions ombudsman, which I have some responsibility for and some knowledge about, members of a pension scheme can complain to the pensions ombudsman, who has the power to investigate, and does investigate, public sector pensions schemes as well as private sector schemes.

The pensions ombudsman looks at maladministration—for example, when a trustee or a manager has been given incorrect advice or information. The previous pensions ombudsman investigated a complaint last year concerning the AEA Technology pension scheme. GAD was not a party to that complaint. In the determination, the ombudsman specifically said that he was not ruling on whether the actions of GAD came under his jurisdiction and that no inference should be drawn from his comments about whether it did or did not, or about the likelihood of a successful complaint about GAD.

I understand that the current ombudsman has since considered some AEA complaints and the ombudsman’s office has decided not to investigate. I cannot comment on any particular complaint, but I have been informed that, in accordance with the usual procedures, all the complaints were looked at individually. Many reasons for not investigating the complaint were given, but they did not include that GAD was outside the pensions ombudsman’s remit.

It is possible, of course, to challenge the pensions ombudsman’s decision through the courts by judicial review or by appeal. I would briefly like to mention the Equitable Life case, which has been discussed during the debate. The parliamentary ombudsman did an investigation and asked the Government to expand the jurisdiction for this case alone. She informed us that public sector pensions are beyond her remit, so it seems to me that it is in the pensions ombudsman’s remit. He has looked at these two cases but has said that GAD was not a party. As far as I can see, however, there is nothing to stop people from going to the pensions ombudsman and naming GAD as a party to the case. If they are still not satisfied, there is the system of judicial review in the Court of Appeal, because the pensions ombudsman is a quasi-judicial body. I meet the pensions ombudsman regularly, and I am prepared to bring the subject up straightaway and ask whether he has difficulties within the scope of his existing jurisdiction in dealing with complaints brought to him.

Mr Vaizey: Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: I am afraid there is not time. I am really sorry, but I only have three minutes left.

The Government have announced their intention to bring forward a draft Bill to create a new public service ombudsman, the focus of which remains the resolution of complaints from individual citizens who claim to have suffered injustice. The response to the consultation said that the ombudsman should operate a “no wrong door” approach, which is referring individuals and possibly transferring their complaints when they fall wholly or partially within the jurisdiction of another body. As for whether GAD should be included in its remit, the Government’s commitment at the moment is that it should take on just the jurisdiction of the parliamentary, health service and local government ombudsmen, but if right hon. and hon. Members believe—as my hon. Friend the Member for W est Dorset to discuss this and other relevant issues.

I realise, Ms Dorries, that you are about to tell me that my time is up. I am sorry that I do not have more time to go into details, but I hope that I have given some indication of the Government’s thinking.

5.29 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am very grateful to the Minister. I will indeed pursue that question with the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, and perhaps the Minister’s question about the pensions ombudsman. Eventually, I am sure we will find a solution.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the advice given to AEA pension scheme pensioners.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): If Members wish to remove their jackets, that is totally in order. I apologise for the fact that one of the green clocks is not working, but the other two are.

1.30 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Second Report from the Defence Committee of Session 2015-16, Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge, HC 494, and the Government response, HC 465.

It is a privilege to present the findings of our report entitled “Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge” to the public once again—it was published some time ago. I doubt whether anybody two or three years ago would have registered the significance of the term “2% of GDP” in connection with defence, because it was only relatively recently that the prospect of Britain’s falling below the NATO recommended minimum expenditure on defence for the first time came to the public’s attention. For many years, we spent a great deal of money on defence. The purpose of the report is to track the history of that expenditure to check the extent to which we are continuing to meet the NATO minimum and to see whether there has been any financial jiggery-pokery to enable us to do so.

In a nutshell, we found that no rules have been broken. The Government’s figures and methodology conform to the NATO guidelines. It is true that, on the basis of including such things as armed forces pensions, which were not previously included but are allowed to be included, the Government will reach the 2% minimum. I use the word “minimum” advisedly, because that is what it is. It is not a target, but the minimum expected of each NATO country to contribute as a proportion of their gross domestic product to their defence. One could argue that it remains a target for countries that have never managed to reach it, but for those of us who have always exceeded it, often by very large amounts, it remains a floor, not a target, let alone a ceiling.

I know it is frowned upon to use props in debates in any Chamber, but the sheet of paper I have is so vivid that, even at a considerable distance and through the lens of a television camera, it is easy to read. The bar graph shows a consistent and steady decline in the percentage of GDP spent on defence since the mid-1950s. In the mid-1950s, we spent more than 7% of GDP on defence. In about 1963-64, that downward-falling graph crossed the upward-rising graph of what we spent as a proportion of GDP on welfare. Far from spending more on defence than on welfare, as we did until about 1963, we spend six times on welfare what we spend on defence. In the mid-1980s, we were spending roughly the same amount on defence, education and health. Since then, the descending graphs for defence expenditure and the rising graph for education and health have similarly crossed over, and we have declined closer to the 2% minimum. We now spend almost four times on health and about two and a half times on education what we spend on defence.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I am interested in the chart that my right hon. Friend is describing, which appears as a corrigendum to our report. More interesting than the three Departments he mentions is the fact that, during that period, spending on overseas aid increased by a significant amount while spending on defence declined. Is that not a significant correlation?

Dr Lewis: It is significant, and it is indeed included on the chart. The only reason why I did not mention it is that, in comparison with the total spent on the other high-spending Departments, it is a relatively small proportion of our GDP. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right because, such has been the decline in defence, our commitment to spend 0.7% on international development now amounts to one third of the total that we spend on defence, which comes in just above the 2% minimum.

When we called the report “Shifting the goalposts?” we put a question mark at the end because we did not wish to prejudice it. There are two ways in which the Government could be said to have shifted the goalposts: first, by including things they are not allowed to include—we absolved them of that—and, secondly, by including things that they are allowed to include but never included in the past, which would mean that we are not comparing like with like in terms of our previous methods of calculating UK defence expenditure. The Defence Committee inquiry found that the NATO minimum would not have been fulfilled if UK accounting practices had not been modified, albeit in ways that are permitted by the NATO guidelines.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that some of the money that is counted in the 0.7% official development assistance is also counted towards the 2%? I might take issue with some of his line of argument, but it sounds like he is arguing that that double counting should not be double counted.

Dr Lewis: We did not find a hard and fast case of double counting, but we noticed in the past that there are items of expenditure that are highly relevant to defence and security that could fairly and usefully be catered for by the international development funds. Given that the 0.7% is protected, and given that one sometimes hears stories of the Department for International Development struggling to find creative ways of spending the money it has to dispose of, there is an opportunity, particularly in relation to soft power, to use elements of the international development money for measures that add to our security.

Of course, this is a rather crude measure, because gross domestic product can vary. If this country’s gross domestic product goes down but we spend the same
amount on defence, it might appear that we are doing more when we are doing nothing of the sort. Similarly, when the value of the pound changes, as has happened in the short term following the Brexit decision, we see the effect on what we are able to buy for the money we have available for defence when we purchase big-ticket items such as the P-8 maritime patrol aircraft from the Americans, although a considerable amount of that purchase will find its way to the British defence industry. What I am driving at is that perhaps we ought to be talking not about shifting the goalposts, but trying to move the benchmark.

We should be reminding people that, in the 1980s—the last time we faced a significant threat from the east in Europe in the second and closing phase of the cold war—we regularly spent between 4.5% and 5.1% of GDP on defence. The similarity lies not only in the international situation. In the 1980s, we simultaneously faced a very significant terrorist threat in the form of Irish republican terrorism. We now face a similar threat in the form of fundamentalist Islamist terrorism.

It therefore seems appropriate to note that and, in the week that we were told that the first of the successor submarines for the nuclear deterrent will be named HMS Dreadnought, to remember a previous HMS Dreadnought, the battleship that changed the whole nature of sea power as far as capital ships were concerned in the years approaching the first world war. A famous naval arms race was going on between this country and Germany and, around 1909, there was a great deal of controversy that the German navy was drawing level with the grand fleet of the British Royal Navy in terms of dreadnought battleships. A public campaign was mounted, encapsulated by the phrase of the Unionist politician George Wyndham:

“We want eight and we won’t wait!”

My view, which I believe is shared by at least some other members of the Defence Committee, is that a new benchmark is perhaps needed for the percentage of GDP to be spent on defence: “We want three to keep us free!” In reality, if we go on at the 2% level, we are in free!” In reality, if we go on at the 2% level, we are in

**Dr Lewis**: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely spot on, and of course that is what underlies my remarks about the fact that the figures are only, at best, the crudest guides. Nevertheless, they give us some sort of measure of comparison. Spending a certain amount of money on defence—oh, or should we say, investing in it in defence—is not a sufficient condition for the reason that the vice-chairman of the Committee has just explained. It is, however, a necessary condition: if we do not spend enough, we cannot possibly have the potential. If we have enough to spend, we can consider how to ensure that we spend it in the most efficient and productive ways.

At this point, I pay tribute to the staff who help the Defence Committee to prepare our reports and, in particular, to one member of staff, Dr Megan Edwards, who did all the background research for the appendices to the report. They show, on as near as it is humanly possible to express the same terms, how much we have spent every year since 1955-56 up to the present day. That sort of original research work is of lasting value, because it sets into context the minuscule efforts that we make these days in comparison with the efforts that we had to make in the past. The reason that I single out Dr Edwards is that today is her last day working as a specialist member of the staff of the Defence Committee—our loss will be the Cabinet Office’s gain, and we wish her well in her new post and congratulate her on it.

Another aspect of the financial calculations that causes particular concern is the constant emphasis on efficiency savings. The most recent tranche of efficiency savings that the Government required from the Ministry of Defence was, I believe, some £0.5 billion, just before the 2015 strategic defence and security review. Some estimates put the aggregated total of efficiency saving requirements in recent years at something in excess of £1 billion, carried forward year on year. Theoretically, savings are ploughed back into the MOD. In practice, I understand from people who know about such things, it is hard to track that money, to apply those notional savings in concrete terms and to see where exactly the savings have gone in terms of new capacity.

A few days ago, on 18 October, that matter came up during a hearing on the Ministry of Defence’s annual report and accounts for 2015-16. The Defence Committee was interviewing Mr Stephen Lovegrove, the new permanent secretary at the MOD; Lieutenant General Mark Poffley, Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff for military capability; and Ms Louise Tulett, director general of finance at the MOD. They made an impressive trio of witnesses.

At one point, it was put to the witnesses that, of the almost £26 billion of equipment commitments that came out of the SDSR, almost a quarter really was new money, nearly £11 billion was so-called headroom or contingency, which is understood to be used up at appropriate points in the programmes, but the rest of it was in fact efficiency savings. It is therefore understandable if we feel a bit worried that what seems on paper to be a substantial commitment on spending, large sums of money, is in a significant respect, notional, because it is dependent on the redistribution of money that the MOD already has but is supposed to spend more efficiently in some way or another.

**Mr Spellar**: May we forbear on the nomenclature of the civil service—the so-called efficiency savings? Efficiency, as I understand it, is when we are running a payroll
office and using 100 people, but we bring in new equipment and only employ 50 as a result, while keeping outputs the same. Efficiency is when people find new and improved ways of undertaking their work. Everything else is cuts. We should be clear that many of the things we are discussing are not efficiency savings but cuts, and we should describe them as such.

Dr Lewis: The right hon. Gentleman perfectly exhibits the cross-party basis on which we try to find agreement on such matters in Committee, and the extent to which we succeed in doing so. He is of course absolutely right.

I do not intend to speak much longer, because it is excellent to see so many would-be contributors to this short debate, but I will first refer to the question that was put to Mr Lovegrove. We asked, basically, when the point will arrive at which an organisation can truthfully say, “We are just about as efficient as can be and, indeed, any further ‘savings’ that we make must amount to cutting into the bone, having already cut through the flesh.” The permanent secretary’s response was as follows:

“There may be a moment at which that happens. It is not on the horizon right now. There are certainly efficiency savings that we can get at in the Department, and our focus is on doing that and seeing whether or not we can go even further. It is only at that point that we would start engaging in the kinds of conversations that you suggest.”

With the greatest respect to the permanent secretary, who as I say made a good impression and was a credible witness in our examination of the annual report and accounts, we hear time and again from within the armed forces the same underlying fear: that we are in danger of creating a hollow force, which may have exquisite equipment—perhaps not enough so-called platforms, but exquisite nevertheless—but not enough people to man it.

The trouble is that short-term cuts—I beg your pardon; efficiency savings—can lead to long-term problems. That applies in particular to training. With the carriers coming on stream, the big frigate programme having to get under way and the new F-35 joint strike fighters taking over the maritime air role from the sadly missed Harriers, which will have filled too long a gap in our naval capabilities, now is the time when we should inject maximum effort into training. Yet we find ourselves in a position—perhaps for reasons of morale or under-investment, or perhaps because insufficient emphasis is being placed on defence in our national priorities—of struggling to recruit and retain the people we need even as we cut the size of the armed forces.

The Government have not broken any rules, but they have scraped over the line by the narrowest of margins. There is no guarantee that we will not dip below the 2% figure. People usually come up with the response, “Just remember that we are the second highest spender on defence in NATO.” I remember that sort of argument from back in the 1980s, when people who wanted us to spend less on defence—we were spending quite a lot in those days; between 4.5% and 5%—said, “Why should we spend this amount on defence when Germany and so many other European countries spend so much less than we do?” The answer, as the author of a short and pithy letter to The Times pointed out, was that the countries that we were being compared with were all on our side. We have to judge our defence expenditure by what our potential adversaries spend and what defence and attack capability they get for the money that they invest.

We do not want to engage in a race to the bottom. We do not want to preen ourselves on doing a good job because people on our own side are spending even less than we are. Our percentage expenditure on defence is lower than it has ever been—even on the new calculation, it is 0.1% lower than it was in the previous financial year. Something has gone wrong with our scale of national priorities, and the purpose of the Committee’s report is to draw attention to that, in the hope that the Government will renew their emphasis on their first duty: to keep our nation safe.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. It may help Members to know that I hope to finish this debate at around 3 o’clock. It is not my intention to put a time limit on speeches, so perhaps Members will bear that in mind.

1.54 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I will not delay everyone for long. Although the Committee found that the Government’s accounting criteria fell firmly within the NATO guidelines, we also found that those criteria had been amended to include several significant items that had not previously been included when the UK calculated its defence expenditure. That is the nub of the issue that we must address. The Committee is concerned that the inclusion of such items, which were critical in attaining the 2%, could undermine the promises in the SDSR of new money for defence.

During our inquiry, there was considerable discussion of the 2% as an indicator of Britain’s political willingness. Witnesses said that “2% is good politically” and not to meet the 2% “would have been damaging to our reputation politically.” The 2% was said to have “a… powerful symbolic meaning.”

The UK has made great play of that 2% as demonstrating its commitment to collective defence in NATO, but the inclusion of items that had not previously been included, such as pensions, has not gone unnoticed—with considerable contempt—across the alliance. As well as being a member of the Defence Committee, I represent the UK on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and I have found that other countries, when talking about their expenditure and accepting that it does not reach 2%, take great delight in pointing out that their figures do not include pensions, as they have no wish to use creative accounting to bolster their spending. That is divisive within NATO and damages our credibility and capability to defend our shores and those of our allies.

Our report highlighted that 2% should be a minimum, not a target, and certainly should not be seen as an indicator of capability or capacity, or give a false glow of competency and readiness. The report also urged the Government to provide a calculation of what defence expenditure would be if we left out the new items such as pensions and used the same items as we had under the 2010 accounting rules. We still await those figures.
A perfect storm is building of cuts to personnel, cuts to training, problems in procurement and gaps in capability. With the 2%, there is a disparity between our procurement aspirations and their affordability—and our capacity to deal with major defence equipment deficiencies, such as the engines for the Type 45 destroyers and the delays in replacing the Type 23 frigates and logistics supply ships. I have a major concern in particular about the Royal Navy’s capacity and capability. If we went back to realistic accounting, perhaps we would be able to deal with those issues.

I do not want to take too much time, because I know that colleagues want to speak, but I must emphasise that in our report, the Committee expressed concern that the UK must not become a hollow force. Sadly, despite the great commitment and bravery of our personnel and their amazing “make do and mend” ingenuity, I fear that we are hiding our vulnerability behind the cardboard shield of 2%. 

1.58 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It was just outside the constituency of the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) that Her Majesty’s Government first committed two or three years ago to the 2% target—or the 2% figure; I will come back to the target in a moment. I would be ungracious if I did not start by saying that I warmly welcomed that that was the case. Until then, through five years of coalition government, that had not been the case. It probably would not be the case—dare I say, without being too party political—if we had a Labour Government; people would seek to find savings from defence to spend on schools and hospitals. The first thing that we ought to say is that thank goodness we have that 2%. I am glad that the previous Prime Minister made that firm and rather surprising commitment at the Wales summit.

Mr Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman tell me in which year under a Labour Government expenditure fell below 2%?

Mr Gray: The trouble is that under Labour Governments we always have wars and things so we have to keep spending up—that is the difficulty. However, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. I am not suggesting that the Labour party made cuts in previous years, but, from listening to some of the speeches produced by the current leader of the Labour party, it would be perfectly reasonable to expect that significant defence cuts would be made were Labour to be in power today.

Mr Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Gray: If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me—[Interruption.] If the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me—[Interruption.]

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not giving way.

Mr Gray: Before the right hon. Gentleman leaps in to enter into a party political discussion of the matter, the purpose of the debate is not to have a party political pop across the Chamber—and of course I would not wish to tread unreasonably on the Opposition’s personal grief on this subject.

Mr Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Gray: I would really rather not. We have not got very long—[Interruption.]

Mr Spellar: On a point of order, Mr Bone. As we are having a debate on defence, it is perfectly proper for the hon. Gentleman, who is normally much better behaved in the Defence Committee, to make partisan points. What I think is improper and verging on being out of order is then not giving way for a response, because I for one do not believe in unilateral disarmament either in the Chamber or in our defence policy.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): The right hon. Gentleman is very experienced and knows full well that that was in no way a point of order.

Mr Gray: I am most grateful.

Mr Spellar: Will the hon. Gentleman now give way?

Mr Gray: No, if the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me. We have a short debate and I have one or two things to say. I do not want to go on too long, but too many interventions of that kind will simply delay the proceedings. He knows perfectly well, because he and I are close friends—

Mr Spellar: Give way, then!

Mr Gray: I have the strongest respect—[Laughter.] Allow me to finish the sentence. I have the strongest respect for the strength of commitment by Labour members of the House of Commons Defence Committee to the defence of the realm. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman is right in saying that I have been a little ungracious in talking about some other parts of his party’s approach to defence because I know the members of the Labour party on the Defence Committee are strongly committed to that.

Mr Spellar: rose—

Mr Gray: I am happy to give way.

Mr Spellar: May I thank the hon. Gentleman, my friend from the Committee, for giving way? I point out that in fact he cannot point to any Labour party policy. The policy of the party is decided at our party conference, as indeed is our commitment to Trident. In the previous Parliament, when decisions were being put off on Trident, there was an overwhelming majority in the Labour party to support the Labour party policy of renewal of Trident. It is the same for the defence budget.

Mr Gray: I am most grateful and greatly reassured by the right hon. Gentleman’s commitment both to Trident and to an increase in defence spending. I look forward to that vision being repeated by the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) when he replies to the debate from the Front Bench. It is good news to know that that is what Labour thinks.
In all events, the debate is not about which party will spend more on defence. I think perhaps we should move away from that parti pris squabble and move on to discuss the report in front of us, which is a very well worded, calculated and researched paper. The first thing I would say, however, is that the Ministry of Defence’s accounts are second only to the Schleswig-Holstein question in being completely and utterly incomprehensible. I think there is nobody alive today who fully understands the MOD accounts, so the one or two accountants in the Department are well able to move figures around and fiddle with them in such a way that no normal human being can understand or follow.

Indeed, much of the language used is equally incomprehensible. For example, in paragraph 14 of the Government’s reply they are talking about the £11.2 billion of efficiency savings—we asked where they would find that. It lays out a few efficiency savings first and then says:

“A further £2 billion will be delivered through the reprioritisation of existing funding.”

They will save £2 billion through the reprioritisation of existing funding. They then go on to say that £2.1 billion that we remove from the joint security fund will in fact allow cuts in the ordinary defence spending. Therefore, that is not extra money coming in from the joint security fund at all; that is merely replacing moneys that otherwise were to be cut. There are many other examples of precisely the same thing.

Without a PhD in such matters it is simply impossible to understand exactly how the MOD accounts work and I am slightly concerned that the Government’s response tends not to try to clarify matters but to make them even more complicated than before. That makes comparators extremely difficult. It is a very difficult indeed to compare our spending today with what we spent in the past. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) touched on this: it is perfectly true that when I was born in 1954 we were spending something like 7.8%—if I remember rightly from the charts in the report—and today we spend about 2%. Therefore, the cut has been gigantic. However, comparing what we spend today with what we spent yesterday is extraordinarily difficult because of the accounting procedures.

It is unclear whether things like urgent operational requirements, or several other things that occurred in the past, are included, not least because, as the MOD said in its reply, it keeps its accounts only for seven years. Therefore, if we ask officials about any financial matter before seven years ago, they do not know. They are unable to give answers on what happened in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s because they do not keep the accounts. It seems to me simply bizarre that a Government Department should not keep accounts in perpetuity—it ought to be able to give an answer on what Government spending on defence was at the time of Waterloo if we asked the question sensibly. To say that it does not know for more than seven years ago is simply extraordinary. We therefore do not know how our spending today compares with previously because of that rule and we cannot compare our spending with other NATO countries for the same reason: it is all lost in the shrouds of mystery and antiquity.

My right hon. Friend made the extremely important point that 2% is all very well, but it is not a target and it is not even a floor—it is absolutely the minimum. In terms of the rhetoric, the Government appear as if they are claiming, “ Haven’t we done well? We have achieved 2%.” No, never in the history of British defence more than we ever had to spend only 2% of GDP. Actually, that is the lowest figure we have ever been at. Moreover, if we were to listen to the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer and we were to face quite a significant recession post-Brexit—I personally do not believe that will occur, but he said so plainly—2% of GDP would presumably mean a significant cut in the pounds spent on defence. Therefore, the 2% figure is, to some degree at least, misleading. What we need to know is that this year we are spending £35 billion or thereabouts on defence and that that will increase every year irrespective of what happens to the economy.

The opposite applies as well. Supposing the economy were to grow at some fantastic rate thanks to Brexit—let us imagine that we see 2%, 3% or 4% growth—does that really mean that we will spend billions and billions of pounds more on defence than we have currently programmed to do? If so, how on earth will we find things to spend the money on? I am not certain that the 2% figure necessarily allows for sensible comparators between different Departments or that it is quite the right way to judge it.

We need to know how much the Government will spend and, as my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Bridgend said, not only how they will spend it but what they will spend it on. What we need to know is what we can do in defence terms—how many ships, tanks, soldiers and sailors and all the other things we need, such as cyber, will we have in the future? The 2% figure does not necessarily tell us that. It is a question of capabilities and not necessarily of money.

While I very much welcome the Government’s commitment to the 2%, which is certainly a step in the right direction, that by no means reassures me that we as a nation are ready to face the appalling threats we now face. Russia is a bigger threat to us today than it has been since the cold war, the middle east is in complete turmoil and much of the rest of the world is a disaster area and we are struggling to maintain a level of spending that we have never before seen.

It seems to me that we are in danger of failing in our primary responsibility of defending the realm by allowing ourselves to be fooled by a piece of camouflage: “ Aren’t we being great? We are spending 2% of GDP”. Are we able to defend the realm? I suggest that we may well not be.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I know this is a very important debate and I have six Back-Bench Members who want to catch my eye as well as the Front Benchers, so could Members keep their remarks as brief as possible?

2.8 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Bone. I will try to be as brief as possible because I also hope to catch the Chair’s eye in the next debate—I have half a speech to give because at first I thought there would be one debate.

Of all the Government’s commitments, we can point at and quantify two—2% of gross national income on defence and 0.7% on aid—and the others go up and
down. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) appeared to imply that somehow that was a bad thing and that spending more on welfare than defence, showing compassion to the most vulnerable and needy in our society and providing that social security safety net of which we all ought to be so proud, was somehow at odds with finding the money we need to spend on the defence of the realm.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke of investment, which I think is also quite important when considering the international aid budget. I would argue that spending money on international aid is an investment in our security and in our enlightened self-interest—helping to build a more stable and secure world by lifting people out of poverty and helping them get the food and education that they need.

It is particularly interesting that the 0.7% target, which admittedly was agreed some time ago, was based on a calculation of what was needed to meet the globally agreed goals for poverty eradication, including ending hunger, access to education and so on. I am not entirely clear where the 2% target came from. Is it a needs-based assessment of what NATO countries ought to be spending in order to effectively defend themselves or, as the report seems to say, a political target—an arbitrary amount? I think that has serious implications.

Even if we are meeting the 2% target, the key point I make is that there is a serious risk of conflating between those two targets. This might be a point of agreement: by definition, the double counting of money that is spent on aid and money that is spent on defence means the total amount of money being spent on each of those is less than it ought to be. That might be permitted under OECD rules, and sometimes there might be a good reason, but both the people who support the aid budget, like I do, and people who support the minimum defence spending target are effectively being short-changed by the Government’s practices in this regard.

There is also the question of what the 2% is actually spent on. I was in Westminster Hall not that long ago and was told that money could not be found for the Type 26 frigates, yet there seems to be a blank cheque for weapons of mass destruction on the Clyde. I have spent a lot of time in Westminster Hall this week discussing the Chagos islands and Libya, as has the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). We heard a worrying amount of language that sounded an awful lot like old-style projection of power and a frankly old-style colonialist mind-set that belongs in the past. If the Government insist on setting these targets for defence spending and want to spend that, fine, but please spend it on what we need, such as modern counter-terrorism or conventional forces in places such as Fort George near Inverness, which is where I grew up. Do not conflate that spending with aid and do not waste it on weapons of mass destruction.

2.12 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I commend the Chair of the Defence Committee on the leadership he has shown in bringing the Committee together, as is obvious from our work. While there may have been a wee bit of spat today, the fact is we all work together because we all share the same goals. It is good to be able to tell people outside of the Chamber that we were able to work together on behalf of our service personnel. It is always wonderful to be able to do that.

As a member of the Defence Committee, this is an issue I feel strongly about, and other hon. Members have strongly expressed themselves as well. The evidence that came before the Committee was incredibly persuasive, and I believe the Government have issued their conclusive response since April 2016. The crux of the matter is clear. I have a direct quote from the press release for the report, which I agree with. It says that “the Government has achieved its 2% commitment to defence spending in the last year only through what appears to be creative (albeit permissible) accounting.” That is the fact of the case. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray), who spoke very clearly, outlined that. We are all saying together that there has been creative accounting and that, while the figures may show that the percentage has been met, it is not where we wanted it to be. That is the clear issue and what we are about.

I am a straight man. If I can do something for someone, I will tell them and then do it. If I cannot do something, I will tell them that it cannot be done, and together we can work to find an alternative plan. We do that in the House, in the advice centre back home, in the constituency office and in life in general. I understand that Government bodies cannot always achieve miracles and that people cannot do everything I would like them to do, but this is life. By the same token, if someone says they can and will do something, I expect it to be done. That is the fact of it, and that is what the debate is about.

When the Government made the pledge, I was among the first to stand up and congratulate them on taking this step to ensure that our armed forces were at full strength in all aspects. Why, because of creative accounting, has the pledge not been met in real terms? Why have I seen so much evidence that the 2% pledge has not been fulfilled? Today, along with other members of the Committee, I am holding the Minister and the Government to account on the reasoning behind the failure simply to do what they committed themselves to do with the statements they made a long time ago.

The Government’s commitment to not fall below the NATO-recommended minimum defence spending of 2% of GDP for the rest of the current Parliament was not simply a message to our armed forces that they will not be sent out without adequate equipment, training and intelligence. It also sent an important message to our partners and potential adversaries that we are a force to be reckoned with and that we will continue to improve and enhance our defence with an appropriate budget. As other hon. Members have said, we have to respond adequately and strongly to threats, and send a message that defence and our ability to take up arms if necessary is a Government priority. That message has been diluted and clouded by rhetoric, and has not amounted to much in reality.

It is unclear what accounts have been included in the calculation of what was needed to meet the globally agreed defence budget. As other hon. Members have said, we have to respond adequately and strongly to threats, and send a message that defence and our ability to take up arms if necessary is a Government priority. That message has been diluted and clouded by rhetoric, and has not amounted to much in reality.

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operations or the purchase of urgent operational requirements were included in the calculations it submits to NATO. Such inclusions are allowed by NATO, but the lack of clarity confuses anyone’s ability to make year-on-year comparisons of the defence budgets. The MOD must be secretive—that is the very nature of it—but there is no need for shading in that respect, unless it is because the Government hope to get away with not doing what they said they would do. If that is not the case, it could easily be cleared up and rectified with a clear, simple and transparent spreadsheet. That has not been done. I am sure the Minister will respond to that when the time comes.

In accounts provided by the MOD for 2010 and 2015, the new inclusions of the 2015 accounting strategy are difficult to identify. The new inclusions should be outlined and shown from which Department each was previously funded, such as war pensions, intelligence gathering and all of the other things that may be found in the budget for the first time that have suddenly been introduced as part of the 2%. Hon. Members will understand why the Defence Committee is concerned; others who are not on the Committee have expressed concerns as well. My mother often talked of “robbing Peter to pay Paul”. That is what appears to have happened. We have enlarged one defence budget by doing away with others. In the end, Peter and Paul have the same combined amount as they did before. It really is hard to understand how it all works.

As I said in March 2015, my concern is not and never has been about the pennies. My concern is about provision and whether we have in place what we need to actually do the job we want. That was mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who spoke before me. Is there enough? I do not believe there is enough spending, and the report backs up the fact that that has not changed. My first concern is not having the adequate manpower or provision to step in and offer adequate aid to buttress against further pressures in the areas in which we are involved, which is in the wider context of heightened security tensions across Europe and the middle east and across the Atlantic.

I and other members of the Defence Committee have expressed concerns before about the numbers of reservists and how we get those numbers up. How do we deliver that? How do we retain our regulars? How do we ensure that our service personnel are adequately trained and equipped, and that we have the frigates and ships to fulfil the Royal Navy’s roles? Sometimes Members who are not here or not on the Defence Committee may not know what those roles are. Do we have an RAF that can carry out its responsibilities, from as far away as the Falklands to the piracy in the horn of Africa? Can we be effective in the middle east? We need to be, and we need to have the money in place to do that.

We face threats of both an internal and existential nature, which we need to be prepared to meet. Those threats stretch the capacity of our defence capabilities; first, to maintain the standard of assistance in areas in which we are involved and, secondly, to meet the prospect of further demands. That is what we have to do: meet those further demands.

Those concerns have been shown to be truth over the past 18 months, as we have become involved in more and not fewer situations that require, if not a presence, then intelligence and preparation. We cannot stretch ourselves to such a limit that we are no longer able to protect our citizens, or commit to and deliver our responsibilities, wherever in the world they may be.

As I stood then for at least a 2% of GDP spend, I stand today. We will not be pacified with pie charts and graphs, as the Chair of the Defence Committee presented it to us at an earlier stage, or columns of this or that. We need an honest and open account, and that is not what we have received.

I am conscious that other Members wish to speak, so I will conclude. I say to the Government: do the right thing. Be a Government that the UK can be proud of. Do not seek to pull the wool over the eyes of the Defence Committee or anybody else outside it, when our national security and the lives of men and women are at stake. Our men and women whom we are very proud to see serving and honouring the pledge they have made to defend all these shores and all our interests deserve no less, and their service demands that we cease the disservice that has been done. The Government should simply do what they said they would do by delivering on the 2% and ensuring it is a real 2%. At this time, I do not believe it is.

2.20 pm

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is always a challenge to follow my informed colleagues in these debates, so I apologise for any repetition.

The first duty of any Government is the defence of the realm and security of their citizens, so I welcome this opportunity to discuss the Government’s ongoing defence commitments. We are living through a period of global turmoil and national uncertainty. Though Britain is preparing to exit the European Union, we must remain an outward-looking nation, committed to fulfilling our role in the world and supporting the efforts for peace and international stability across the globe.

The threats to that peace are many and varied: an emboldened Russian Federation, continuing instability in the middle east, a Europe struggling to come to terms with the historic migrant crisis, ever-adapting terror networks, and modern technology that expands the potential threats to our country and that has revolutionised the theatre of war. In these uncertain times, it is more important than ever that the UK is committed to maintaining a military that is capable of dealing with whatever threats the future may hold and that meets the capacity and capability needs identified by the strategic defence and security review. That can be achieved only by ensuring sufficient year-on-year funding to maintain and expand our armed forces capability. That is why I and my colleagues on the Defence Committee welcome the Government’s continued commitment to the 2% pledge on defence spending, to ensure our NATO compliance. That commitment sends an important message to our allies in NATO and beyond that the UK remains committed to fulfilling our role in the world, and to defending and supporting our friends, wherever and whenever that need arises.

As we have heard, the UK has the largest defence budget in the EU, the second largest in NATO and the fifth largest in the world, but money alone will not solve these issues. I hope that the 2% pledge is a commitment to maintaining our military strength in the long term.
Report stated that capacity in order to stay within that amount. Our should never seek to curtail or compromise our military Benches would support. We must understand that the Wiltshire (Mr Gray) said, many Members on the Labour 2%, which, despite what the hon. Member for North may necessitate a spending increase over and above the spending is sufficient to meet our needs, even when that of ensuring that capacity is met and that our defence report that is welcome, but I wish to stress the importance tell, and I am sure we will revisit that.

Army of 112,000 personnel is sufficient to deliver the sceptical of the Government’s suggestion that an integrated F-35s, we will have to review that number. I remain However, with the imminent arrival of not enough regular personnel to a baseline of 31,750 are welcome. I have no doubt that the Government’s commitment to defence spending and recognition of the challenges our country faces is sincere. However, our troops deserve more than financial wizardry. I hope that, in future years, the Government work to ensure that the necessary resources are put into defence, and ensure that we are spending a minimum of 2% annually in real terms, so that we have sufficient resources to fund our capabilities as well as to invest in our future.

I also welcome the Government’s commitment to maintaining the size of our armed forces, with plans to grow the size of the Royal Navy to 30,600 in 2025—an increase of 400 personnel and an uplift of 1,600 over the position initially laid out by the previous Government in 2010. However, as we have discussed today, with the planned retirement of HMS Ocean, even those numbers are insufficient to fully man our current capabilities. I have significant concerns about proposed cuts to our Royal Marines in terms of absolute numbers, which I hope our Committee will continue to investigate.

Considering the ongoing active deployments of our RAF forces, plans to expand the strength of RAF regular personnel to a baseline of 31,750 are welcome. However, with the imminent arrival of not enough F-35s, we will have to review that number. I remain sceptical of the Government’s suggestion that an integrated Army of 112,000 personnel is sufficient to deliver the Army’s contribution to joint force 2025, but time will tell, and I am sure we will revisit that.

There is much in the Government’s response to our report that is welcome, but I wish to stress the importance of ensuring that capacity is met and that our defence spending is sufficient to meet our needs, even when that may necessitate a spending increase over and above the 2%, which, despite what the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) said, many Members on the Labour Benches would support. We must understand that the 2% pledge represents a minimum annual spend, and we should never seek to curtail or compromise our military capacity in order to stay within that amount. Our report stated that “the Government must be clear that 2% is a minimum—not a target—and be prepared to increase defence expenditure further, in order to reflect the increasing threats faced by both the UK and our Allies.”

We must also take into account the UK’s situation in the wake of the EU referendum and the role that the current uncertainty may play in our economic outlook. With the additional financial and geopolitical challenges that Brexit may pose in the short to medium term, it is vital that the Government recognise those concerns and act to ensure that our military remains on solid financial and operational ground in the years ahead. A report from the Resolution Foundation suggested that the economic upheaval thrown up by uncertainty around Brexit could cost the UK economy up to £84 billion over the next five years, which would have a significant impact on the 2%. The real value of the Government’s 2% pledge ebbs and flows with the country’s economic fortunes. As outlined by the hon. Member for North Wiltshire, the commensurate drop in GDP resulting from that would be reflected in a drop in the value of the 2% set aside for annual defence expenditure, which could have a devastating effect on our capability, especially if the 2% comes to be seen as a spending cap rather than a minimum.

A further concern is the declining value of sterling and the impact that it may have on overseas procurement. One particular issue is the purchase of military equipment bought in US dollars, at prices that could greatly exceed initial estimates. For instance, the MOD recently announced the purchase of nine P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft from Boeing via a foreign military sale. The predicted cost, including training, infrastructure and the necessary support at RAF Lossiemouth, was recently estimated to be £3 billion over the next decade. However, with the pound slumping to its lowest value against the dollar in some time, the initial costs of purchase could greatly exceed initial predictions unless appropriate—

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): I apologise for interrupting, but as former Ministers in the room and the Chair of the Defence Committee will know, these sorts of contract are offset, and predictions are put in—the Treasury has that capability. If we build a road project, we put in the project cost and the inflation cost. That risk is built into the project, which former Ministers in the Chamber know.

Ruth Smeeth: I thank the Minister for that. The end of my sentence was, “unless appropriate hedging is put in the contract.”

Mike Penning: It always is.

Ruth Smeeth: While I appreciate that it probably is, I do not think anyone could have anticipated the likely devaluation of the pound in recent days. I hope very much that that is the case, but we will see what happens in the long term when we get the full figures.

Mr Spellar: Is it not even more significant that, in giving this order directly to Boeing, the MOD did not seek to get any offset in other programmes in order to create work back in the UK?
Ruth Smeeth: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. With the P-8A and even the F-35, we get only 20% of the build in the UK.

Mr Spellar: And the Apache.

Ruth Smeeth: And the Apache. There are significant concerns about British manufacturing capabilities within the current procurement programme.

As the UK comes to terms with our future outside the European Union, it is more important than ever that we maintain a strong independent military presence. I believe the Government recognise that. I again welcome their response to the Defence Committee’s report and their ongoing commitment to supporting a robust UK military. I for one believe these issues to be above party politics.

2.29 pm

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

I was going to talk about the 2% pledge, but many of the points I was going to make have been covered today and were extensively covered in the report, so I will confine my remarks to chapter 4 of the report: “UK defence: what can we afford”. It considers that question in the context of the 2% pledge.

In paragraph 75, the Ministry of Defence is quoted as saying that the SDSR would “determine priorities for investment to ensure that the UK has a full suite of capabilities with which to respond to defence and security threats”. Indeed, page 67 of the “National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review” document of last year identifies the three tiers of domestic and overseas risks we face, grading them as tier 1, 2 or 3 “based on a judgement of the combination of both likelihood and impact.”

Taking that at face value, the National Security Council has identified terrorism, international military conflict, cyber, public health, major natural hazards and instability overseas as the tier 1 threats facing the UK.

With that exercise having been undertaken, one would have thought the resources would follow the perceived threats and their perceived likelihood, but that does not seem to be the approach followed by the Ministry of Defence. For example, it is extremely concerning that the Government seem to be hellbent on pursuing their ideological obsession with a new generation of nuclear weapons, which its proponents argue are to deter an attack using chemical, biological or nuclear weapons—a tier 2 threat according to the National Security Council risk assessment.

Meanwhile, the Government have delayed commissioning and building the promised Type 26 frigates on the Clyde, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) mentioned. Those are essential to address tier 1 threats—international military conflict and instability overseas.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): May I ask whether the hon. Gentleman is in favour of continuing to produce Type 26 global combat ships on the Clyde when their primary role is the protection of our independent nuclear deterrent, which he detests?

Steven Paterson: I am in favour of fulfilling the promise made in 2013 to have 13 ships built on the Clyde. If the hon. Gentleman goes to the Ministry of Defence website he will see that its description of those ships’ role includes a whole range of things in addition to protecting the nuclear deterrent.

We wait to see whether the national shipbuilding strategy, which is due by 23 November, sees an end to the disgraceful delay in commissioning those ships on the Clyde. We wait to see whether there is a guarantee that the five multi-purpose frigates will be built on the Clyde, or whether they will be commissioned to be built overseas. Based on the answers to those questions, we will evaluate the long-term prospects for the Clyde yards, which provide vital capability infrastructure, enabling the UK to address tier 1 threats set out in its own national security strategy and SDSR.

Originally, of course, the Government promised that 13 Type 26 frigates would be built on the Clyde, but they revised that substantially to eight, with five general purpose frigates to make up the shortfall. In paragraph 90 of the report, the Committee correctly identifies the risk:

“Should...the ‘concept study’ to investigate the potential for a new class of lighter, flexible general purpose frigate be unsuccessful, we wish to be informed at the earliest opportunity of the MoD’s contingency plans to deliver the extra ships to satisfy the total originally promised.”

The Government’s response to these concerns merely indicates a willingness to keep the Committee informed, and we must hope that there will be no further backtracking on the general purpose frigates. Further, we await confirmation that they will be built on the Clyde. Should that not occur, as well as being a betrayal of the skilled workers employed at those shipyards, it will threaten the yards’ capacity to deliver complex warships in the future and undermine the UK’s ability to meet the challenges identified in the national security strategy and SDSR.

The report also identifies clear concerns among the witnesses the Committee questioned about the MOD’s ability to maintain the size of the armed forces at the levels envisaged in the SDSR, which several speakers touched on today. Those concerns were voiced more than six months before the EU referendum and the economic impact of that vote. Should the decision of the UK as a whole to leave the EU result in an adverse economic impact on the UK, as seems likely given its impact in the months since the vote, there will be further pressure on the UK’s ability to deliver expensive military capability and manpower in future.

In particular, the collapse in the value of the pound may have a serious impact on the affordability of imported military systems, of which we have many and plan many. Spending 2% of a significantly smaller pot will have serious implications for the delivery of ships and planes and the maintenance of manpower, particularly if, as seems inevitable, the costs of vastly expensive programmes such as the successor nuclear weapon submarines spiral.

I thank the Defence Committee for its work in this area—it does an excellent job looking at this policy. I am very happy to have had the opportunity to speak today.

2.34 pm

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.
This debate is about what sort of country we see ourselves as being. I have always seen the UK as a force for good, and I mean that not just in military terms but in our humanitarian role in the world and how we have defended liberal democracy over the decades. The issue is not just the 2% pledge, but whether we have the capability to achieve what we set out to do as a military nation. In 2013, the UK's GDP was £1.6 trillion, with a defence budget of £37 billion, or 2.3% of GDP. In 2014, our GDP was £1.7 trillion and the defence budget was 2.17% of GDP. At the same time as the budget has fallen significantly over that period, Russia's defence budget went up by 21% last year alone. That is what we must consider.

I do not think the Russians want to enter into a war with the west, but times are uncertain. Russia might be a declining power, but insecure powers, like insecure people, may lash out, and that country also has nuclear weapons. I read in The Times at the beginning of this week that Russia has just unveiled a new sort of intercontinental ballistic missile. We know that it has put nuclear weapons into Kaliningrad, and we know what it does in Syria. We definitely know what it did in Ukraine. Russia is flexing its muscles, and we must be prepared for that.

General Sir Richard Shirreff said in his evidence to the Committee that even if all NATO's member states put 2% of their GDP into the defence of the west, he was sceptical about whether that would be enough to see off the threat from countries such as Russia. We must realise that many of the military conflicts and issues around the world are asymmetrical, and there are all sorts of issues such as cyber and terrorism. Russia is one nation that we could find ourselves in conflict with.

China's defence budget is well over $200 billion. The rest of that region's defence budget put together is only $45 billion. A figure I came across at the beginning of the week is that there are more than 100,000 UN peacekeepers around the world in 16 locations, many of them in Africa. The world situation is very turbulent. Are we in a position to defend ourselves?

The report is unequivocal that although 2% may act to Britain's ability to defend itself from aerial attacks and said:

“UK air defence now consists of the” working Type 45 destroyers,

“enough ground-based air defence to protect roughly Whitehall only, and RAF fast jets. Neither the UK homeland nor a deployed force—let alone both concurrently—could be protected from a concerted Russian air effort.”

These issues are worrying for me and, I believe, for the other people in this Chamber and the Defence Committee.

Is 2% enough? When other things, such as pensions and so on, are included, and there is creative accounting, do the Government really mean 2%? We must sit down and think whether it is enough. Efficiencies are brilliant and fantastic. We all agree with that, but the one thing we must do is to protect this country. We must have a serious look at whether 2% is what we should be paying.

We have two brilliant aircraft carriers that will come into service in a little while, but have we got enough ships to defend them? Have we got the submarines to defend them? Have we got the skills to man them? We need to look at that. If we are to punch above our weight, let us ensure that we can actually do that. We just have to be honest with ourselves. Is 2% enough? Is the 2% actually 2%? Should the figure be higher? We need to hear from the Minister on that.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP):

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) for his input this afternoon and for his chairmanship of the Defence Committee. I associate the Scottish National party with his comments about the excellence of the Committee staff.

In preparing for today's debate, I not only read the report and the Government response, but looked back over my notes from last year of the evidence that the Committee took. It speaks well of the quality of the witnesses to the inquiry that much of what they said is now coming to pass. I will touch on some of that evidence today.

This is obviously a vast subject that really deserves a day's debate in the House. However, time pressures will restrict me to only dipping into some of the issues raised in the report. Those are the decidedly squidy nature of what 2% means; the pressure that that will inevitably put on future procurement projects; and the overwhelming feeling that the Government are confusing “preserving the shop window”, which is typified by the pledge, with actual hard-headed strategic thinking that links in to capability. The focus on inputs has simply provided a useful smokescreen for a distinct lack of usable outputs in our defence capability.

The report is unequivocal that although 2% may act as a useful benchmark and a statement of intent, we should not kid ourselves that it means anything more than the MOD wants it to mean, because, quite simply, using previous measures of defence spending will bring us below the desired figure. Shifting the goalposts means the nature of what 2% means; the pressure that that will inevitably put on future procurement projects; and the overwhelming feeling that the Government are confusing “preserving the shop window”, which is typified by the pledge, with actual hard-headed strategic thinking that links in to capability. The focus on inputs has simply provided a useful smokescreen for a distinct lack of usable outputs in our defence capability.

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Let us take pay restraint, for example. Central to future budgets of the Department is a commitment to ensuring that any rise in the pay of personnel does not exceed 1%. Any upwards movement on salaries would, given the nature of such a target, mean less money for other projects. As inflation rises in post-Brexit Britain, so our dedicated and selfless armed forces personnel will face a pay “crunch”, as Dr Robin Niblett of Chatham House foresaw in his evidence to the Committee last October.

In that regard, although giving hard-pressed personnel a pay rise will be part of the question, the one part of the 3% that there will be no problem with is funding the weapons of mass destruction. I and my colleagues have been relentless in asking the Government to address that anomaly. In fact, if the SNP Defence team could be
renamed, I am sure that we would be called HMS Relentless, because we know that every penny spent on Trident is a penny less spent on conventional defence, and that also means fewer pennies for the salaries of serving personnel.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East suggested that we should move to “three to be free”. I think that a great campaign would be to go for “nil to save on the bill”. Perhaps the Minister can comment on that.

As the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife, I am sad to say that every penny spent on Trident also means less money to support the stunning Queen Elizabeth-class carriers being built in my constituency. Those amazing vessels deserve and require a host of capabilities around them, but in the Government response to the report, we do not get much idea of how they will be paid for. Other hon. Members have alluded to the Type 26s, for example. Whether we are talking about the F-35B joint strike fighters that will fly from the carriers or the Type 26s that will protect them, it seems that in putting forward their pledge, the Government may have caught themselves in a trap of their own making. Of course, as the Great British pound continues to fall in value against the dollar, each of the planned 138 F-35s becomes that bit more expensive, even allowing for what the Minister alluded to earlier. Every day that passes without a timetable being given for the Type 26 programme means that the hard work of my constituents in ensuring that the carriers are delivered on time and on budget is being undermined. I hope that, along with addressing the other substantial points from the report today, the Minister will take the time to let us see what his Department plans to do to ensure that those projects are not adversely affected by the plummeting pound.

Ultimately, the problem is that the 2% pledge should not be confused with a strategy—a charge made by many witnesses in their evidence to the Committee and most forcefully by Professor Julian Lindley-French. The problem is well illuminated in the recent document leaked to the Financial Times, in which General Sir Richard Barrons critiqued the Ministry of Defence for its focus on “preserving the shop window” over its most basic national security duties. The 2% pledge obviously sits very nicely in that shop window.

Also in the shop window sit projects such as Trident, which the Government hope will boost our international prestige and look good in a press release, but which bear no relation to the threats that this country faces and are taking a terrible toll on real, usable procurement projects and, indeed, our armed forces personnel. As we float off into the uncertain waters of Brexit Britain, I would hope that at the very least we could have some form of real stability in our national defence, but as the report shows, as it is with Brexit, so it is with defence—there are more questions than answers.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members for their participation. Because we have run over a little bit—I thought it was right to do so—we will try to wind this debate up at 3.15 pm.

2.46 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I add my voice to those congratulating the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on securing this important debate. As we have heard from other hon. Members, he has been an excellent chair of the Defence Committee. I congratulate him and his Committee on their report “Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge”.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part in the debate, but particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Stirling (Steven Paterson), for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). [Interjection.] And the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) of course, although I will have to caveat that by saying that I agreed with much of what my hon. Friends said and, as the hon. Gentleman will not be too upset to discover, I did not agree with a great deal of what he had to say.

What has been confirmed to us today is that the 2% target was created to redress the balance between the defence budgets of the United Kingdom, the other European Nato members and the United States. It has been correctly pointed out that it does not necessarily follow that achieving the 2% target will deliver the defence capabilities required by the UK. The Defence Committee was very aware of the limitations of the arbitrary 2% figure in delivering capability. It may well, as has often been stated in this debate, have a powerful symbolic meaning in the context of the perceived commitment of the UK to our Nato allies. As the report says, it “sends an important message to all the UK’s partners and potential adversaries.”

However, as I am sure the right hon. Member for New Forest East would agree, that is a far cry from saying that we are getting this right. Committing a minimum percentage of GDP to defence may well send the desired message, but—as my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling said—it does not adequately protect us from the threats that we ourselves have identified. I need not remind hon. Members of the words of General Sir Richard Barrons just last month. He said that the UK armed forces had lost much of their ability to fight a conventional war and accused the MOD of sidestepping “profoundly difficult” strategic challenges. He also said that there is “no military plan to defend the UK in a conventional conflict.”

Let us be clear: that is because we have made in this country the political choice to go down a nuclear route at the expense of a conventional route. That will have massive consequences for what we can do now and in future. Do not just take my word for it. Just last year, when General Sir Richard Shirreff spoke at the Defence Committee, he said one either goes “down the line of a nuclear capability at the expense of conventional capability, or conventional capability at the expense of nuclear.”

As a result of our decisions, our vital conventional defence capability has been sacrificed on the altar of this Government’s obsession with nuclear weapons. As my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow North and for Stirling said, the most notable casualty of that is the Type 26 programme, which has been cut, delayed, cut again and further delayed while the Ministry of Defence struggles to find the money to cut the first steel on the Type 26 frigates. Lord West, a former First Sea Lord, said:

“Because of pressures...our numbers have declined. Not only is that a problem for our defence capability and the security of our nation and our people; it is a problem for our shipbuilding and our defence industries.”
The lesson we have learned from this Government is that there will always be money for nuclear weapons and that it will always come at the expense of our conventional defence. How much longer will the workers on the Clyde have to wait to start work on the Type 26 programme? How much longer does the Ministry of Defence believe it can eke out the ageing Type 23 fleet? Those frigates were supposed to have been taken out of commission by 2023, but that is now virtually impossible to see happening. The Type 26 frigates are badly needed by the Navy and are a vital part of our conventional capability; however, they are being sacrificed because of this Government’s obsession with nuclear weapons.

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman—he might even be a friend—for giving way. I repeat: a primary role of the Type 26 global combat ship is to preserve our independent nuclear deterrent. Frankly, if we really go down that road, perhaps we do not need the Type 26. If the Scottish National party were in power, it would get rid of our independent nuclear deterrent, make us really vulnerable and get rid of the Type 26 frigates while it was at it.

Brendan O’Hara: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s repetition and think that my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling adequately answered him previously. There is much more to the Type 26 frigates than simply protecting the deterrent. The workers on the Clyde were initially promised 13, which has subsequently been cut to eight. All we are asking the Government to do is honour their commitment and fulfil their promise to the workers on the Clyde.

Whatever the Government’s method of calculating defence expenditure, we have grave concerns about their strategic choices and the effects those are having on the UK’s defensive posture. As the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and the hon. Member for North Wiltshire said, the MOD’s creative accountancy and ability to hide a multitude of sins in a fog of statistics is the stuff of legend. Let us be absolutely clear, as Professor Phillips O’Brien at St Andrews University said recently, defence “cuts have fallen disproportionately on the guts of British defence: the army and logistics.” The Army is smaller than it has been for centuries while the Government throw obscene amounts of money at Trident.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife said, although 2% may act as a useful benchmark and a statement of intent, let us not kid ourselves that it means anything more than what the MOD wants it to mean. As we have heard on numerous occasions this afternoon, if we take previous measures of defence spending, it brings us well below the desired figure. Only by adding a whole range of spending priorities, from pensions to Trident, can we achieve that 2%. In many ways, that renders “2%” meaningless—it becomes a totem rather than any meaningful gauge of how we defend this country. The Government have thrown everything into the pot, including the kitchen sink—indeed, we probably could claim against the kitchen sink—in order to play what has become a rather crude numbers game.

On this side of the House, we have said many times that the Select Committee’s report noted that meeting the minimum NATO spending targets does not mean that defence is adequately resourced. That is very clearly the case under this Government and previous ones. Their sums do not add up, and we believe that their decisions have been highly detrimental to the armed forces and to this country’s conventional capabilities.

In his opening statement, the right hon. Member for New Forest East said that there had been no jiggery-pokery by the MOD, but I am sure he would agree that there is, indeed, a strong whiff of jiggery-pokery in reaching the 2% target. The Government have had to rely on childish tricks, including conflating international development and defence spending, to reach this target. They have ignored numerous requests from the Committee to come clean and to explain where that money has been re-accounted for.

In conclusion, this debate has shown that the 2% figure is pretty meaningless; it is a totem and is merely symbolic. The debate is now about what we should be doing with the real money we have, rather than posturing with percentages. It is about the amount of money we have and what we do with it, not whether it is 1%, 2%, 3% or—in the opinion of the hon. Member for North Wiltshire—4%. We can do better if we allocate it properly, which means allocating it to our conventional defences and not pouring it down the black hole that is Trident.

2.56 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. We have had an extraordinary debate this afternoon here in Westminster Hall. I want to add my congratulations from the Opposition Front Bench position to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), who chairs the Defence Committee, and to all the members and staff of his Committee, on producing an excellent report. So far, nine right hon. and hon. Members have spoken about it, plus two Front-Bench spokespersons, and the Minister will speak in a few minutes.

The Chairman of the Committee made it clear at the beginning that what we spend as a percentage of our gross domestic product on defence has radically altered since I was born in 1955, a year after the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray). [Interruption.] Yes, I appreciate he looks considerably younger than I do. When we were born in the ’50s, it was just 10 years after the most momentous world war and the destruction of so many lives and properties throughout this country and the world. Our entire country was effectively one armed force to defend ourselves from the aggression we faced at the time. It was logical, therefore, that we should have scaled down the percentage that we spent. However, one of the themes that has come through clearly during the debate this afternoon, is that it is not about the crude percentage, but about how we spend it and the value for money we get. Speaker after speaker has made that point and I am sure the Minister will underline it when he sums up at the end.

We have heard some very good contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) is well known for her hard work on the Defence Committee and for her knowledge of defence. She questioned, yet again, the criteria of the calculation to the amended so that the Government were assisted in reaching that 2%. As many other right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned, including pensions is perhaps a slightly
dodgy calculation when trying to make up that 2%. I would welcome the Minister’s view on the inclusion of pensions in the overall percentage. My hon. Friend made the point that the UK’s credibility is being damaged by the way in which we make up the 2% that NATO demands.

We heard a very good contribution, as always, from that expert on the Government side, the hon. Member for North Wiltshire. I have known him for many years and have worked on many campaigns with him—we share that in common. He made the point that we cannot compare the percentage spent in 1954 with the percentage spent today because the world is a totally different place. He also made a very important point about accounts: why are they not kept for more than seven years? I find that surprising. Surely the different accounts must be in the records of this place in Hansard from when estimates have been debated and discussed in the decades since 1954.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as always, made his contribution to a debate—it seems that every debate I take part in he is there, making important points. He said that the MOD was unable to provide a robust dataset and that, as his mother used to say, it was robbing Peter to pay Paul.

[Andrew Rosindell in the Chair]

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), who made a thoughtful and well written contribution to the debate. We are the fifth largest defence spender in the world, but it is really important that 2% does not remain a maximum of what we spend to keep the realm safe. She said that we need to spend what is required. We on the Labour Front Bench agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) spoke well, as always, being very knowledgeable in these things and being an active member of the Committee. He pointed to the threat from Russia. In my previous role in the foreign affairs team, I was responsible for our connections with NATO, where I went in June. We heard over and over again, from officials in Brussels and in the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Mons, about the increasing threat from Russia as it flexes its muscles in the world, shows us what it is made of, making up for the deficiencies of the President of that country in internal and domestic policy with aggressive foreign policy. It is very clear that that is what dictators look to divert attention.

In bringing my remarks to a conclusion, Mr Bone—[Interruption.] Sorry, Mr Rosindell. Thank you for pointing that out, Minister. In trying to bring together the points that have been made this afternoon, I make it absolutely clear that Labour’s position is to remain an active, important and strategic member of NATO and to keep our defence spending as we need it to be to defend the realm.

Everyone in the armed forces knows the damage that was done during the last Parliament when our defence spending dipped well below that 2%. Many are questioning, as we have this afternoon, what is now included in the calculation that puts us artificially over that 2% to 2.08%. It has not necessarily been achieved as a result of increases in actual defence spending on our armed forces and on the equipment that they need; it has been done by showing and including other expenditures, such as some of the money spent within the Department for International Development. I would welcome the Minister’s comments on that.

As my colleagues have pointed out, the Labour Government comfortably met that 2% target each year. In fact, the lowest percentage of GDP spent in the 13 years that Labour was in power was 2.4%, so the next Labour Government are certainly committed to spending that NATO minimum. [Interruption.] Sorry, did the Minister want me to give way?

Mike Penning: Where did that come from?

Fabian Hamilton: Well, that is the calculation that I have been given by my researchers.

As I said, we have the fifth largest defence budget in the world. I am glad to say that defence spending will increase by £5 billion up to 2020-21. That is welcome, but like any competent business purchasing supplies or the resources necessary to make it work, we have to ensure that we get the best possible value for what we buy, and that, as the Chair of the Committee pointed out, we put money into our personnel with adequate, proper and decent training. We all know that without that training, our forces cannot work as a collective whole and cannot work as effectively as possible.

I believe that only Estonia, Turkey, Greece and France spend 2% of GDP or more on defence. There has been anxiety in Washington about the fall in the UK’s defence budget. In the Financial Times recently, the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), the former head of policy at No. 10 Downing Street, was reported as saying:

“If we need to get to 2 per cent of GDP, there is a question of whether you can increase overall spending by counting funding of the intelligence agencies as defence spending”.

I would welcome the Minister’s response to that.

The Opposition Front-Bench team believes, like the Government and I think every Member of this Parliament, that the defence of the realm is the No. 1 priority of the Government of the day. We need to spend what is necessary to keep the population of this country safe, but we need to spend it wisely and well.

I will conclude by returning to the remarks that were made by my friend and colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield. He said that even if all the NATO countries put 2% of their GDP into defence, it would not be enough to protect us from our enemies. There are 100,000 UN peacekeepers in 16 countries because the world is in such turbulence at the moment, so the question I leave the Minister with is this: is 2% of GDP sufficient?

3.5 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell—I hope I get your name right; I got told off last time, so I will try hard.

This has been a very interesting debate on such an important day—the day that the national poppy appeal is launched, when we remember those who gave so much for us. What a perfect time for this debate to take place. It is my first debate as Minister for the Armed Forces in the Ministry of Defence.
I completely agree with the Committee in asking whether 2% is enough. Could we spend more? I am sure we could, but 2% is a NATO guideline. Would it not be great, as the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) indicated, if the other NATO countries also stepped up to the plate and spent 2% of their GDP on defence?

What great news it was today that our GDP has increased, even though scaremongers, including the BBC and others, said that the economy was in a dive after Brexit. It has gone in the opposite direction, which will mean there is more money to be spent. No Defence Minister would stand up and say, “No, we wouldn’t like to have more money,” and anybody who did would not be telling the truth. However, we have to live within our means and make sure that what we get is spent correctly, which is the crux of today’s debate.

Let us get Trident over and done with first. If we want to be a member of NATO, we have to be under a nuclear umbrella. If we do not want that, we do not stay in NATO. If we took the Scottish National party’s position, not only would we lose thousands of jobs on the Clyde, but we could not really be part of NATO.

That debate has been had before. We debated the nuclear deterrent in the House, when the House—not the Conservative party or this Government—made the decision on the future nuclear deterrent by a huge majority. That was the message to the rest of the world and to NATO.

Brendan O’Hara: Does the Minister accept, though, that the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government, the SNP, the Labour party, the Greens, the Scottish Trades Union Congress, the Scottish churches and great swathes of Scottish civic society have all said no to Trident? Should that voice not be respected?

Mike Penning: Perhaps the referendum in Scotland, when the Scottish people decided to stay part of the United Kingdom and under the rule and sovereignty of this Parliament, is another important decision that needs to be taken into account. The percentage of GDP in the Scottish economy from defence spending is huge, and the SNP really have to take that on board in what they say about the future of defence.

Brendan O’Hara: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Penning: No, I have given the hon. Gentleman an opportunity to intervene and he has had plenty of time.

We have to spend the money correctly. Comparisons are really difficult. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, the Chair of the Committee, touched on that point in saying that trying to compare like with like is very difficult. National service was still in place when the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) were born, which has been alluded to. When I joined the Army in 1974, I was in the British Army of the Rhine in Germany with the 3rd Armoured Division. We had almost no fuel and almost no ammunition and we hardly ever left the military transport park. We just did not have the money. We sat there knowing full well that we were a deterrent. The boys and girls who were serving at that time were very brave—all the armed forces were brave—but we knew that the money was not being spent correctly. As a young soldier, I could see it then and we have seen it through various Governments that have been in power.

How do we spend the money as well as possible? We get the right kit to deal with the threats, but the threat changes. Most of us thought the cold war was over. We thought we could look at the threats from other parts of the world and apply our defence accordingly. In the past couple of months we have had to look back to the old foe. We saw their fleet sailing through the English channel, probably as a sign of what they could do. We saw black smoke coming out of the top of the aircraft carrier—she could not have gone a knot faster if she had tried because she is so old and decrepit—but she represents a threat. Could they have gone round the north, as they have done before? In fact, the weather was very bad off the west coast at the time, but probably they were sending a message. Our boys and girls in our armed forces shadowed her man for man as she came through. I know that because I was on a frigate in the channel while the aircraft carrier was coming through.

We have to be careful with these defence reports. We are genuinely trying to do the best for our armed forces and make sure they have the right equipment. We must show we are after them and not undermining them. It is a very thin line.

I have responsibilities as the Ops Minister. Everybody thinks we are home from Afghanistan and Iraq, but we have ops in nearly 39 countries where our armed forces are serving us today. I do not think we have paid enough tribute to those boys and girls—our servicemen and women who are out there on our behalf—during this debate. I know it was touched on in some Members’ speeches, but mostly it was not, and that is a real disappointment because the forces pick up on what we say in this House and see where their support is.

Are we hollowed out? I do not think so; I would not be able to do this job if I thought that was the case. We will continue to fight the Treasury to make sure we have as much as we possibly can. It is enormously difficult to compare what happened in 1956 with what happened in 1974 when I joined the Army. The package we offer our armed forces is absolutely important. The issue is not just about recruitment, but about retention, which I will come to in a moment.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): There is genuine support for the armed forces, but when working out what we have to spend, it is difficult to have confidence in the figures we have been given. For the seventh year in a row the Ministry of Defence accounts have been qualified because they cannot meet international accounting requirements. A resolution of that would go a long way to supporting the appropriate spend in the areas that need it. It would also give confidence to our service personnel.

Mike Penning: I completely agree. It is way beyond me to understand the accounts of the MOD. I freely admit that.

Kirsten Oswald: It’s way beyond anybody to clearly understand them.

Mike Penning: I am in my seventh Department in six years and I have struggled to understand the accounts in most of them. That does not make it right—I fully accept that. From my point of view and that of my fellow Ministers, when we are looking at what we can
and cannot do around the world and at home in defence of the realm, it is difficult, but at the end of the day, NATO set the 2% so that the rest of the NATO countries would come on board.

The question has been asked whether the international aid budget, which is 0.7% of GDP, should be linked to the MOD budget. Some of us have been in this place a long time. Although I was not elected such a long time ago, I remember a huge argument going on between DFID and Defence when Clare Short was the excellent DFID Secretary of State over helicopters during the flooding in Bangladesh—I may be wrong, but I think it was in Bangladesh. A massive delay took place while they argued about money. Is that the sort of situation that we want to be in today? If our Navy or our armed forces are operating in a humanitarian area, it is right that we help, but should that come from my budget or from DFID’s? We need to work much more closely together.

I will not be able to answer all the questions in the time I have been given, but the crux of the matter is that we are all, no matter what party we are from, pushing for the same thing. We want to respect our armed forces and give them the kit and equipment they need. We will disagree on certain aspects. We disagreed on Trident, which was debated in the House. We will continue the debate, but the House has made a decision and we are pressing ahead. I am really pleased that Her Majesty’s Opposition has committed to 2% of GDP on defence. That is the first time we have heard that. We have had a commitment for this Parliament going forward and I am really pleased that the Labour party has bitten the bullet, for want of a better description, and committed to doing that. I hope the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) has not got into trouble over it, but I will write to him to confirm the commitment when this debate is over. It is a very important message from this House as we go forward.

I felt the report was helpful. As it says, we have not broken any rules. Along with my fellow Ministers, I will spend the money in the best way we possibly can to make sure we continue to have the best armed forces in the world and that they have the kit and equipment they require.

3.15 pm

Dr Julian Lewis: I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. We have had an excellent turnout for a quiet Thursday afternoon. The fact that so many people have given up their afternoon to take part in this debate and made such strong contributions, both from the Back and from the Front Benches of the respective parties, is a matter for congratulations. I think we all agree that adequate funds are a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition for wise defence expenditure. The question that came up again and again was whether 2% is enough. We heard it from the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and from the Front-Bench spokesman for the Labour party, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton).

I started off by referring to the “we want eight” crisis of 1909, of which Winston Churchill wryly noted:

“The Admiralty had demanded six ships; the economists offered four; and we finally compromised on eight.”

Perhaps in the context of this debate we might end up by saying that I want three to keep us free in terms of percentages. My hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) wants four or the Government should be shown the door. Maybe we can compromise and, like the Bee Gees, say, “We want five for stayin’ alive.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Second Report from the Defence Committee of Session 2015-16, Shifting the goalposts? Defence expenditure and the 2% pledge, HC 494, and the Government response, HC 465.
Lariam


3.18 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I beg to move.


Before I turn to the overview of the report and the conclusions of the Select Committee on Defence, I want to put on record our thanks to those who gave us the impetus to investigate the issue and contributed their knowledge and their time. I apologise if I leave anyone out. Our thanks go to Trixie Foster and the retired Colonel Andrew Marriott for their persistence in raising the issue and co-ordinating a detailed submission; to defence correspondents who took the matter up; and to Forces TV whose work brought in more evidence. I thank the Library for its research and our Clerks, who did a magnificent job, as well as the witnesses who appeared at our three evidence sessions, including from the drug’s manufacturer, Roche.

I would also like to put on record my personal thanks to the Committee for agreeing to pursue the issue for the sake of the approximately 25% to 35% of personnel who have taken Lariam who have been directly affected. The Committee was determined to ensure that the Ministry of Defence would examine the damage to lives and the failure of the duty of care, and to make the necessary recommendations to protect our armed forces personnel in the future.

Lariam is one of several antimalarial drugs that the MOD uses to protect military personnel against malaria. None of the alternatives is without its problems, but Lariam has been the subject of concern for a long time. The inquiry set out to establish a clear picture of the impact of its use in the UK armed forces. I think it is fair to say that the Committee was shocked and surprised by what we found. I will leave others to go into details, as it is my role to give an overview of our principal conclusions and recommendations.

From the evidence we received from individuals and the statistics that the MOD provided, we were shocked that Lariam is still being used so often despite the well-known problems. We were told by the drug’s manufacturer that the MOD accounts for one fifth of all its UK sales. At a minimum, 17,368 personnel were prescribed the drug between 2007 and 2015. There may well be more, but one of our findings was the haphazard nature of MOD medical record keeping. Note to the Minister: it was particularly unhelpful when the MOD published its first 10-page statistical bulletin on Lariam on the day we took evidence from the Minister.

The MOD receives advice from the Advisory Committee on Malarial Prevention alongside the advice from the manufacturer. Roche is clear in its guidance that every individual who is prescribed Lariam should undergo an assessment with a medical professional to identify any contra-indications that might make them more susceptible to side effects. We questioned whether the ACMP’s advice was appropriate. It was clear to us that the general advice that it offered was not tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the military. It fell short and put military personnel at risk. We concluded that the MOD should work with the ACMP to develop specific guidelines, similar to the US so-called “Yellow Book”.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Is the hon. Lady now confident that the MOD will be able to deliver on the duty of care and the commitment to proper prescribing of Lariam, especially when a large number of troops are leaving at the same time?

Mrs Moon: If I am perfectly honest, no. I think that the medical care that is offered continues to fall short, but I hope that the Committee will be able to address the issue again in future and ask for further updates. Of course, we have the opportunity to hear from the Minister today what further progress has been made.

Alongside our findings about the ACMP, we looked at whether Lariam was appropriate to where personnel were sent and the work that they do. The Minister and the Surgeon General told us that geographical location was a consideration in prescribing Lariam. By contrast, other witnesses made it clear that there is nowhere where Lariam should be the preferred drug, particularly given that there is increasing resistance to it and there are alternatives available. Geography aside, and linked to our earlier concerns about the ACMP advice, we sought to clarify whether Lariam, given the known side effects, was appropriate at all in a military setting. A military deployment is a world away from a tourist sightseeing or sitting by a pool. The physical and mental strain of being deployed in stressful situations does not need to be exacerbated by the severe side effects that Lariam can induce.

Dr Nevin gave evidence of an alarming potential negative impact on military performance and operations. There were cases of service personnel experiencing “episodes of panic resulting in abnormal behaviour” and incidents of servicemen becoming confused and being found “wandering aimlessly”. There were incidents of tension and anger, episodes of severe mental and physical exhaustion and nausea, lapses of concentration and episodes of short-term memory loss, ill temper, dangerous driving, confusion and suicide ideation. That is a grim picture of medically induced problems for military personnel on deployment.

We explored whether other nations gave Lariam to their armed forces. Our research uncovered a mixed picture, but a tendency towards either no longer using Lariam at all or using it only as a drug of last resort. That all added weight to our recommendation that greater clarity is needed in determining when to use Lariam, and that attention should be paid to whether it is appropriate for military personnel.

At the heart of our inquiry was the question whether the MOD was fulfilling its duty of care by following the clear guidance on prescribing Lariam. Did every individual undergo the Roche-required individual medical assessment prior to deployment? Was it realistic to think that the MOD could ensure that that happened, particularly for a large-scale, short-notice deployment? Alarmingly, there was evidence that individual assessments were not happening. Lariam was included in pre-deployment kit;
it was handed out on parade; or the MOD relied on an assessment of medical records only for prescription. We felt that that was a fundamental failure in duty of care. We concluded that, aside from the need to consider the practicalities of arranging assessments, prescribing Lariam should only ever be a last resort bounded by strict conditions. Linked to that, we uncovered concerns about non-reporting of contra-indications; military personnel appeared unwilling to admit to conditions such as a previous history of depression, because of fear of a negative impact on their career. That underlines even further the need for individual assessments.

Several witnesses reported that personnel were so concerned by the reputation of Lariam that they discarded their medication and were potentially left with no antimalarial protection at all. That came even from the very top. I believe Lord Dannatt has announced that he refused to take Lariam and would throw it away. We were deeply disturbed by that and recommended that the MOD should monitor compliance rates.

**Bob Stewart** *(Beckenham) (Con)*: I recall that evidence that came to us, as hearsay, from Lord Dannatt. It really shocked me that he was Chief of the General Staff and felt that way and did not take action. I think that the Committee felt that too.

**Mrs Moon:** We most certainly did; but that also shows the inertia in the Ministry of Defence. We heard from many personnel—either individually or as a Committee—at different ranks within the MOD. The matter was not something that was not known about, but it was not being tackled or recognised as a major problem for serving personnel.

Finally, and most tragically, we heard from many individuals who suffered severe long-term effects from taking Lariam. Long after leaving the military, they are still suffering such things as mental trauma, vivid dreams and suicide ideation. That is totally unacceptable. We sought to establish what support was on offer for them from the MOD as it became clear that arrangements were somewhat fragmented. We recommended the establishment of a single point of contact, which we felt was particularly important for veterans, some of whom have experienced mental health problems for years.

Having seen what happened in the previous debate, when the vice-chair of the Committee could not be called to speak owing to time restrictions, I shall now leave it to my colleagues to expand further on the report and evidence. We look forward to hearing from the Minister that further progress has been made.

3.28 pm

**Johnny Mercer** *(Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)*: I, too, want to thank the Defence Committee Clerks, who did a terrific job. We were presented with a wide range of evidence, some of which was reasonably scientific, and we certainly needed their help. I also pay tribute to our many witnesses, one of whom flew in from America to give us evidence.

The report has been an important one for the Committee. In the first 18 months following the 2015 general election we have produced three reports on the duty of care and how we look after people. It is an interesting time in politics, and there are diverse views on defence on either side of the party divide and in the SNP; that is great, but we have a duty to hold the Government to account.

Having served and so on, I know that the interesting side of the military is going on operations and all the things that come with that—shiny stuff, bombs and all the rest of it—but what we fail to get in this country is the importance to combat power of looking after people. I certainly would not hold the United States up as a bastion of getting everything right, but we have seen its forces go through a process so that they understand the whole force concept. They do not just talk about it doctrinally or write about it at staff college. They actually impose a whole force concept whereby looking after families, housing, accommodation, health, wellbeing and so on contributes to fighting power. The US has seen those rewards. We are slow to that game, but we are beginning to get there and we are making real strides, particularly under the current Minister.

In the challenging time we are going through with Brexit, which absolutely presents opportunities as well, it is important that we do not drop the ball on defence issues. As everyone will recognise, we have come out of a particularly tense time on operations. We must maintain our focus, as my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces alluded to in the previous debate. People read and watch what happens in this place, and it means something to them, so I am pleased that we are having this debate.

Lariam can be quite a complex issue, but it comes down to one clear thing. There is a drug that is clearly very effective at fighting malaria, which is a killer—we should not lose sight of the fact that malaria still kills a lot of people worldwide—but any manufacturer will say that the drug should be used within the guidelines. Unfortunately, for one reason or another, we did not use it within those guidelines, and people were affected.

The matter can be viewed as being a bit niche. When I first brought it to the attention of the Ministry of Defence in August last year, I was treated as though it were a personal campaign of mine. I have never taken the stuff, so I have never experienced any of the effects at all, but the issue is not niche to those who have been affected. We are now doing so much better in this place when it comes to the problems caused by Lariam, as we are on other mental health matters. However, it is simply not good enough to understand it just because it happens to us, our family or someone close to us. We have to take these things seriously, and we must take responsibility.

**Douglas Chapman:** The hon. and gallant Gentleman has been identified as being closer to the issue than most. Do his former colleagues in the services believe that things have improved or changed? Is there any evidence of more support being given to our armed forces who have been subjected to the drug over many years, and are there signs of improvement in the support they get?

**Johnny Mercer:** It would be hard for me to say, at the moment, whether there has been a shift. From the information I have been receiving, I understand that...
work has been done and it will take a little while to get the granular picture of that support. We have been given assurances that the report has changed things for people who are suffering.

We have to be mature and accept that, as an employer and a Government, we have asked young men and women to take medication to protect them from a disease in areas where we are asking them to operate, and we have not done so correctly. I welcome the fact that the report realises that. It is not in keeping with how we normally look after people. I know that, having served, I have come to this place on a bit of a mission, and that I get slightly carried away, as I did the other night, about how we look after people. However, one of the strengths of the military, including the Army, is that we do look after people. That pastoral care very much contributes to what we do, but the way in which we have looked after those who have taken this drug has been out of keeping with that.

Bob Stewart: I thank my very good friend for giving way. I am slightly concerned by the third condition for prescribing Lariam, whereby the danger of the drug is explained to the soldier, sailor, airman or airwoman, and then the decision is down to them. In my experience, a lot of soldiers will say, “For goodness’ sake, tell me whether I should take it or not. Why do you give me that decision?” That condition worries me, because I think that most soldiers will say, “You tell me what I should take. I am not the judge of that.”

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend, loosely speaking, for raising that point. He gets to the crux of the problem. Essentially in the military, we go on medical advice. None of us are scientists or doctors. If we get into the real detail of the issue, it is on that point that we get to the nub of what has gone wrong.

Mrs Moon: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the problem was that there was no medical advice? Often, a sergeant major would just walk down the ranks, saying, “Take these.” There was no assessment—nothing. It was just, “This is what we have in the stores. You take it.” There were no warnings about the side effects or about reporting them. That was, and remains, the failure.

Johnny Mercer: I absolutely agree that the single point of failure was that we had a drug that, like any drug—even paracetamol or Anadin—should be used within the guidelines set down by the manufacturer, but instead of people being given it carefully, in a medical fashion, with individual risk assessments as stipulated by Roche, Lariam was just handed out on parade. Clearly, that is not the way to do business. The hon. Lady is right. That is a generic function of leadership, not one that is particular to this cause. Having that intimate relationship with our soldiers, or with those under our command, is something we work hard on at a junior level. At a senior level, it is desired. Whether the time is taken to do that is another matter. Across the military, we need to foster an environment where it is okay for a conversation to go both ways so that we can get on top of such problems.

I know that more Members want to speak, so I will finish soon. We need to change our view on having a softer side in the Ministry of Defence and understand how important it is to look after people. Whether we reconfigure what we do, or look into having a Minister for defence people or whatever as a No. 2 in the MOD, we need to bump that change up the priority list. I thank the Defence Committee and its Chair for letting us look into the issue. People talk about Parliament being so remote—that essentially, we just turn oxygen into carbon dioxide and no one really cares—but I hope that the people who have been affected by the issue see that Parliament does work for them and can take some comfort from that.

3.40 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a great privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the Defence Committee, under the excellent chairmanship of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and all previous speakers in this debate.

I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases and as a trustee of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. I have a large MOD base in my constituency, MOD
Stafford, which has three signals regiments and the RAF’s tactical supply wing. Many members of those units spend quite a lot of time on deployment in countries where malaria is a problem.

Malaria, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) said, is a killer. It used to kill well over 1 million people a year, but thankfully that figure is now down to 438,000 a year, according to the World Health Organisation in 2015. I hope the figure is still falling, but it is an awful lot of people. I have had friends die from malaria, which is a serious disease.

It is absolutely right that the Ministry of Defence should take every precaution to protect its personnel from the depredations of malaria, but the question, of course, is how to do it. I had experience of Lariam when I lived in a tropical country. I took it when I was diagnosed with malaria—I took it not as a prophylactic but as a curative—and they were four of the worst days of my life, and not because of the malaria. Lariam produces extraordinary dreams that leave those who take it completely debilitated. The next time I had malaria—I have had malaria four times—I took a different drug, artemether, and the experience was quite different. Within 12 hours I was back on my feet, back at work and able to continue. The side effects were almost zero.

We are talking about Lariam as prophylaxis, but several alternatives are mentioned in the report. There is Malarone, which for many years was quite expensive, but it is a lot cheaper now that it is off patent—that is the one I use whenever I go to tropical countries. There is doxycycline, which is effective and cheap, and of course chloroquine and proguanil, which have been used for decades. Those two drugs have some side effects, particularly proguanil, which can cause mouth ulcers if taken over an extended period—proguanil is also an ingredient of Malarone.

On the curative side there is Lariam, but artemisinin-based combination therapies are also incredibly effective and are the recommended curative drugs for malaria across the world—I will talk about those in my conclusion.

The Committee’s recommendations for using Lariam are spot on. First, the MOD should find out whether service personnel are unable to tolerate alternatives. Secondly, individual risk assessments should be conducted and, thirdly, the patient should be aware of alternatives. I am delighted that the Committee has come up with those recommendations, which are all absolutely right, but they need to be put into effect. I am delighted to hear that the Ministry of Defence has taken the report seriously.

I finish by issuing a warning. We think that we have come a long way with both prophylactic and curative drugs against malaria, and that is indeed the case. All the research funding over the past decade and a half has partially resulted in halving the number of deaths, although a substantial part of that is also due to the use of mosquito nets. Has the Committee looked at how the research funding over the past decade and a half has partially resulted in halving the number of deaths, the research funding over the past decade and a half has partially resulted in halving the number of deaths, the research funding over the past decade and a half has partially resulted in halving the number of deaths, the research funding over the past decade and a half has partially resulted in halving the number of deaths.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is right that the first three speakers in this debate should be the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who has campaigned on this subject for probably the longest time; my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), who is an outstanding campaigner on behalf of anything to do with the welfare of veterans and current service personnel; and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), whose unparalleled experience of malaria—experience of an unfortunately all too personal nature as well as professional experience—we have just listened to with great attention.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford asked whether the Committee had considered the question of mosquito nets impregnated with insecticide, and the answer is no. We were focused entirely on Lariam and our concern that it was being prescribed inappropriately. We said that the prescription of a drug known to have what were described as “neuro-psychiatric side effects” and to cause “vestibular disorders” without face-to-face interviews showed a lamentable weakness in the MOD’s duty of care towards service personnel. We are grateful that the Minister, who has an outstanding record of military care towards service personnel; made an apology to present and former service personnel when he appeared before the Committee on behalf of the MOD in relation to those who believe that they were prescribed this drug without the necessary individual risk assessments.

This is a slightly unusual case because, for once, nobody is pointing a finger of accusation at the drug manufacturer. Roche appears to have behaved responsibly in this matter from the outset. It always gave the clearest possible instructions that this particular drug, though it could be effective in some cases, could have dangerous side effects and therefore absolutely should not be prescribed without a face-to-face assessment of each individual first. It was good to receive a letter from the manufacturer, despite the Committee’s report being so critical of the drug itself and despite the adverse publicity that the drug inevitably received, stating:

“Your report has made a major contribution to highlighting the correct use of Lariam in the armed forces.”

That shows the strength of the arguments in the report and reinforces the importance of the MOD following Roche’s guidelines for use.
[Dr Julian Lewis]

The hon. Member for Bridgend mentioned several of the people who gave evidence to the Committee. I would like to mention Mrs Ellen Duncan, who gave evidence on behalf of her husband, Major-General Alastair Duncan. Alastair Duncan was awarded the Distinguished Service Order while in command of the First Prince of Wales’s Own Regiment of Yorkshire, or 1 PWO. In May 1993, he took the battalion to Bosnia-Herzegovina under the UN mandate during the Balkans conflict. The Daily Telegraph described what he did in the following terms:

“The hostilities had escalated into a three-cornered fight between the Bosnian-Serbs, the Bosnian-Croats and the Muslims. In this dangerous environment, at great risk to himself, Duncan sought out the commanders of the belligerents in an attempt to broker a truce. In June, he was instrumental in the rescue of 200 Croats who had sought sanctuary from a violent attack in a monastery at Guca Gora. The citation for the award to Duncan of the DSO paid tribute to his courage, resolution and inspired leadership which, it stated, had saved many lives and had helped 1 PWO to win an outstanding reputation.”

He was subsequently awarded the CBE for his work in Sierra Leone.

Major-General Duncan suffered from post-traumatic stress as a result of all that he had seen and done, but his wife was absolutely convinced that taking Lariam destroyed his mental stability. He was sectioned many times. Our report was published on 24 May 2016, and I was truly saddened to read in The Daily Telegraph that he had died on 24 July 2016. He was a year younger than I am. It is a case of someone at the highest end of the Army whose life was wrecked by the inappropriate prescription of the drug.

I will touch briefly on a number of the Committee’s recommendations and the Government’s response. As we have heard, the Committee recommended “a single point of contact for all current and former Service personnel who have concerns about their experience of ‘Lariam’”, and the Government announced that that would be done. I would like an update on that, as I have heard suggestions that the advice people get when they ring the relevant number is very basic indeed, even on a par with “Go and visit your GP.” If that is all they are getting, we still have some way to go on that recommendation. We also said that people should be offered an alternative to Lariam if they are concerned about the risks, that this should be explained to them and that a box should be ticked to show that it has. I believe that that is now happening.

One part of the Government’s response was strange. They have alleged that they need to keep Lariam on the books because there are certain geographical areas where no other drug will work. The report disputed the Government’s assertion that geography was a valid factor. We therefore asked the Ministry of Defence to set out which geographical areas, if any, it believed to be resistant to each antimalarial drug it uses, and give us any accompanying evidence to support that view.

The Government’s response was:

“The MOD relies on authoritative external advice on the global distribution of antimalarial resistance.”

They provided us with a link to guidance from Public Health England. That guidance, which is 109 pages long, includes a table where areas of malaria risk are listed alongside the recommended antimalarial drug for that area. The table shows a dozen countries or areas for which only chloroquine is recommended, but by contrast, we could see no instances where Lariam was the only recommended antimalarial drug in any single area. [Interruption.] I am interested to see my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford assent.

The report questioned the feasibility of providing face-to-face individual risk assessments before prescribing Lariam in the event of a significant deployment, so we asked the MOD to set out how it would be able to do so, alongside an estimation of how much time it would take to conduct face-to-face individual risk assessments at both company and battalion level. I will not go into all the details of the MOD’s response, but I found one aspect worrying. The MOD acknowledged that if the operational imperative meant that the timing of a deployment did not allow for specific face-to-face interviews, “an appropriately trained and regulated healthcare professional will review individual electronic health records and confirm that there are no contraindications to the recommended anti-malaria drug. It is estimated that this will take up to five minutes per individual, or approximately eight hours for a company, or approximately 50 hours for a battalion.”

Can the Minister explain—or, if not, write to us—exactly what that means? Is it predicated on the fact that people will have had a face-to-face individual assessment at an earlier stage in their career? In that case, there might be some argument for it, but if it is meant to be a substitute for individual face-to-face assessments, I am sure the Chamber will agree that that would be wholly unacceptable.

Ruth Smeeth: Is not one of the problems with Lariam that if someone has had a mental illness before, they may be more vulnerable? A lot of servicemen and women would feel uncomfortable admitting that, would be unlikely to have told anyone within their chain of command and may well not have sought guidance, so the idea that the medication could be used even with those measures is almost impossible.

Dr Lewis: That is probably the single strongest point that one could make in the course of this entire debate. Particularly in the macho military environment—I use that term in a non-sexist way—people are unlikely to disclose mental troubles in their past, meaning that either they may take a drug that is inappropriate for them or they may throw it away, rendering themselves vulnerable to contracting malaria.

Jeremy Lefroy: Did the Committee have any idea why there is such a particular emphasis on Lariam when other drugs are available, such as doxycycline or Malarone, that many of us take whenever we go to countries affected? The emphasis on Lariam seems to me extraordinary. I absolutely applaud my right hon. Friend’s point about the importance of encouraging Roche to continue its research in this area; we do not want it put off. Roche has been excellent in its clarity about what Lariam is about and what precautions need to be taken.

Dr Lewis: Other Committee members may correct me, but I have a feeling that we never quite got to the bottom of why the MOD is so fixated on that particular drug. What I am about to say is sheer speculation, but it could have something to do with the relative cost of different types of drug, or with concern about compensation.
claims. If the drug were given up completely, it might be easier to bring claims on that basis: "You don’t prescribe this drug at all now, so therefore you were wrong ever to have prescribed it."

We sought to give the MOD a bit of wriggle room, for want of a better term, by saying that all we wanted it to do was designate Lariam as a drug of last resort. I do not see why it should not do that. It is obviously a drug of last resort, because the MOD accepts the fact that it should now be issued only under the most strictly defined conditions. What is that if not making it a drug of last resort? So why does the MOD not say so?

Similarly, there has been reluctance to acknowledge the experience of other countries. The MOD asserted that Lariam was “considered by US CDC”—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is the US equivalent of Public Health England—“to be equally suitable (with an individual clinical assessment) as each of the other drugs”.

However, Dr Remington Nevin—one of the two doctors to whom we owe a great deal of gratitude for their consistent campaigning on this issue and for the evidence they brought to the Committee—described that as a “misinterpretation of CDC’s position”. The section entitled “Special Considerations for US Military Deployments” in chapter 8 of the CDC’s publication “Yellow Book” states:

“The military should be considered a special population with demographics, destinations, and needs that may differ from those of civilian travelers.”

In respect of the use of Lariam in other states’ armed forces, Dr Nevin argued that “many of our Western allies have all but abandoned the use of the drug”, and that the US and Australian military use it only for “those rare service members who cannot tolerate...two safer and equally effective alternatives”. That is why we made the point that Lariam should really be used only for such people, because we are not convinced that there is any geographical area where some other drug could not be used.

Dr Nevin also referred to the US Army Special Operations Command having taken the “very wise step of banning it altogether”. He said that the decision by the US military was made “primarily on clinical grounds” and was intended to “decrease the risk of negative drug-related side-effects”.

The MOD’s response commits merely to updating the information held on the use by our allies of Lariam and other antimalarial drugs, including the extent to which Lariam is used and the circumstances in which it is supplied. It still does not appear to accept that its policy on Lariam is increasingly out of step with that of our allies.

We have made considerable progress by focusing on the terrible situation in which a drug designed for very specific issuing to very specific people after a very specific interview was doled out en masse as a routine prophylactic to our service personnel who were about to go to malaria-infested areas. That really was a scandal, and it would be another scandal if it ever happened again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Rosindell (in the Chair): Order. May I ask for brevity in the remaining speeches? I shall call the shadow Minister to speak next, because he has to leave a little early. I know that that is not regular, but we do not want Fabian to miss his train.

4.3 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your-chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank Members for bearing with me; I know they will all get the chance to say their piece. I apologise to the Minister for having to leave. I have had to stand in at the last minute for my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who has been taken ill, and I need to catch a particular train to get back to my party meeting this evening.

Like my friend—I hope he does not mind my calling him that—the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), with whom I served on the International Development Committee for three years, I feel a personal connection to the subject of Lariam. Unlike him I have never had malaria, but I have contracted it I would no longer be standing here, because it is fatal to patients who have no spleen—mine was removed some 20 years ago. I really feel very concerned about malarial areas. The hon. Gentleman knows how difficult it is for people who do not have a spleen to go to them because of the risks involved. Even the prophylaxes that he mentioned are not 100% effective, so even places where there is a tiny risk of contracting malaria are too dangerous. The Foreign Office advises all its asplenic personnel not to visit those areas at all. His personal experience has informed us greatly about the effects of Lariam, and the fact that he has taken it himself and knows exactly what its side effects can be has brought the issue to life for many of us.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), because she has pursued and pursued this. I am so glad that the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and the rest of the Committee agreed that the issue of Lariam was so important and wrote this splendid and well written report with all the evidence that they accumulated. I congratulate them and their staff on it.

I feel huge sympathy with the 25% to 35% of Army personnel who have been affected by taking Lariam. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend mentioned that geographical location was a consideration when prescribing Lariam, and the hon. Member for Stafford underlined that with his point about the resistance that is now growing in south-east Asia. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend also said something very important that is contained in the report: military deployment is very different from tourism. While it is unpleasant to suffer the side effects as a tourist, it is dangerous if not worse for military personnel who suffer them on military duties.

The biggest scandal of all that has been revealed in the contributions to this debate, many from former serving personnel such as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), is that there seems to have been no duty of care from the Army. The right hon.
Member for New Forest East said that just five minutes’ assessment may be sufficient to ensure that individual Army personnel have the right prescription and are not forced to take Lariam when it is wholly inappropriate for their needs.

Dr Julian Lewis: May I correct that? I did not say that five minutes was sufficient. I said that the MOD was saying that.

Fabian Hamilton: My apologies for that. I obviously did not write my notes correctly. I am sorry if I misquoted the right hon. Gentleman.

As we discussed in the previous debate, we have a duty to ensure that people who put their lives on the line for the defence of this country, like hon. Members in this Chamber who have done so, do so in the knowledge that those who ask them to do it and who send them to dangerous places are looking after their interests.

We know that Lariam is the brand name of mefloquine and that it is used to treat malaria. It is most commonly administered as a prophylaxis, but the history of side effects, the evidence we have received and the evidence in the Defence Committee’s report make it clear that it is not necessarily the most appropriate prophylactic medication. I am glad we have made it clear that we do not blame the manufacturer, Roche, for the misuse of its drug. It is clearly an issue for the Army itself and we want the Army to get it right. That is why the Committee’s report was written in the first place. I myself have taken chloroquine and proguanil; I suffered some side effects, but nothing like those that have been recorded for Lariam.

We know that many countries’ military forces have used Lariam in the past, but that it is becoming increasingly uncommon because of its side effects. Some 17,000 British military personnel were prescribed Lariam between April 2007 and March 2015, and the reports of those side effects meant that many of them have discarded their Lariam tablets instead of using them. That makes them far more susceptible to malaria, which is extremely dangerous—as the hon. Member for Stafford said, it has killed 438,000 people in the last 12 months.

The summary of the Defence Committee report says:

“The evidence we received highlighted some severe examples of the possible side-effects of Lariam in a military setting. While they may be in the minority, we do not believe that the risk and severity of these side-effects are acceptable for our military personnel on operations overseas.”

When the Minister responds to the debate—I apologise that I will not be present to hear him—will he care to tell us about the handing out of Lariam to military personnel in future in the light of the report and the evidence contained within it?

In preparing for this debate, I sought the advice of a specialist—he has asked not to be named—who works at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. His view was quite interesting. He made the point that Lariam is a cheaper medication than some antimalarials, and that it is very effective. That could be one reason why the MOD is maintaining its support for Lariam in the face of media controversy, the Defence Committee report and, of course, resistance from many military personnel. The specialist said that it is a good drug.

He even gave it to his spouse when they went to west Africa a few years ago. He reported that she had had the most vivid and crazy dreams. Like most drugs, it is not good for some people, but it is good for others.

One thing in favour of Lariam is that it is administered once a week. Many other antimalarials are administered once a day. For someone in a military setting who is in a conflict situation, or who has been deployed in a remote area, it being a once-a-week drug will have a huge benefit for those administering it and those having to take it. A once-a-week dosage also increases the chances of compliance and of people actually taking the medication when they need to take it.

The specialist I mentioned noted that the number of tests on the effects of Lariam on Army personnel were small and were not done in an adequately controlled situation. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend would agree with that, given the evidence taken by the Select Committee, but there needs to be far more testing. There needs to be a much greater database of evidence to prove conclusively that so many people will not tolerate Lariam and that it should perhaps be replaced by other drugs, depending on geolocation and the individual assessment of military personnel.

Mrs Moon: Is my hon. Friend aware that there have been episodes in which serving personnel have murdered individuals, and in which they have deliberately carried out inappropriate acts, all because they were under the influence of Lariam? That is part of the record that the Committee looked at.

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, I was aware of that, but I am not aware of the details. I have heard anecdotal evidence, but it is important to hear about the actual cases and evidence.

I know that other Members wish to speak, and of course the Minister must respond, so I shall conclude. Paragraph 97 in the conclusion of the Defence Committee report states:

“The Ministry of Defence has a duty of care to protect military personnel on operations overseas. It includes ensuring that they are adequately inoculated against disease. This will never be without the risk of detrimental side-effects, and we understand that the MoD must balance those risks against the health of our Armed Forces. However, in the case of malaria, we conclude that the MoD’s current policy has got that balance wrong.”

I hope the Minister addresses that point in his response.

4.13 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I shall be as brief as I can.

I have a couple of brief reflections of my own and from a constituent. I took Lariam prophylactically when I worked as a teacher in Malawi, and I certainly experienced what I later realised were its various side effects, including vivid dreams and a certain amount of paranoia. It was difficult to tell, though, because I had moved to a new context and was working in a stressful environment. It was not until some time afterwards that I started to realise that those side effects were the result of the Lariam kicking in. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) was absolutely right to ask at the outset...
how much more difficult it must be for troops and service personnel, who are put into extremely pressurised situations, to try to deal with the consequences and side effects of these medicines.

I have heard from several individuals who have taken Lariam as part of their service. My colleague Feargal Dalton, a councillor for part of my area who also happens to be the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), was a serviceman who served on Trident submarines and elsewhere. He described similar side effects which, fortunately for him, did not last after he stopped taking it. The point he made was that the drugs were prescribed and had to be taken under orders. If someone was to stop taking them, even if they were having side effects and making the person ill, they could be subject to military discipline. Many service personnel were put in a very difficult situation.

I was contacted by a constituent who was given Lariam while he was in Kenya for six weeks in the mid-90s. Twenty years later, he continues to suffer from severe headaches and migraines, which are attributed to side effects of the drug. He has been given no compensation. He has also been told that the side effects are actually the result of post-traumatic stress disorder, but he has not been given any compensation for that either. The problems he faces are making it difficult for him to access work and, when he does, to maintain steady work. He has been told that his condition is not severe enough for him to be admitted to a treatment centre, despite his having approached various different charities.

I wrote to the Secretary of State for Defence on 21 September but have not yet had a reply. I hope this debate will help to speed up the process.

There is clearly consensus in this debate. Lord Dannatt, who was quoted earlier, said:

“It is extraordinary that the MoD continues with this policy given the mounting evidence as to the harmful effects of Lariam.”

The Government have a duty of care to those who, like my constituent, have served in the armed forces. I call on the Government to implement the recommendations in the report and to provide the support needed by my constituent and many like him.

4.16 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Rosindell. I am aware that we are now very short of time, so I shall look for your guidance on when you want me to stop speaking so that the Minister can respond.

I thank the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) for opening the debate so thoughtfully, and the Defence Committee for its work. I endorse its recommendation that Lariam be retained for use by the Defence Medical Services, but it should be a drug of last resort, subject to the clear recommendations set out by the Committee. I would go further and suggest that those who are prescribed Lariam should be counselled about the potential side effects and the need to report them up the chain of command.

Once I had reviewed the Select Committee’s report, I was left wondering whether the level of debate and conflict on this issue was actually necessary—I shall try to return to that point at the end. I noticed from the departmental memorandum submitted to the Committee that the Ministry of Defence policy on preventing malaria is contained in a joint services leaflet called “Preventing Malaria in Military Populations”. I understand that the leaflet was made available to the Committee, but when I looked on the Government website, it was not there—it was released under a freedom of information request in 2013, so I was able to see it that way. The covering letter attached states that, in the interests of transparency, it should be published online. Had that happened and we had been able to see it, it would have been useful to a number of people. The sole reference in the leaflet to the use of Lariam and other antimalarial drugs is the statement:

“In the UK Armed Forces...policy is based on the guidelines at Footnote 1”,

which helpfully read:


As we have heard from several Members in the debate, information on the use of Lariam is sorely lacking. The only direct reference to it in the guidance was regarding its use by divers and aircrew, who are not to use it. There is considerably less information than I would have expected from a document that is described to Members of this House as the Government’s policy on the use of antimalarial drugs. It is exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) said.

Had the information been freely available, we would have seen a description of the briefing that is given to personnel receiving antimalarial drugs without an individual consultation. The only definitive items that have to be included in that consultation are dosage and frequency, and when to start and finish taking the drug. If that is the situation, advice levels clearly fall far short of what we would expect, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said. There was simply no indication that Lariam should be regarded as any different from other antimalarial drugs.

Will the Minister address whether the document was published online? Will he tell us more about the advice the Government are seeking from Public Health England’s Advisory Committee on Malaria Prevention? Will he commit to a wider consultation on the version of the guidance that is currently being prepared? I also wonder whether he will commit to review the procedures for sharing and consulting on policy documents, which are so vital to the welfare of our armed services personnel, as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) told us.

The Government response looks too much like business as usual. The Committee’s report outlined the three stages when a risk assessment should be carried out: on completion of initial training; on being posted to a deployable role; and on receiving warning of possible deployment. Will the Minister clarify how the assessments will be made? Are they additional assessments, in which case how do we know what resources are needed to deliver them and are those resources in place?

As we heard from the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), the evidence provided by the Department in its response to the Committee reveals a significant difference in the nature of the side effects caused by Lariam and those caused by alternative drugs. We have heard significant detail about that difference today.
As the right hon. Member for New Forest East said, the evidence that Lariam has such a clear link with adverse psychoactive effects suggests that the Committee’s recommendations about the use of the drug should be clearly heard by the Government, and it should simply be a drug of last resort.

Equally, mefloquine currently constitutes only 1.2% of all the antimalarial tablets held by the MOD, and in terms of doses for a six-month deployment—of course, doses for different drugs are given at different rates—it accounts for just 14% of the stock. So 86% of our stock is not Lariam. That hardly represents a reliance on Lariam or evidence that it is being used as a drug of first choice.

**Mrs Moon:** I am delighted to hear about the low take-up of Lariam by the Ministry of Defence now. Does the Minister have the figures for what the take-up was in the past?

**Mark Lancaster:** Those figures give the current status, but I believe that the figures for the last eight years, which is as far as we go back, are similar. However, I am happy to write to the hon. Lady to give the exact figures. Of course, much of this debate is about how we move forward, as opposed to what we have done in the past, and I hope to demonstrate in my response over the next five and a half minutes that the steps we are taking are very positive.

It is important for me to state that we take the health and wellbeing of our personnel extremely seriously and acknowledge the duty of care to provide the best possible support to them. Malaria is a deadly disease, and we must protect our deployed personnel from it. The most effective way to do so is through the use of antimalarial drugs. However, as we have established, no antimalarial drug is 100% effective and risk-free. Indeed, all medications have the potential to cause side effects and adverse reactions in a small number of people. That is why the MOD needs to use a range of prevention drugs to protect our personnel and ensure that the treatment provided is the most effective for each individual. I should emphasise that despite tens of thousands of service personnel deploying to malaria-risk areas, no serviceman or woman has died from malaria resulting from an operational deployment since 1992, and cases of severe malaria are rare in the armed forces.

I turn to the two main recommendations of the Committee’s report. The first was that the MOD works with the Advisory Committee on Malaria Prevention to develop guidelines on mefloquine and other antimalarials, specifically regarding their use by military personnel. The MOD has always kept its malaria prevention policy under constant review, and I can confirm that a recently revised malaria prevention policy has been passed to the ACMP for its consideration.

The revised policy is based on three elements. In the first instance, at around the time when individuals complete initial training they will undergo a face-to-face consultation with a medical professional, to identify any adverse reactions to the five most commonly used antimalarial drugs. Secondly, after posting into a deployable role, armed forces personnel will undertake a generic face-to-face travel health risk assessment, again with a medical professional. Finally, once individuals are advised that they are likely to deploy, they will undertake a deployment-specific face-to-face travel health risk assessment.

The results of those assessments will be recorded in the patient’s electronic health record. Although the need for a risk assessment is not new—defence policy since 2004 has been clear on the requirement for such
assessments—monitoring will now be better aided by an electronic records system. In answer to a question put by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, perhaps I can say that if the actions that he described need to be taken, in extremis, before an emergency deployment, they will be based on those three thorough, face-to-face, comprehensive interviews, as recorded in the electronic record.

On that point, I reiterate what I said when I gave evidence to the Committee. I recognise that anecdotal evidence submitted to the Committee suggests that, in a small number of cases, some people believe that their individual risk assessments did not take place in the past. I hope that the new system will prevent that situation from recurring. I encourage anyone who has concerns about the issue to come forward, in confidence, as there are established processes by which current and former members of the armed forces can be referred to medical staff to have such concerns investigated.

That leads me to the second main recommendation of the Committee’s report, namely that the MOD should establish a single point of contact for those who are worried about their experience of mefloquine. I am pleased to report that the mefloquine single point of contact has been set up and publicised widely through the chain of command, veterans’ organisations, military publications and GPs. As I sat here listening to the debate, I googled the advice about that single point of contact, and there it was on the gov.uk website. It was launched last month and is easily accessible. It is a confidential service for people to make contact by phone and email, and it is supported by other information on the Government website, as I have just said. Depending on their circumstances, individuals are directed to a range of information and services available to help them. That includes how service personnel and veterans can find out whether they have been prescribed mefloquine in the past. My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East has raised concerns about the quality of information being given on the helpline. I am more than happy to go and examine that, and I will write to the Committee with details as to exactly what advice is being given.

Again, I encourage anyone who is concerned about their experience of mefloquine and who has not yet gone to the single point of contact, including those who believe that their risk assessment did not take place, to contact the single point of contact or speak to their GP.

In addition to those two main recommendations, the MOD will conduct a prospective audit of returning travellers, to assess the impact of the new policy. That will be for any antimalarial drug that has been taken. The MOD will also continue to undertake post-deployment surveys, to enhance its understanding of compliance with the revised policy.

The Government informed the Committee that the MOD would undertake further research into the impact of the adverse effects of antimalarial drugs on the performance of military personnel. A research proposal is currently being considered by the MOD’s research ethics committee. The research will be in the form of a retrospective survey of soldiers deployed on exercise in Kenya who have been prescribed one of three antimalarial drugs. A questionnaire will seek information about risk assessments, individuals’ compliance with prescriptions, the incidence and prevalence of side effects of the drugs, and the impact of those side effects on functional effectiveness.

If there are any other questions, I will endeavour to write to hon. Members about them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.


4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 31 October 2016

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

Driven Grouse Shooting

[Relevant document: Oral and written evidence from the Petitions and Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committees, Grouse shooting, HC 670.]

4.30 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered e-petitions 125003 and 164851 relating to driven grouse shooting.

It is a joy and great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Davies. I thank those who initiated the two e-petitions and all those who signed them, because they have provided us with the opportunity to debate driven grouse shooting today. As with all issues regarding animals, this one is highly emotive and draws out a lot of feeling. One of the things I have been surprised about since being elected is that I get far more emails about animals—be they bees, badgers, foxes, dogs, cats or now grouse—than I do about things I have been surprised about since being elected is that I get far more emails about animals—be they bees, badgers, foxes, dogs, cats or now grouse—than I do about any issues regarding animals, this one is highly emotive and draws out a lot of feeling. One of the things I have been surprised about since being elected is that I get far more emails about animals—be they bees, badgers, foxes, dogs, cats or now grouse—than I do about any issues relating to the welfare of people. Something in our national make-up certainly seems to be drawn out when it comes to animals.

The e-petition to ban driven grouse shooting has received more than 120,000 signatures. The petition states:

“Grouse shooting for ‘sport’ depends on intensive habitat management which increases flood risk and greenhouse gas emissions,” and kills many mammals, such as “Foxes, Stoats, Mountain Hares…and…protected birds…including Hen Harriers.”

The petition goes on to describe driven grouse shooting as “canned hunting”, which is “economically, ecologically and socially unnecessary.”

The other e-petition is in favour of protecting grouse moors and grouse shooting. It states:

“Grouse moors…are an integral part of moorland management both for the grouse and other…wildlife such as lapwing and curlew.”

According to the petition, grouse shooting helps to support local businesses, jobs and rural areas.

I have a keen interest in and concern for our traditional rural way of life, but I have never participated in grouse shooting and, as far as I am aware, I have no links or connections to anyone who has, although I will admit to eating a few grouse on occasion—I found them very tasty. I am opening this debate as a member of the Petitions Committee. I do not claim to be an expert on the subject, but since the petition was brought before the Committee it has been interesting to learn about the issues and listen to views from both sides. The Committee has received numerous written submissions and held an oral evidence session with representatives of those who wish to ban or control grouse shooting and those who support it.

Grouse shooting has existed in the UK for more than 160 years. It is governed by parliamentary legislation and European Union directives, and it is a devolved matter for the devolved regions of the UK. Red grouse are wild game birds that live in the uplands of the UK. In 2009, there were an estimated 230,000 pairs in the UK.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I am hesitant to interrupt such a superb speech, but my hon. Friend mentioned that one of the petitions used the word “canned”, which is surely extremely ignorant and misleading, because the birds are completely wild. Does he agree that there is no logic whatever in saying that driven grouse shooting should be somehow controlled, but that other forms of grouse shooting should not be? There is no logic there, because we are talking about a wild bird, not one that can be reared.

Steve Double: I agree very much with both my hon. Friend’s points.

Red grouse are not found anywhere in the UK but uplands. They live in heather moorland and heather forms the staple part of their diet. Seventy-five per cent of global heather moorland is located in the UK, so in global terms heather moorland is rarer than the rain forest. Heather moorland comprises about 7% of the UK’s land mass, or some 6,500 square miles.

Grouse shooting comes in two forms: walked-up shooting, which involves groups of shooters who walk around a predetermined area and drive the grouse from the ground, and driven grouse shooting, which involves a group of beaters who scare the grouse from the ground towards a line of shooters. One of the petitions calls for a ban on driven grouse shooting, but as my hon. Friend said, it seems slightly illogical to wish to ban only one form of grouse shooting.

Clearly there are informed and strongly held views that grouse shooting is detrimental to our environment and wildlife. Concerns have been expressed about how the way in which the moors are managed contributes to flooding and is responsible for the destruction of other wildlife, including some of our national birds of prey in particular. I am aware that many other hon. Members wish to participate in the debate, so I will be unable to go into all the detail of the issues raised in the time available to me in opening, but I hope others will pick up on the other points. I will deal with what I see as the main issues.

One of the biggest questions, as I see it, is whether the management of grouse moors is good or bad for our environment. First, we have to look at moorland management and whether the moors must necessarily be managed. Moorland looks wild, but in fact it is a carefully managed environment. It is thanks to grouse shooting that over the past 30 years grouse moor managers in England have been responsible for the regeneration of more than 217,000 acres of heather moorland. The petition to ban mentions that such moorland is an important part of the ecosystem and local habitats, so one of the big questions to be asked is, if we were to ban grouse shooting, how would that important habitat otherwise be managed?

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend. Does he agree that the question is not just how this moorland would
be managed were grouse shooting to be banned, but whether it would exist at all or instead be given over to belts of conifers or grazed farmland? Surely the existence of the moorland is a reflection of grouse moor management over generations.

Steve Double: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point, which I will develop later in my speech, and I agree with him completely.

The management of the moorland for grouse provides the manpower to tackle invasive plants such as bracken and ragwort, along with saplings and shrubs of other species, and keeps the heather moorland clear. That level of intervention would not be viable without the grouse shooting industry. In England, grouse moor owners spend approximately £50 million every year on moorland management; in Scotland, the figure is more than £30 million. If grouse shooting were banned, where would the funds to manage the land come from?

Another concern expressed by those who wish to ban grouse shooting is that it causes flooding. I understand the logic of their argument: grouse moor management can increase the risk of flooding, because burning reduces the ability of the moor to absorb rainfall and run-off must therefore increase, leading to flooding further downstream. I suggest, however, that that is too simple a conclusion and that the issue is far more complex. Indeed, peatland restoration is known to help to slow the rate of water run-off. Ending moorland management as a result of banning grouse shooting might actually make flooding worse and more likely to happen. I am particularly interested in hearing the Minister’s views on that when she responds to the debate, because the issue is of great concern to those who live near such moors.

Another point worth making is that many areas of heather moorland are protected in their current state by their status as SSSIs—sites of special scientific interest. If the tens of millions of pounds of income from grouse shooting were to be lost, how would those protected landscapes be maintained in their current state without the cost falling on the taxpayer, something I simply could not support?

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. It seems to me that the opponents of shooting grouse want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, because if we destroy grouse shooting, the raptors would lose their food source, local jobs would be lost and, as my hon. Friend is saying, the environment would be the poorer. The argument is not about conservation, but about destruction of the countryside.

Steve Double: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Again, I agree with the points he makes.

Another argument put forward by those who wish to ban grouse shooting is that it is damaging to wildlife. The petition to ban grouse shooting states that it causes the deaths of predators such as foxes, stoats and hen harriers. The lawful control of predators is essential to protect grouse, which are ground-nesting birds. That includes the black grouse, which is one of the most endangered species in the UK. Peer-reviewed research by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust shows that as the population of black grouse has declined, they have retreated to managed moorland areas, which now account for 96% of the black grouse population. Predator control also protects other valuable species, such as the lapwing, skylark, curlew, grey partridge and merlin, whose numbers have doubled on grouse moors in the last 20 years.

All wild bird species are protected under law, to varying degrees. The UK has some of the most robust wildlife and animal legislation in the world. It is a criminal offence to shoot, kill or tamper with birds of prey such as the hen harrier—and their nests—without a licence.

In 1999, the joint raptor study on Langholm moor measured the impact of hen harriers breeding on grouse moorland. When grouse management of that heather moorland stopped, there was a marked decline in red grouse, skylarks, curlews, golden plovers and hen harriers. The evidence is clear that birds of prey, including hen harriers, are better off on managed heather moorland. Hen harriers need gamekeepers as much as grouse do. However, gamekeepers on grouse moors are often accused of persecuting birds of prey. As one person who gave evidence to the Committee said, grouse shooting “is underpinned by wildlife crime.”

There are clearly genuine concerns about the illegal killing of birds of prey on grouse moors. I want to make it clear that I believe that those who flout the law do the shooting community no favours whatever. There is no justification for illegal activity. However, I suggest that the illegal activity of a few is no justification for a complete ban—otherwise, we would have outlawed driving a long time ago—but instead a case for more effective enforcement of our current laws.

The key argument on this subject is the economic one. We must always keep in mind when addressing issues of this nature that although many of the key arguments are to do with the environment, landscapes and wildlife, they are also about people and the livelihoods and sustainability of our rural communities. The Moorland Association and Countryside Alliance note that in many cases grouse shooting not only supports but is a lifeline for rural areas of the UK that are cut off from employment streams that other parts of the country enjoy.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): We often hear that grouse moors are sustainable because they receive funds under the basic payment scheme, but is it not the case that grouse shooting is not an agricultural activity and is therefore not eligible for such funds?

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a valid point, which I will address at the end of my speech. Leaving the EU may give us an opportunity to divert some money to better management of our moorland.

In Scotland alone, grouse shooting supports thousands of jobs that are worth £7 million a year in wages and contributes £32 million to the economy. It is estimated that it supports more than 4,000 full-time equivalent jobs in some of the poorest and most rural communities in the UK. Banning grouse shooting would be an epic gamble with our rural economy.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Petitions Committee is quite new, but I would have thought that someone opening a debate on a petition on behalf of
that Committee ought at least to look at both sides of the argument and not present such a biased argument against the petition. More than 120,000 people signed the petition to ban grouse shooting, and they want a debate that sets out both sides of the argument. The hon. Gentleman is failing them miserably.

Steve Double: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I think I have presented arguments on both sides, and I have not yet finished my speech, so perhaps she should wait until I have before jumping to a conclusion.

Local post offices, pubs, corner shops and primary schools would be at risk if grouse shooting were banned. Although it is correctly argued that many of the jobs linked to grouse shooting are seasonal, it takes place outside the main summer months and therefore fills a gap in local employment by employing people at a different time from other seasonal jobs.

It is clear that part of the opposition to grouse shooting is down to the perception that it is elitist. We have often heard the term “shooting for fun” used in a derogatory manner. Nothing could be further from the truth. Grouse shooting brings rural communities together in areas that struggle with social isolation and a lack of employment. Many of those who work on grouse shoots are students, school leavers or retirees looking to supplement their income. Those people are not rich toffs; they are ordinary people who rely on the additional income that the work brings them. Those who call for a ban have failed to present any credible alternative to that. No case has been made for where the tens of millions of pounds that are spent on the management of the land would come from. There seems to be a romantic view that if the land is left to nature, it will somehow become a natural paradise full of wildlife and people will pay to view it, yet no evidence has been presented to support that notion.

Many of those who support the movement against grouse shooting are also against all other countryside sports. If those people had their way, after grouse shooting was banned, other forms of shooting would be up for bans. I have even heard mention of fishing being on the radar for a ban one day. Many communities across rural Britain rely on grouse shooting. What do those who support a ban want grouse shooting to be replaced with? Who will employ the gamekeepers, the beaters and the land managers? Following the cessation of trips by tourists and visitors to those local communities, who will visit the pubs and shops and spend money in local businesses? The people who support a ban have no answers to those questions. For them, the end justifies the means. They see the countryside as a theme park or museum—something to be watched and visited. They do not realise that it needs constant management. The management of our countryside relies on viable, sustainable communities. People need to be able to live and make a living in the countryside.

It should be noted that, interestingly, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds does not support a ban. Instead, it advocates some form of licensing of grouse shooting. However, little detail has been presented about what that would work or what value it would add, other than another layer of bureaucracy.

I do not support a ban on shooting—our current laws and regulations provide the right balance between protecting wildlife and the environment and supporting our rural communities—but that does not mean that nothing needs to be done. We should certainly take notice of some of the issues raised by the petition to ban and acknowledge the legitimate concerns of many of those who signed the petition. I believe that the Government can do more to address the underlying concerns that the petition expresses. Specifically, will the Minister address the concerns about flooding and the link to heather burning? What steps can be taken to address those concerns? What are the Government doing to enforce the law on protecting wildlife, especially birds of prey, and what more can be done to prosecute those who flout the law? What opportunities does she believe leaving the EU may bring for using agricultural subsidies to encourage land management, which would increase the protection and diversity of our moorlands?

Several hon. Members rose—

Philip Davies (in the Chair): Order. As people can see, a considerable number of Members want to speak in this debate. To try to give everyone a fair crack of the whip, I will have to impose a time limit, which will start at seven minutes. I will have to review that based on interventions and things like that. If people can keep interventions to a minimum, that will protect as much time as possible for speeches.

4.49 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. The moors in my area are characterised by a long tradition of grouse shooting, so I understand the evidence for the sport’s economic impact. Nevertheless, my grouse moors represent a habitat that is badly degraded and needs a lot of attention if it is to be restored to favourable condition status. One is still able to enjoy the wonders of nature on my grouse moors such as curlew, snipe, golden plover and the fantastic mountain hare, but there have not been peregrine falcons or hen harriers for many years.

One of the petitions before us today highlights huge concern over the plight of the hen harrier and other raptors, and rightly so. In 2013, there were no successful hen harrier nests in England, and the numbers have remained stubbornly and pitifully low. Of course, the debate is also concerned with the conservation status of the moorland habitat favoured for grouse production and shooting. There is lots of confusion over the habitat. Grouse moors in my area, for instance, are areas of blanket bog, which also support extensive heather habitat. That is typical of grouse moors, and it is important to understand the need to balance the conservation of healthy heather habitats with the need to restore and maintain our precious blanket bog.

To be clear on this point, the causes of blanket bog degradation are varied. Industrial pollution, over-grazing, wind erosion and drainage in the 1950s and 1960s have played their part. The management of moorland for grouse is one of many factors and it is important to be honest about that, because if we are not, we will underestimate the importance of dealing with atmospheric pollution and climate change when it comes to maintenance of a healthy environment. However, the management of moorland habitat for grouse has become controversial, not least because increasingly there is the
feeling that there has been a significant prioritisation of habitat conducive to maximum grouse production at the expense of the health of our blanket bog. Of course, the burning regimes traditionally favoured as a moorland management tool are at the heart of the controversy.

Much work is being carried out on the science, and references were made in the evidence session last week to the various studies that have been undertaken, but more work needs to be done. I am pleased that the University of York is undertaking a 10-year study, which attempts to remove as many variables as possible from its experiments, especially in relation to pre-management regimes. The study, which is only five years through, has so far been funded by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but I understand that DEFRA will not fund the next five years, all for the sake of £650,000. I look forward to the Minister’s comments on that in her conclusions and to a commitment that the project will continue. We need to have the science, and we need robust science.

I acknowledge that we cannot wait for the science to make progress. Just 26,000 of our 176,000 hectares of upland blanket bog classified as SSSIs are in favourable condition. When it comes to our wonderful birds of prey, let us remember that we saw only three successful nests this year. We cannot wait. We need to resolve the conflict on our grouse moors now. We need to make every effort to establish management regimes that balance economic and conservation interests, and that are capable of adjusting to the science as it emerges.

A number of options are available as the science evolves. The first involves the voluntary approach favoured by DEFRA. Its strategy for the restoration of blanket bog was published last year, and its vision is worthy because it talks about balancing the economics and the environment. Implicit in the vision is the restoration of a healthy population of raptors on our grouse moors. However, if that is to work, the Minister must show some leadership and demonstrate a sense of her responsibility to do all she can to make it work.

Year one of the programme was dedicated to a series of “bogathon” events, accompanied by “active engagement on a suite of sites where positive relationships already exist or are developing and/or there is a significant opportunity to improve the condition of a site in the short term.”

The document goes on to point out that:

“These pilots will be important in demonstrating the benefits on the ground and also in refining the approach and potentially revealing further evidence needs.”

Will the Minister indicate whether those year-one milestones have been successfully concluded? Will she commit to updating the House on a regular basis? That matters, because if the House is to be satisfied that the voluntary approach is working, we have to hear from the Minister that the Government’s own strategy in that regard is on track to deliver improvements.

Confidence matters, because the debate about how best to manage our grouse moors is increasingly contentious. Even those of us who believe in the voluntary approach are reaching despair. The breeding of hen harriers this year has been poor, and it is becoming clear that progress in delivering a sustainable future for our moorlands is beginning to stall, stutter and shudder to a halt. It will do so unless something is done to stop the persecution of our birds of prey. To put it quite simply, the killing must stop. It must stop. It is quite clear that that is a prerequisite to progress.

Will the Minister therefore underpin the voluntary approach outlined in her strategy by exploring the possibility of introducing an offence of vicarious liability? Responsible landowners have nothing to fear from that and everything to gain. By isolating and effectively dealing with illegal practice, the law-abiding majority on all sides can gain credibility and trust.

That brings me to licensing. There are many regulations pertaining to grass moor management, and I accept that the detail on the licensing system is unclear as to how to streamline that, but will the Minister at least confirm that that must stay on the table as a political option? After all, while the implementation of the blanket bog strategy is built on voluntary partnerships, is it not equally true that legislative options need to be held in reserve? In other words, will the Minister spell out how she will respond if it becomes apparent that her strategy is failing to deliver?

4.56 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): It is a great privilege to be called to speak in this debate about a matter that touches on issues of great importance to this House: biodiversity; the uplands, their fragile economy and the people who live there and make their way of life there; and questions surrounding some of the most magnificent, special wild places in the whole of this beautiful country. May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on the measured and careful way in which he introduced the debate?

I should declare an interest in that I am chairman of the all-party parliamentary game and wildlife conservation group and I am a keen game shot. I have had the great joy of spending a good deal of my time in the uplands ever since I was a child. The heather moorland of the sort maintained by grouse shooting is one of the rarest habitat types and enjoys some of the very highest conservation designations. These moors were not designated sites of special scientific interest in spite of being grouse moors but precisely because they were grouse moors. These wonderful places exist only because generations of owners have refused endless blandishments and huge grants from successive Governments to drain them, fence them, plant them with conifers, carpet them with sheep and cover them with roads and tracks.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I will press on—I am afraid I have not got any time.

The owners did that because they love these wild places and the occasional chance to shoot grouse. Driven grouse shooting touches the livelihoods of thousands of people in the uplands: hoteliers, publicans, agricultural workers, shopkeepers, retired folk, children in the holidays and, of course, gamekeepers and their families. What I particularly want to ask today is: what would happen if driven grouse shooting were to be banned and grouse moor management were to cease?
If anyone wants to see in real life what that would look like, go to Wales, which in many places is an ornithological desert. Indeed, on one 5,000-acre estate in north Yorkshire there are more golden plovers than in the whole of Wales. This May, I walked on a well-kept and managed grouse moor that practises enlightened standards of stewardship. I heard curlew, grouse, golden plover, oystercatchers, skylarks, lapwings, and the wonderful grey hill partridge. It was truly a miraculous and unforgettable cacophony of sound; people can see and hear for themselves the beneficial effect of legal predator control.

I pay tribute to the work of the gamekeepers in the uplands, whose contribution to the environment and to natural biodiversity in the hills we ignore at our peril. They are responsible for the control of foxes, crows, and the wonderful grey hill partridge. It was truly a miraculous and unforgettable cacophony of sound; people can see and hear for themselves the beneficial effect of legal predator control.

I pay tribute to the work of the gamekeepers in the uplands, whose contribution to the environment and to natural biodiversity in the hills we ignore at our peril. They are responsible for the control of foxes, crows, magpies and stoats, all of which eat the eggs of ground nesting birds. They are the unsung heroes of conservation, and those who take an interest in the matter without knowing much about it need to remember that man has been dealing with predators for centuries. Other colleagues will deal at length with the question of burning, but it is true that if you cease burning, you get long, degenerate, rank heather, which is unsightly and seriously inhibits the habitat for the very species that we want to encourage. Substantial sums of private and public money have gone into the eradication of bracken and thousands of acres have been controlled. Stop driven grouse shooting and all that work will halt; we will be left with old, rank heather, acres of bracken and, inevitably, an ornithological desert.

Driven grouse shooting plays a major part in sustaining communities on the edge of and in the middle of the moors—something that cannot lightly be dismissed. I am very taken with the views of Mr. Avery when he was director of conservation at the RSPB; I understand that he started the e-petition to ban grouse shooting:

“The RSPB and other moorland owners and managers agree about many things—we care deeply about the countryside and are angered by the declines in black grouse and wader populations; we agree that grouse moors have prevented even greater losses of heather to intensive grazing and conifers”.

He continued:

“Grouse moors undoubtedly provide good habitat for species in addition to grouse. Some birds, particularly breeding waders, do well on grouse moors. The package of management, which includes the killing, legally, of certain predator species, benefits a range of other bird species. On the subject of predators the RSPB does not oppose legal predator control and recognises that it is necessary if the objective is to produce a shootable surplus of gamebirds.”

And so say all of us.

Properly conducted grouse shooting is a force for good in the uplands. It would be a disaster for the landscape, biodiversity and many small but locally important rural economies were driven grouse shooting to be banned.

5.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate. I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for moving the consideration of the petition.

I am a country sports enthusiast. I do not have time to enjoy it as much as I would like, but it is a family tradition for me to take my son and grandchildren shooting on Boxing day, and to enjoy time together in a natural environment. Anything we manage to shoot is used. Quite often, the girls in the office will see birds of one sort or another—all legal, by the way—hanging in the office to be given to those who want to partake of them; and why should we not do that?

As a keen shooter, I am also a dedicated conservationist, which I mention because I want to tie the two things together. I have planted some 3,000 trees, created two duck ponds, preserved hedgerows and ensured that the habitat is right. The result is that in recent years, yellow buntings and birds of prey have returned. I have no doubt that that is because of the conservation work. That is the kind of thing that is replicated by enthusiasts throughout the UK. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation is clear about the facts of the case: grouse moors are sustainably managed, largely through private investment by their owners, and offer the most cost-effective model of upland management to the taxpayer.

The sale of grouse shooting helps to fund the work of the gamekeepers, which protects the unique upland habitat and the wildlife it supports. It is a pleasure, incidentally, to follow the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who set out that case very clearly. Grouse moor owners in England spend about £52.5 million every year on moorland management, 90% of which is private investment—the equivalent of £1 million a week. I wonder how those who want driven grouse shooting to end will manage those vast moors, staff their management, and pay for it. Even if they cannot see past the idea of shooting, surely every right-minded person must understand the importance to the environment of the work that is carried out by those involved in grouse shooting. If they do not, they need to.

Grouse shooting is already heavily regulated and controlled. There is extensive legislation, which has an impact on almost every aspect of grouse shooting and grouse moor management, including the possession and use of firearms, the use of lead ammunition, the grouse season, methods of predator control, heather burning, use of medicated grit and the protection of wild birds. Any additional legislation would need to be consistent, evidence-based and principled, with recognition that further controls would add to the cost and bureaucracy of grouse moor management without necessarily improving the outcomes. Many of the existing laws on grouse shooting involve licensing requirements—for example, those on firearms possession and heather burning in environmentally sensitive areas. That has given the UK Government, devolved Administrations and Government agencies considerable control over grouse shooting. In England, it is an offence to carry out burning on a site of special scientific interest unless a licence is obtained. More than 70% of England’s upland SSSIs are managed grouse moors, so that requirement applies in most cases. Clearly, we have good control; we should focus on what we have.

The grouse season is relatively short, as there is a closed season under the Game Act 1831. Additionally, shooting takes place only when grouse numbers are at sustainable levels. If we read the factual evidence, we see that estates already self-regulate by cancelling or reducing their shooting programmes if grouse numbers are low, to maintain a healthy population. There is clearly already a management process in place within the grouse shooting sector, aimed at preserving the sport in the long term.
I have carefully considered the emails that have been sent to me and my conversations with those for and against driven grouse shooting. I can somewhat understand the viewpoints, and people have a right to their views, but my opinion is based on factual information about economics and conservation, and on people's right to shoot on their land as long as they adhere to the strict guidelines that the House has put in place.

In a debate of this kind, it is easy to get caught up in the web woven by those who refuse to see that the sport brings about any good. I remind the House again that shooting is worth £2 billion to the UK economy and supports the equivalent of 74,000 jobs. In England, grouse shooting creates 42,500 work days a year; more than 1,500 full-time jobs, of which 700 are directly involved with grouse moor management; and a further 820 jobs in related services and industries. Research has also shown that associated spin-offs from grouse shooting in the north of England are worth in excess of £15 million a year. That is an enormous shot in the arm for the rural economy, which cannot be ignored and which benefits a wide range of rural businesses. In these uncertain times, grouse shooting is a sector that is proving its popularity, and its importance to its participants. It is estimated that shooters spend £2.5 billion each year on goods and services overall, and that shoot providers spend about £250 million each year on conservation. Shooting is estimated to manage 10 times more land for conservation than the country's nature reserves. Shooting and conservation go hand in hand—a marriage made in the right order.

I believe in the natural order of things; I enjoy watching the nature channels with my wife when I get a chance, and I understand that nature can seem cruel. However, grouse shooting adds money and benefits to our economy and I do not agree that it goes against the natural way of things.

The only scientific study of wildlife populations after a driven grouse moor ceased to operate but walked-up shooting continued was done in Wales. The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex referred to it. The grouse moor was Berwyn, where in 20 years the lapwing became extinct, golden plover declined by 90%, and curlew declined by 79%. All three species are now listed as of conservation concern, with both curlew and lapwing red-listed. That is what happens when grouse shooting is stopped. In Northern Ireland, at Glenwherry, through the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, we have a sustainable moor, where there is pest control. That ensures that it can succeed. All the birds of prey are still there in large numbers, but grouse numbers have risen from four to between 250 and 300. That is what can be done; there is evidence for it.

For all those reasons, I do not feel able to support the e-petition. I ask people to look at the big picture, which clearly shows that we must encourage the sport of grouse shooting and enable conservation to be carried out, to ensure that money will be poured into enhancing wildlife and the environment.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I had the honour of holding a similar job to that which the Minister currently holds at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I sought, as I am sure she does, to ensure that the fact that there is more that united the forces involved in biodiversity and conservation, land management and field sports than divides them, was prevalent in policy making. It is absolutely imperative that reversing the decline in biodiversity continues to be a priority for the Government and for future Governments.

I formed my opinions on this subject through my experience of managing an area of upland for many decades, and also, as a Minister, through working with grouse moor managers, NGOs, national parks and other organisations to restore peat land and to see what water companies and others were doing in the constituencies of Members such as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). Her excellent remarks about the depopulation of some of the moorlands over many decades were entirely right.

Good stuff is happening and we do not want to see that reversed, but before we go any further let us accept that there are enormous challenges here. I am the first to say that those who are breaking the law deserve to feel the full force of the law. They are doing shooting no good; they are doing their peers no good; and they are doing the name of conservation no good. We need to make that very clear.

Very little in this place is certain to me—very little in life is certain to me—but one thing I absolutely know is that, if the aims of the petition were realised, it would be a catastrophe for the biodiversity of the uplands. I know that because I have seen at first hand how good grouse moor management results in more curlews, more lapwings and more oystercatchers. In an area that I know well, I have seen eagle chicks fledged and I have seen hen harriers and other birds of prey thrive. However, the most important thing is that no one in the House should take my word for it. A number of people have referred to an excellent piece of peer-reviewed science, “Changes in the abundance and distribution of upland breeding birds in the Berwyn Special Protection Area, North Wales 1983-2002”. What slightly surprised me when reading the transcript of the Petitions Committee's evidence session for the petition was that the main perpetrator of the petition, who has a desire to ban driven grouse shooting, admitted that he had scant knowledge of that report.

As has already been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members, the report provides a bleak vision of what would happen to our uplands if there were a ban. Berwyn is a 242 sq km area of blanket bog and upland heath, similar to the one described by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge. No driven grouse shooting has taken place there since 1930, and I need not repeat the details of the catastrophic decline that we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Coincidentally, there were increases in carrion crows, as well as peregrines and buzzards, although that is a national phenomenon—a conservation triumph owing mainly to the exclusion of certain chemicals from those areas. Most tellingly in that special protection area, hen harriers declined by 50%.

There is another piece of science that we should consider. It is a very good, peer-reviewed paper, produced by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, called “Waders on the fringe”. I could go into great detail...
about the paper, but if I could sum it up in one phrase it would be, “If you want to see waders and red-listed bird species, go to a managed grouse moor.”

I will tackle the important point about flooding, because it will be much in the Minister’s mind as winter sets in. I spend a lot of time looking at the devastation caused by floods in places such as the Calder valley, and I am absolutely certain that the arguments around grouse moor management being a cause of flooding are very thin indeed. There may be small areas in certain circumstances but, when I was a Minister, the main problem for the grouse moor owners who battered on my door was that Natural England was being slow or over-bureaucratic in allowing them to block grips or drains. For them, on grouse moor management, “wetter is better”. That phrase resounded in my mind, and I personally have experience of trying to make a grouse moor wetter. We forget at our peril that decisions taken in Parliament or in Whitehall have had devastating effects on our uplands—not least 80%-plus grants for moorland drainage schemes.

I believe that, if many of the people who signed the petition listen to the debate and to some of the experiences of hon. Members, they will feel that there are two very different narratives. I have great praise for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. I worked very closely with it as a Minister and I continue to support much of what it does. Its caution on the call for a ban is something we should listen to. I think movement could be made by both sides, but it is sad when issues are polarised in the way the petition has forced them to be. I believe much more work can be done to get to where we can all agree and can take this forward, as other hon. Members have already said.

It is totally wrong to say that this is an argument between a ban and the status quo. The countryside and the natural world never stand still. Grouse moor owners and managers are constantly trying to find new ways of restoring peat and of increasing the quality of the habitat, not just for the birds that they want to use for sporting purposes but for the wider biodiversity of the uplands. We in the House should be obsessed with reversing the decline of biodiversity in this country. If the petition were enacted, it would work in the opposite way. That would be a disaster for my generation and for my children, who would not be able to see the kinds of birds and wildlife that I have had the privilege to enjoy seeing in our uplands.

5.16 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) for introducing both petitions, although I find it odd that we seem to be debating two opposing petitions. I am not here to support the ban on grouse shooting. I am a lousy shot but I support shooting. More important, I am not here to support the ban on grouse shooting. I support much of what it does. Its caution on the call for a ban is something we should listen to. I think movement could be made by both sides, but it is sad when issues are polarised in the way the petition has forced them to be. I believe much more work can be done to get to where we can all agree and can take this forward, as other hon. Members have already said.

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Danny Kinahan: I was brought up by a mother who would not let me look at any wildlife—bird or animal—without knowing how it lived and how we lived with it. I was also brought up in the valleys of Antrim, which are beautiful whether snow-covered or windswept, although it is not necessarily the case that “wetter is better”. Northern Ireland certainly gets its fair share of rain. It is a stunning part of the world, with great green, flowing valleys.

To the north is Glenwherry. There we have a partnership between the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs—what was called the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; Northern Ireland’s agriculture Department—the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, the RSPB and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, all working together on a mixture of private and public land, paid for by the shooting fraternity and the Antrim Estates Company. They manage the hill farms and the bog land. Interestingly enough, the reason I went there was not about grouse. I went to see how they were looking at pollinators and bees. They look at the total management—the bog land, partridge restoration, bees and pollinators and what we are talking about today, grouse conservation.

The Irish Grouse Conservation Trust was set up 10 years ago to save the Irish grouse and to stop them from disappearing. That was done through the organisation at Glenwherry, where there were four pairs of grouse 10 years ago. There are now more than 250. The site holds some 65% of Ireland’s grouse population, and it is learning how all types of farming can operate next to it, whether that is burning, cleaning, clearing or unblocking the old drains that were put in when people were trying to reclaim land. They are looking at everything so that they can manage the ecosystem and preserve all of the wildlife that is there.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to take account of climate change obligations? The Committee on Climate Change estimates that 350,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide is emitted from upland peat each year, with the majority due to burning on grouse moors.

Danny Kinahan: I certainly take that point on board, but I go back to what I said at the beginning: we all need to listen to one another and find the right way of doing this. In Ireland, we have much more peat than many other areas, but we have to find the right way forward.

The RSPB has been instrumental in this, as has the Irish Grouse Conservation Trust. My feeling today is that we should not all fall out with one another. Let us work together as a team to find the right way of doing this. Burning is well regulated. We have had awful fires on some of the moors in Northern Ireland in the past few years that have had absolutely nothing to do with those looking after the land. We have to find a proper way of protecting it. I believe the proper way of protecting it is those who own the land and shoot on it carrying on as they are at the moment. The same can be said when it comes to looking after birds of prey. It is better if we all work together, pull together and learn from one another.

Sir Henry Bellingham: The hon. Gentleman mentioned working together. Does he agree that a good start would be for the RSPB to come back into the flagship
hen harrier joint action plan, which it pulled out of after six months?

Danny Kinahan: I certainly agree. I would like to see the RSPB perhaps being less political and getting more involved in working with all of us.

I think I have made my point. We should work together. We have the skills and we have the regulations. Let us make them work and listen to one another.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): There seems to be a common concern on both sides of this debate, which is criminality. Both sides would say that criminality is wrong for conservation purposes. On that point, would those who oppose a ban on grouse shooting support vicarious liability, to make landowners responsible for criminality on their land? Is that not a potential solution we could all work together on?

Danny Kinahan: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point, but all sorts of problems come with vicarious responsibility, such as the cost of insurance and of letting people on to one’s land. That needs to be carefully looked at, and we need to find out what everyone thinks about it. Initially, I do not think it is the right way forward.

Let us learn from one another, as a partnership. Thank you for letting me speak, Mr Davies.

5.22 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): It is very nice to see you in the Chair imposing a time limit on speeches, Mr Davies. That is fantastic; thank you.

I have not shot grouse before, and I doubt I ever will. In fact, I confine myself mostly to shooting clay pigeons. Today, I want to challenge the untruths being promoted by those who wish to ban grouse shooting—people who outside this place knowingly promote cod science in what I regard as a shameful attempt to set community against community and neighbour against neighbour. That wilful cynicism was no better exemplified than by the reaction of Mr Mark Avery and Chris Packham to last December’s floods when, at a time of disaster, they took to the airwaves and their blogs to blame that brutal act of nature on gamekeepers and grouse moors. That was a simply unforgivable act of premeditated malice, with two media savvy men using the suffering of real people and real communities to promote their narrow political objectives.

I was driving north on 27 December 2015 through the lakes when I heard those people and their collaborators putting forward their knowingly scientifically dishonest theories—theories that sadly went unchallenged by the poorly briefed journalists interviewing them. This debate provides me with the chance to put the facts behind the Christmas floods before the House. The facts are these. The two-month period of November-December 2015 was the wettest recorded in the north of England since 1910. The December rainfall total at Shap in the single month of December 2015 was 77.3 cm or, in old-fashioned money, more than 30 inches of rain. From 1 December to 28 December 2015, Bainbridge in North Yorkshire received 49.62 cm of rain—three times more than the December average of 15.65 cm—or, in old money, 19.5 inches of rain per acre. Bingley in West Yorkshire received more than 80% of its monthly rainfall in just two days between 25 and 27 December.

In raw numbers, 1 inch of rain equals 113.31 tonnes of water per acre, so each acre in Bainbridge for the month of December received 2,209 tonnes of rain. I know it is difficult for people in this place to imagine what 1 inch of rainfall per acre actually looks like. Well, it is equal to 16 of the largest African bull elephants landing on an acre of ground. So the rainfall at Bainbridge for December 2015 was the equivalent of 312 bull elephants jostling for position on a space the size of four football pitches.

Sticking with totals and elephants, on 5 December, one storm—Storm Desmond—deposited 13.45 inches of rain on Honister pass. That is the equivalent of 212 bull elephants all arriving in the same place, on the same day. That is why there were floods in the north of England—a biblical rainfall falling over sodden ground in a very short space of time. It was nothing to do with gamekeepers, beaters or the people in tweed who like to shoot grouse.

However, Mr Avery and his friends have never paid science and the facts much regard. Only recently, in his blog, Mr Avery stated in relation to run-off:

“Leeds University research, led by Dr Lee Brown and published in 2014, confirms Ban the Burn campaigners’ criticisms of the Walshaw Moor Estate burning.”

The glaring problem—there is only one—with Mr Avery’s posting is that it is entirely untrue. Very kindly, Dr Brown let me have a copy of his headline findings, and what he actually states in his summary is this:

“River flow in catchments where burning has taken place appears to be slightly more prone to higher flow peaks during heavy rain. However, this was not a conclusive finding.”

Angela Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Walker: No, I do not have time.

As I like to deal in facts, unlike Mr Avery, I have read the excellent and thoughtful Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council local flood risk management strategy, to which my excellent colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), contributed. It was published in June this year. I have read all 60-plus pages of it, and the word “grouse” is not mentioned once. However, what is referenced is the 60 flood events in the area since the end of the second world war, with the statement on page 14 that “flooding has been a regular feature in Hebden Bridge since the 1890’s.”

That grown-up report does not focus its attention on banning anything. Instead, it talks of working with “land and asset owners to implement natural flood management schemes to maximise water retention, storage and slow flows.”

That is a responsible council talking the language of collaboration, not division, and a council that wants to bring town and rural communities together, not drive them apart.

I will conclude with this. It is a wholly reasonable position for people to dislike shooting birds for sport and the table. It is a position I happen to disagree with, but I can live with disagreement. However, what is unreasonable is for people such as Mr Packham and Mr Avery to disguise their dislike of grouse shooting as part of some wider concern for the environment. That is
the lie that needs to be exposed today. These two gentlemen are known for their hostility to the farming community and land management. As one farming friend described them to me,

“Two of these two men are not participants in the countryside. They are simply voyeurs.”

Philip Davies (in the Chair): I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning Bingley, in my constituency.

5.29 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Davies. Let us be clear what we are debating today. It is not whether people are entitled to shoot for the pot, whether shooting has a role in conservation or the wider issue of shooting for sport. We are not talking today about pheasant shooting, deer stalking or even walked-up grouse shooting. We are talking about driven grouse shooting because particular concerns are associated with it. It is rather disappointing that the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) sat through the evidence to the Petitions Committee and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee last week and does not seem to have grasped that basic point about the petition.

The weight of scientific evidence is that driven grouse shooting damages habitats, pollutes our water, increases greenhouse gas emissions, increases flood risk and, all too often, involves the illegal persecution of birds of prey. As we have heard, shooting estates commonly burn heather and peat on the moors to increase the red grouse population. Reference has been made to the work by the University of Leeds on the effects of moorland burning on the eco-hydraulics of river basins—the EMBER study—which concluded that burning reduces organic matter in the upper peat layers and depletes it of nutrients. Heather burning is intensifying as grouse burning may cost a six-figure sum each year.

Water tables were significantly deeper in burned catchments, indicating greater peat degradation and more carbon released into the atmosphere and water. This contributes to both climate change and to our water bills, as the water companies incur additional costs in removing the dissolved carbon. Treating a single drinking water catchment for the effect of peat burning may cost a six-figure sum each year.

The Energy and Climate Change Committee identified the climate threat in its report to Parliament last year and warned that the

“the majority of upland areas with carbon-rich peat soils, are in poor condition. The damaging practice of burning peat to increase grouse yields continues, including on internationally protected sites.”

Burning also reduces the uplands’ capacity to hold water, thereby increasing the flood risk downstream. In his paper calling for a radical rethink of flood defences, Dieter Helm, chair of the Natural Capital Committee, identified the burning of heather on grouse moors as a publicly subsidised practice that pays

“little or no attention to the flood risk dimensions.”

The Government’s national flood resilience review neglected this. The focus seemed to be on slowing down the flow instead of looking at what mismanagement in the uplands caused the flow to speed up in the first place. That is surely the wrong way to go about things.

It is not surprising that the highest number of signatures for the petition came from Calder Valley because it is communities such Hebden Bridge—which was devastated by the Boxing day floods, as I saw for myself when I visited with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch)—that pay the price for the mismanagement and abuse of the uplands.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for coming to see the devastation in my constituency in Calderdale in the aftermath of the Boxing day floods. I heard the points made by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), for whom I have the utmost respect, but does my hon. Friend agree that we are not talking about banning grouse shooting in isolation, but that we must take the management of moorlands seriously as part of a package of measures if we are to have any chance of managing flood risk in future?

Kerry McCarthy: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. She will know that Natural England initiated a prosecution, but proceedings were dropped in 2012 and the burning continued.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for coming up to the Calder Valley during the floods, which was a horrendous time for everyone. I just wonder whether she has had a look at the moors—indeed, any moors—to see what sort of restoration work is being done to restore them.

Kerry McCarthy: I went with the Uplands Alliance and the Moorland Association to an estate in Cumbria—we did not have time to go to Walshaw Moor; to be honest, our focus was on people in the flooded areas—so yes, I have visited moors with those organisations.

It is all the more galling that burning not only has costly consequences, but is often publicly subsidised under the guise of environmental stewardship. A freedom of information request to Natural England revealed that in 2012-13, £17.3 million of environmental stewardship funding was paid for land used for grouse shooting. The RSPB says that during the last 10 years £105 million has gone to grouse moors, supporting environmental damage to sites of special scientific interest and internationally protected special areas of conservation and special protection areas. In 2014, 30 estates received £4 million of taxpayers’ money—they included one owned by the late Duke of Westminster, who was worth £9 billion; I am sure that, despite some death taxes, the new duke is still pretty well off—that could be spent on public goods such as restoring wildlife habitats or flood alleviation.

Codes of practice on heather burning are simply not working. We need the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to respect the evidence and deliver a joined-up policy that does not involve the public subsidising practices that damage our environment. Nor can the Government continue to turn a blind eye to illegal practices, or meekly say, as they do in their response to the petition, that

“all those involved are encouraged to follow best practice.”

DEFRA has rightly identified raptor persecution as a national wildlife crime priority, but that is just used words. There is no action. Will the Minister tell us today what resources have been allocated to the national wildlife crime unit to prosecute those responsible and to
prevent future persecution? We are told that a taskforce is developing a plan, but can the Minister tell us when that plan will be published, who will be consulted and when and how it will be actioned?

The decline of the hen harrier is the most obvious illustration of the failure to uphold the law on illegal persecution. The RSPB reports that four satellite-tagged hen harriers have disappeared so far this year. Their last known transmission was from areas on or close to grouse moors. According to the Government’s Joint Nature Conservation Committee, there should be 2,600 nesting pairs of hen harriers in the UK, including approximately 300 pairs in the English uplands. Instead, this year there are just three. The RSPB said in its evidence to the Petitions Committee “a wealth of scientific evidence” shows that is because of illegal persecution. The RSPB has withdrawn its support for the Government’s hen harrier action plan because it has “patently shown itself unable to deliver”.

As has been said, the RSPB is not against shooting in general, but has made it clear that the “the status quo is not an option and that voluntary approaches have failed.”

DEFRA’s initial response to the petition was incredibly complacent. It relied on the industry’s own claims about the benefits of driven grouse shooting and, critically, focused on when grouse shooting is “carried out according to the law”, ignoring the too many instances when it is not. The Government’s response cited the industry’s Public and Corporate Economic Consultants report on the economics of shooting sports, but a review by Sheffield Hallam University identified flawed methodology and found that many of the claims were not verifiable or supported by robust data.

Shooting is a diverse industry, and different forms of shooting have different costs and benefits associated with them. Only driven grouse shooting involves such disproportionate costs, illegal activity and environmental harm, which is why the petition focuses on driven grouse shooting.

I want to say something about the density of birds required to make a shooting estate profitable these days. Studies have shown that 60 birds per sq km is optimal, but owners now aim for 180 if not 200 birds per sq km. Owners make money according to how many birds are shot and the sole aim of many shooters now is to bag as many birds as possible. It is not about enjoying the countryside, communing with nature or even demonstrating any real skill, which might be required in walked-up shooting; it is just about blasting as many birds as possible out of the sky so that they can brag about it to their mates afterwards. Many find this so-called sport morally reprehensible, but even those who do not must accept that the driven grouse shooting lobby needs to put its house in order.

The Government could take a number of steps to reduce the damage associated with driven grouse shooting. They could put an end to widespread heather burning and investigate the use of public subsidies for environmentally damaging behaviour, ensuring that it ceases after Brexit. They could demonstrate the leadership we need to uphold the law and tackle illegal persecution through the national wildlife crime unit. They could look at the introduction of vicarious liability, which applies in Scotland, whereby estate owners are held responsible for the actions of their estate managers and gamekeepers. They could work with the RSPB to develop its proposal for a licensing system, although doubts have been expressed by others as to whether that would work. I do not have time to debate this today, but they could also ban the use of snares and lead ammunition, which as we know causes massive pollution to our water supplies as well as contaminating food. The Government must show the political will to uphold the law and protect our environment. If we do not see concerted action and swift progress soon, the only answer will be a ban.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
I saw horrified me. Actually, I felt quite sick, and not because I saw anything repugnant—quite the opposite. I quickly realised that the petition and much of the information peddled around the Calder valley about the estate are, in many cases, simply untrue and based more on ideology than on fact and reason. The nonsense that people are led to believe could not be further from the truth, and it is time to put some of those things straight.

It is true that our peatland moors are in a poor state, but that is not because of grouse shooting. Rather, it is a consequence of a number of different factors, not least decades of abuse from coal burning, the over-intensification of farming—to name just two—and others mentioned by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). So why am I horrified about the amount of misinformation, which is quite frankly breathtaking, relating to the Walshaw estate? Does the estate slash and burn, as is suggested by many? No, it does not. It does, however, use what is called cool burning. The estate works in partnership with Natural England, Yorkshire Water and many other agencies. Everything it does is done under licence and is strictly controlled and plotted by GPS, and mapped, so that no area is burnt out of cycle, which, for active peat, is over 25 years, and, for other areas, is over 20 and 15 years.

Does this contribute to the increased peak flows? Common sense would probably say that it does; as does a study completed by Durham University and commissioned by Trees of Responsibility in the Calder valley. Although the study shows that burning does indeed have an impact on flows—I say “flows”, and not “flooding”—its methodology is so inherently flawed by a number of omissions and inaccurate assumptions that it is of very limited value. For example, the author of the study does not take into consideration any other burning outside the Walshaw estate. The author assumes that all channels on the moorland are unimpeded and allow the free flow of water; grips, ditches and drains are ignored; bankside areas are all assumed to be unimpeded and free flowing; and, finally, it is assumed that our six local reservoirs are storage neutral and allow for the unimpeded passage of water. As such, before drawing any conclusions from the study, we have to be aware of the significant weaknesses in its methodology.

We know that water does not have an unimpeded flow. There are thousands of acres around the Calder valley that are up hill and down dale and that have thousands of natural traps and bungs. On top of that, our reservoirs are not always storage neutral. Indeed, managing the level of reservoirs can have a significant impact upon mitigating the risk of flooding. Owing to the significant proportion of water on the moorlands that runs through the six reservoirs on and around the estate, if the levels of the reservoirs had been proactively managed last winter, the scale of the destruction caused to the communities in the valley bottom may have been reduced. Ironically, going into this winter, many of our reservoirs are kept low or empty.

As a result of a variety of factors, including the use of cool burning, mechanical cutting and spraying, and the planting of mixtures of new seeds of heather and cotton grass replacement, we have seen a huge influx of bird species back on to the moor. Many of those species have been mentioned today, and none of them have been on the Walshaw estate for decades. I was fortunate to see some of those species during my recent visit. This evidence is contrary to the petition, which states that...
grouse shooting exterminates wildlife. The careful custodianship of our moorlands is actually supporting and encouraging wildlife in a way that we have not previously seen.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important point about cool burning. Does he also recognise that cool burning allows mosses to develop, which has a huge impact on the carbon capture of the moors?

Craig Whittaker: Yes, I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is absolutely right. A key point about the over-intensification of farming over decades—20,000 sheep were kept on the Walshaw moor during the war and in subsequent years, and the number is now down to 1,000—is that molinia is a huge problem that causes deeply damaging wildfires, so he is absolutely right.

In relation to the petition, I point out that it is already illegal to kill endangered species. Banning grouse shooting will have no influence on this practice; policing of the law that is in place will. Furthermore, it has been alleged that the grouse moors practise “gripping”, which is designed to drain the moor to encourage heather growth and that, in turn, has contributed to flooding. The opposite is true. The Walshaw estate has practised grip blocking over the last three years. That practice blocks grips that were paid for by the Government in the 1970s to encourage more intensive farming. Over a third of grips have been blocked at Walshaw and the work to completely block the rest will take place over the next 18 months.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the very substantial cost of the restoration work and moorland maintenance programme. The seven full-time gamekeepers—I would call them, more appropriately, “custodians”—who carry out the vast amount of restoration work are on constant lookout in the summer for wildfires, which can totally destroy the peat.

Angela Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman not acknowledge that although landowners make a significant contribution to moorland restoration, they nevertheless generally do so with a wide range of partners, such as, in my area—and I think in the hon. Gentleman’s too—the Moors for the Future partnership?

Craig Whittaker: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. A lot of this stuff is done in partnership with Natural England. Yorkshire Water is a big partner up there as well. Of course, there is also our local council; our full flood catchment plan was released only last Friday and part of that is about working in partnership to manage the uplands.

As I was saying, these guys are on constant lookout for wildfires, which destroy the peat. Were they not there and were the estate not to have grouse shooting, there would be no capacity to prevent the wildfires. In fact, due to the poor state of much of our moorland, because of the factors that have been outlined, not having those custodians would result in the moors degenerating even further. West Yorkshire fire brigade has attended 249 illegal fires around the Calder valley since 2009. Those really do damage moors and wildlife.

Where do we go from here? In common with organisations such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, I do not think that banning driven grouse shooting is the answer. Similarly, I am not convinced that burning is needed to the extent that we hear about, although on the Walshaw estate, that only equates to approximately 2% of the 16,000 acres each year. I understand that there is machinery available that can access hard-to-reach areas, which reduces the need to burn. At the very least, I believe that a reduction in the scale of burning should be worked on and should be achievable.

However, we have to remember that if the current owners of our moors did not carry out the scale of restoration that they currently do, our moorlands would be in significantly worse condition than they are. I do not think that banning driven grouse shooting is the answer—in fact, it would be a sledgehammer to crack a nut—and as far as flood measures go, it would actually be detrimental. Common sense, not ideology, should prevail.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): As many will know, driven grouse shooting is a really important aspect of the economy and rural community life in counties such as North Yorkshire. It is so pleasing to see so many honourable colleagues here from our county this afternoon.

Clearly, we have to look at both sides of any argument, but I believe that the petition to ban driven grouse shooting simply does not stand up to scrutiny, and it does not seem to have ignited the enthusiasm of many Members who support the ban to speak here today. The economic impact of banning driven grouse shooting would be disastrous. There are estimates that revenue from walked-up grouse shooting would be less than 10% of that gained by driven grouse shooting. Many grouse moors rely on the sale of grouse shooting days for their economic survival.

Richard Arkless: Since I was elected to this place, economics has been used to justify dropping bombs, supplying arms, withdrawing tax credits and now killing birds. Does this place ever come down on the side of morality versus economics, or will it always be the case that if it makes a few quid, it is okay with the Tories?

Nigel Adams: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but it is probably one of the most nonsensical I have heard in this Chamber in the six years that I have had the pleasure of being here.

The petition’s proposals would result in a huge number of job losses. Grouse shooting supports more than 1,500 full-time jobs and many more part-time jobs, so its proposals would be very damaging. In many cases, these are quality jobs, with most paying above minimum wage and with the benefits of working in a beautiful natural environment. Businesses related to or dependent on grouse shooting in the north of England also generate more local jobs and tens of millions of pounds of income, mostly to small and family-owned businesses. This industry is reasonably run and already heavily regulated, and I do not support a further threat to the jobs that are created.
Steve Double: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is nothing moral about knowingly making a decision that will put hundreds of people in some of the poorest parts of our country out of work?

Nigel Adams: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and I congratulate him again on introducing this petition today. I certainly would not want any further excessive burdens to be placed on the approximately 450 estates that offer grouse shooting.

Grouse moor management is conducted in accordance with clear regulations contained within conservation designations, such as sites of special scientific interest and special areas of conservation. That has been shown to be highly effective, with SSSIs that are also grouse moors demonstrating a massive improvement in condition in the last decade. An overwhelming majority are now in either “good” or “recovering” condition, whereas only approximately a third were previously.

The legal predator control and habitat management undertaken by managers of grouse moors is supported by Natural England because these have proven to provide sanctuary and habitat for increased populations of endangered wading bird species, including lapwings, curlew, and other red-listed species, including the red grouse, which is unique to the British Isles.

Additionally, there is little evidence to show that predation species are damaged by the responsible management of grouse moor estates. In fact, studies show that they benefit: breeding merlin pairs were four times as high in kept moorland than elsewhere, and the control of predators was shown to reduce nest predation, increasing the population of hen harriers and other native birds of prey. When keeping stopped, hen harrier populations did not increase. In fact, they declined alongside grouse populations, because crow and fox populations took over. This petition may have been well intentioned, but if its recommendations were implemented, it would end up shooting the uplands in the foot.

Grouse moor managers actively restore peatland and well-maintained peatland helps to reduce flood risk, as we have heard. Those are essential environmental maintenance tasks that the Government do not have to fund, yet they produce huge public benefits—a virtually free service is conducted by grouse moor managers. Grouse moor owners in England alone spend approximately £52.5 million every year on moorland management, 90% of which is private investment. Those tasks would have to be taken up and funded by the public purse or we would face declining biodiversity, increased flood risk and damage to a rare type of habitat on the basis of neglect.

Let me come to those who really matter in this: the local community, many of whom benefit from and enjoy grouse shooting and enjoy living near picturesque, well-maintained heather moorland. It gathers people of all ages together to enjoy the camaraderie of a day’s grouse shooting. Driven grouse shooting brings the rural community together in areas that struggle with social isolation and low levels of employment. It keeps a rural community thriving, among those who have newly taken up the profession, there are people whose families have been grouse shooting, farming and keeping for centuries.

I will try to put this gently, but I feel that there is a bit of misplaced or inverted snobbery in the petition to ban this practice. There is a sense of knee-jerk opposition without a full understanding of the facts. There is an impression, for example, that grouse shooting involves a bunch of tweed-clad toffs trampling the countryside and killing for fun, but that is a huge misconception. I suspect that those who want to see driven grouse shooting banned, some of whom are given a very regular platform by the BBC to espouse their views, are keen to propagate that image, alongside their dodgy science.

The industry is supported primarily by those who have spent their lives living in and working hard for the countryside. All sides—the rural community, the shooters and the gamekeepers—know that their environment and occupation cannot continue unless they maintain good relations with one another and conserve the countryside. The actual business of conservation requires people to get their hands very literally dirty, not simply sign a petition from the comfort of their home.

In the debate, there is an element of seizing upon a convenient, if fallacious, environmental objection as a straw man for some people’s misguided opposition to shooting when, in fact, most country sports contribute massively to conservation and animal welfare. I encourage anyone who is interested to visit a grouse moor and speak with the passionate, hands-on and knowledgeable gamekeepers before leaping to criticise, based solely on a couple of deeply unrepresentative bad examples.

Shot game tends to be of an incredibly high quality and raised to high welfare standards, and is often organic. Almost all game that is shot on such estates, including grouse, gets eaten. A lot of people object to seeing a shooting party carrying home a bird to pluck and cook, but those same people sometimes buy at their local supermarket, without a second thought, eggs and chicken raised in truly deplorable conditions. We must not pander to squeamishness about where food comes from, especially when those ideas are based on uninformed prejudices. Therefore, I am fully in support of the alternative petition to support the countryside and driven grouse shooting.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I am the chairman of the Countryside Alliance. I will not repeat absolutely everything that has been said this afternoon, but I will compare two moorlands, and build on the excellent story that we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames).

I, too, spent a pleasant day on a moorland—not actually shooting—not that long ago. Many species have been mentioned, and I think I counted 44 in total that day, including mammals and birds. There were blackcock, golden plover, woodcock, snipe, jack snipe, greylag geese, teal, widgeon, mallard, gadwall, pintail and even, right out in the middle of the moor, miles from anywhere, a wild chicken. I am not sure whether there were wild chickens, but there was a chicken that was probably not born and brought up there. There were also a collection of corvids and a few raptors. Probably as important, to pick up on the comments made by my
[Simon Hart]

hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), was the thriving school, the busy shop and a pub that did business not just during the tourist season, but throughout the winter. In other words, the place was a proper community built around the agriculture and shooting activity of the area.

Compare and contrast that with my other experience of a moorland in mid-Wales, where I used to live and where, something like 20 years ago, grouse shooting of any sort came to an end. Now, as we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), lapwing have become extinct on those moors. The numbers of golden plover are down by 90% and curlew by 79%. The moors are dominated by crows and other corvids, as well as ground predators. Biodiversity has been damaged by a lack of investment and overgrazing. A new phenomenon—at this stage being reported anecdotally—is the uninterrupted rock climbing in some of the few cliff areas, which is deterring peregrine falcons from nesting. No malice is intended, but the pretty unlimited and unregulated disturbance each and every weekend is contributing to difficulties elsewhere.

Stephen Timms: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hart: If it is a quick one. I always regret giving way, but I will do so for the right hon. Gentleman.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman has not yet mentioned hen harriers. A lot of my constituents are deeply concerned about the decline of the hen harrier population in England. Does he accept that there is a real concern that grouse shooting is making things worse?

Simon Hart: If the right hon. Gentleman—and this is not an insult—had been around earlier, he would have heard quite a lot about that. I suspect we will also hear from the Minister on that point. We have all acknowledged that the problem exists, but hen harriers are susceptible to a number of different things; persecution is but one. I will pass that ball to the Minister to deal with when she sums up.

We are told that there are good alternatives to driven grouse shooting. As far as I can make out, those include forestry, wind generation, rewilding—whatever the definition of that is—ecotourism, farming and rough shooting or walked-up shooting, as some people call it. The point is that the alternative already exists across a lot of the UK, including across a lot of Wales. Therefore, arguments that suggest that somehow there will be a booming rural economy in areas where driven grouse shooting does not take place can be contested, because we have the example already. It is not a case of speculating about what the alternatives may be. We know what the alternatives are because they are out there for anybody who wishes to go and see them, and they do not reflect in any way the suggestions made by those who wish to criminalise the activity.

In the joint evidence session last week between the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Petitions Committee, it was pretty obvious to us that the people promoting a ban on driven grouse shooting had made no assessment of the economic or ecological costs, or the social consequences. The Committee felt, I think—I certainly did—that if people are going to make a case that would essentially add to the criminal sanctions of the country, put people out of work and alter the management of the uplands, the very least they could do is come up with a reason that their alternative is better than the existing model that has been tried and tested over some time. Until opponents of driven grouse shooting actually bother to make that case, their argument deserves to fail.

I finish by turning to a slightly more political argument. Earlier this year, the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) produced a document entitled, “Labour’s rural problem”, which was an analysis of why Labour was not succeeding in its electoral ambitions in rural areas. On page 33, she confesses that “much of the party treats the countryside with a polite indifference.”

The report goes on to state:

“An activist from Labour South West, said...in the future we need to ensure that we focus on rural issues that most people worry about. Rural issues shouldn’t be confused with animal welfare issues.”

And so it goes on.

The report compares interestingly with another document, produced by a former Labour MP, called the comprehensive animal protection review, which apparently has the warm endorsement of the shadow Minister. The author of the report says:

“As part of our wider environmental priorities, we will no longer allow drainage of land to facilitate grouse shooting and landowners will have obligations to restore land to its natural environment... We will introduce a licensing requirement for shooting estates”.

And yet, without defining what a shooting estate is. There are various other comments about further restrictions on shotgun ownership and increased licensing costs and so on.

There seems to be a problem. There is recognition that, in order to re-engage with rural communities, all political parties need to do things for them, rather than to them. Sadly, some of the comments today reveal that there is still an ambition to pursue a political agenda under the cover of some kind of ecological argument. Because of that and because of the lack of the proponents of the motion coming up with any more positive alternatives whatever, the proposal to ban driven grouse shooting deserves to fail, and I hope that it does.

6.8 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I must immediately declare an interest as chairman of the all-party group on shooting and conservation, the sister of the group to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) referred. In his excellent speech, he described, par excellence, the biodiversity that takes place on a well-managed moor. I will sketch for the House—my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) got somewhere towards it—what the opposite course may entail.

I have been visiting an estate on the Caithness-Sutherland border almost continuously for 30 years. When I started, there were a few grouse there. It was decided that the estate would gradually be stocked with more and more sheep. Tick numbers went up. Biodiversity on the moor went down. In the early days, there were raptors, skylarks,
curlew, oystercatchers—the whole range of birds discussed today—but now virtually none of those birds remains. The quality of the moor has gone down considerably: the heather has got rank because it is not burnt properly; the number of grass species has immeasurably increased; and the amount of bracken, which is no good for any wildlife, has increased hugely. Without managed moors, I say to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), biodiversity would definitely go down. I disabuse her of one other fact: without driven grouse shooting, and without proper management, vast tracts of our precious moorland would degrade in the way I have described—we have already heard that moorland is rarer than rain forest and that in the United Kingdom we have 75% of the world’s heather moorland.

Many others have commented on the economic benefits of grouse shooting, so I will not go over that too much, except to say that the £50 million spent on grouse moors, and the associated £15 million spent on ancillary businesses, supports 1,500 full-time equivalent jobs, according to the Moorsland Association—my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) may have got the figure wrong in his excellent speech—and some 125 days of seasonal work. Those are considerable figures in some of our country’s remotest areas.

Some 2,715 miles of moorland drainage ditches have been plugged in the north Pennines alone as a result of revegetation with 120 hectares of bare peat, and there has been a reduction in flood risk. Many Members have commented on burning, but it is a fact that just 0.68% of heather moorland in Britain is burned each year. If it is burned properly under proper conditions—Members have talked about hot and cold burning and about rotation around the moor—it should not create the damage that has been mentioned.

On the hen harrier problem, the RSPB came to see me ahead of this debate and pleaded with me to be reasonable. I will be reasonable to the RSPB if it will be reasonable to the grouse landowners. The RSPB pulled out of the biodiversity action plan earlier this year, and I appeal to it to rejoin that action plan because only out of the biodiversity action plan earlier this year, and it is irresponsible to ignore the hard science and the factual benefits that driven grouse shooting provides to the UK’s countryside.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): For the benefit of all Members here, this debate is scheduled to finish at 7.30 pm. Thanks to the brevity of Members who have spoken already, even if Members wish to take an intervention or two, there may be time to fit in all the remaining speakers and to hear from the Front Benchers before the conclusion of the debate.

6.14 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I am pleased to contribute to this debate because the area of Wales that my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) spoke about, the Berwyn range, is well known to me. It is worth remembering that that range, which covers a huge area and is internationally protected because of its significant numbers of hen harriers, has been managed by the RSPB. The peer-reviewed findings of the study between 1983 and 2002 are therefore incredibly important. If the decline is down to grouse moor management, why are we not seeing an explosion of hen harrier and grouse numbers on the more than 312,000 acres of land managed by the RSPB? That is peer-reviewed scientific evidence. The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) failed to say what sources she is relying on or, indeed, whether those sources are peer-reviewed.

Between 1983 and 2002, lapwing were lost from the Berwyn survey area, golden plover declined from 10 birds to one and curlew declined by 79% despite its conservation designations. Carrion crow numbers increased sixfold and raven numbers fourfold, with the number of 1 sq km grid squares that they occupied doubling and trebling respectively. Buzzard numbers increased twofold, and the number of occupied grid squares increased fourfold. Peregrine numbers increased sevenfold, whereas hen harrier numbers declined by half. No significant changes were detected in the abundance of other SPA-designated raptors, merlin and kite.

Angela Smith: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s point, but the latest report of the Peak District raptor monitoring group is absolutely clear. The group is frustrated by the heavy focus on hen harriers—I say that as a hen harrier champion—because, despite its best efforts over nearly eight years, merlin and peregrine numbers are going down. A range of significant birds are going down in number.

Antoinette Sandbach: I would be grateful if the hon. Lady provided me with a peer-reviewed study showing those numbers.
There has been no grouse shooting and no grouse moor management in the Berwyn range, where the number changes have been happening, since the late 1990s. Between upland breeding surveys, red grouse numbers declined by 54% and the occupied range—in other words, where the birds were—fell by 38%. Grouse count data collected on four moors since 1995 show that grouse numbers have remained at low levels on three of the moors. The study is important because it covers an RSPB-managed reserve. Grouse numbers declined, and so did harrier numbers.

Contrast that with what happened in relation to the plastic carrier bag charge in Wales, where landowners and the RSPB worked together to protect the black grouse, which was a huge success. There was a big increase in black grouse numbers on one keepered moor; on the three other RSPB moors, black grouse numbers did not increase. On the keepered moor on the Wynnstay Hall estate at Ruabon, the number of black grouse, one of our rarest grouse, increased. That shows what partnership can do, but it also shows that, when the land is not being managed by keepers, or is not where driven shooting happens, there is a decline in biodiversity. The RSPB reserve saw minor increases in black grouse.

This House has a responsibility to judge on proper evidence, not some scientific allegations made by third parties. I am quoting the scientific facts from peer-reviewed research. I find it difficult that very few RSPB reserves release their data. They do not allow peer-reviewing of their bird numbers. One need only drive down the Llangollen valley to see the bracken on the hills of the RSPB reserves.

Mr Charles Walker: I point out to my hon. Friend that the Avian Population Estimates Panel states that 100 years ago there were no hen harriers in mainland UK, whereas today there are around 645 breeding pairs across the country. In 1963, there were 360 pairs of peregrines in the UK; today there are 1,500. There were 160 breeding pairs of red kites 20 years ago: there are now 1,600. Birds of prey are doing well in the United Kingdom.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for quoting those data. I would refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I congratulate my colleague and friend the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on making an excellent speech using facts and figures. Many of the facts in my speech have already been quoted, so I have spent a lot of my time crossing them out, as I do not want to repeat those points. If I may, I will go through what I have left. The facts are the important part of this debate.

We know that birds thrive where moorlands are managed. Without the conservation management of moorland, there would be no red grouse. They have already disappeared from the south-western moors and most of Wales, and are amber-listed for conservation concern. Many endangered species, such as lapwing, curlew, golden plover, merlin and black grouse, that are in serious decline elsewhere can still be found in good numbers on grouse moors. Research shows that, where predator control is in place on keepered grouse moors, red-listed birds such as the curlew and lapwing are 3.5 times more likely to fledge their chicks. Scientific research also shows that densities of golden plover, curlew, redshank and lapwing are up to five times greater on managed grouse moors, and that there are four times as many merlin, according to breeding records. In the last 20 years, merlin numbers have doubled on areas keepered for red grouse, but halved on unkeepered moorland.

Where driven grouse shooting has been lost in Wales, populations of many of these species have dropped by 60% to 90%. Driven grouse shooting stopped in Wales in the 1990s, and was replaced by intensively grazing. As a result, the all-important conservation management for red grouse also ended, resulting in red-listed species such as curlew, ring ouzel and black grouse plummeting by between 70% and 90% in just 10 years. The lapwing has been lost completely. All that has happened in an area designated as a special protection area for its bird life.

We have heard about the benefits for wildlife. The 2013 Natural England evidence review “The effects of managed burning on upland peatland biodiversity, carbon and water” concluded that there was “strong evidence” that controlled heather burning and predator control correlated with higher densities of red grouse, golden plover, curlew, lapwing, redshank and ring ouzel.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Gentleman has talked a lot about evidence, as have previous Conservative speakers. Can he say something about the evidence on the climate impacts of grouse shooting? Precisely the moorland management that he is extolling is destroying heather uplands. We know that, as a result, layers of peat are releasing large quantities of stored carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, driving climate change. If he wants peer-reviewed documents, I have some here from Leeds University. What does he say about the evidence on the climate impact?

Richard Drax: I am grateful for that intervention. If the hon. Lady will wait, I will come to that point, and I will try to answer it for her.

A 50-year study of Scottish moorland in the July 2016 Journal of Botany concludes that “to maintain diversity, timely burning is recommended.”

The RSPB has a controlled burning programme at Loch Garten and Hobister “to increase the suitability of the reserve for key breeding birds such as hen harriers, short-eared owls, merlins and curlews.”
Strictly controlled and regulated heather burning from October to April ensures a mix of older heather for nesting, younger heather for feeding and fresh burn for regeneration. This normwork burning and reseeding creates a mosaic of niche habitats, so that one acre can contain red grouse, curlew, lapwing and golden plover. Research by the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust shows that rotational heather burning prevents wildfires, which are likely to burn the peat beneath, damaging the ability of the peatland to store water and carbon.

Written evidence submitted to the Petitions Committee by the Northern Farmers and Landowners Group states: “These people”—that is, gamekeepers—are the ones with the local knowledge, specialist skills and equipment on site which can be deployed, in tandem with the NFRS, to tackle wildfires in the most efficient manner.

The Moorland Association has employed 25% more gamekeepers to manage the heather and protect vulnerable ground-nesting birds including curlew, lapwing and golden plover from predators, increasing their populations by up to five times compared with moorland areas without gamekeepers. Legal control of foxes, stoats, weasels and carrion crows on grouse moors is proven to benefit a range of ground-nesting birds, such as black grouse, lapwing, skylark, curlew, and grey partridge. Scientific research shows that endangered ground nesting birds such as curlew and lapwing are 3.5 times more likely to raise chicks successfully on managed grouse moors.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 protects all wild birds, including harriers, falcons, golden eagles, sea eagles, ospreys and many other moorland birds, with fines and six months’ imprisonment for illegal killing. I, too, condemn any illegal activity, and I suspect, although I do not know and it is hard to prove, that on many occasions, illegal killings in large areas are done not by gamekeepers, landowners or anybody else, but by people off the land. I shall leave those listening to conclude who could be doing it, but the evidence and the numbers show that those wild birds are increasing.

A colleague just mentioned historical trends in population numbers, and it is important to go over them again. Whereas 100 years ago there were no hen harriers on mainland UK, today, there are around 645 breeding pairs across the country. Internationally, they are resident in 87 countries across the northern hemisphere, with a population of 1.3 million. In 1963, there were 360 pairs of peregrines in the UK; today there are 1,500. Over the past 20 years, breeding pairs of red kites have increased from 160 to 1600, and pairs of buzzards from 14,500 to 68,000.

As we have heard, heather moorland is rarer than rain forest and threatened globally. Some 75% of the world’s remaining heather moorland is in the UK and viewed as globally important. It is widely recognised that grouse shooting has helped to preserve it. Written evidence submitted to the Petitions Committee by the Heather Trust states: “It is clear that the best management takes place where there is private funding available and a passion to apply it for the improvement of moorland. This normally means that there is a sporting interest, either grouse or deer.”

With 30 seconds to go, I regret that I have not quite got to the point that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) asked me about, but I am happy to talk to her after the debate.

Regrettably, my time has run out, although I would like to say an awful lot more. In conclusion, common sense is the solution to what is perceived by a few people as a preoccupation with climate change. Wildlife in this country is in safe hands, and there is nowhere better to be than on a driven grouse moor.

6.29 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am very pleased to take part in this debate. As befits the Member of Parliament for Aldershot, I engage in shooting, although I tend to confine myself to pheasant, partridge and the like, sometimes at the kind invitation of my friends. Grouse shooting is not something with which I am so familiar—the grouse with which I am most closely familiar comes in a very fine bottle from Scotland that has “Famous” on the side of it. However, I come from a long line of Scottish border farmers and I have a cousin, Will Garfit, who is not only one of the most exceptional shots in the country but a famous artist. He is also responsible for a magnificent, award-winning small sporting estate, which he has transformed from a gravel pit. He illustrates the association between shooting and conservation that is exemplified by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, which also kindly invites me to go shooting from time to time. The contributions we have heard today strongly illustrate how shooting and conservation go hand in hand.

I believe that people should be free to decide for themselves whether to go shooting. It is currently lawful, it should remain lawful, and it should be a matter for individuals, unless there is damage to the environment. I have been impressed by the speeches of so many right hon. and hon. Members in this debate, particularly that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who knows a huge amount about the subject. The collective wisdom produced today must provide very compelling evidence to those who have signed the petition. I have had a handful of identical emails about the petition but, as we know, our constituents have not written them; they have simply been fed them by the League Against Cruel Sports and have duly ticked the box and sent the emails winging their way to us.

Caroline Lucas: I want to come back to the point about climate change. When the hon. Gentleman talks about scientific evidence, he makes it sound as if grouse shooting is good for the environment. However, the Committee on Climate Change’s 2015 progress report to Parliament notes: “Wetland habitats, including the majority of upland areas with carbon-rich peat soils, are in poor condition. The damaging practice of burning peat to increase grouse yields continues, including on internationally-protected sites.”

That is the kind of evidence that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, but it shows exactly the opposite conclusion to the one he draws.

Sir Gerald Howarth: All the hon. Lady has managed to do, I am afraid, is illustrate her complete and utter obsession with climate change. It is an important subject, but the science is not settled. If she is saying that burning 0.6% of heather in this country is contributing to climate change, I am afraid to say that I, for one, do not believe it.
I do not want to make a long speech, but I have a couple of observations to make. First, moorlands account for something like 4 million acres across the whole United Kingdom, as we have heard, and they employ something like 2,500 people—1,500 in England and Wales and more in Scotland. These are some of the most remote parts of the kingdom. So many of the people who write to us about these matters obviously feel emotional about it but do not understand what it is like to have to farm the countryside to maintain its beauty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) so rightly pointed out, it is people in the farming community—the agricultural community—who tend the land and make it such a magnet for those in the rest of the country to go and visit. They manage the moorland 24/7, 365 days a year in all weathers, to the benefit not just of the landscape, as my hon. Friend pointed out, but of the birds.

The role of gamekeepers, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) described as custodians, really needs to be emphasised. A conversation with a gamekeeper is absolutely fascinating, because gamekeepers have so much knowledge, understanding and passion for the countryside. If shooting were made unlawful or banned, it would be hugely to the detriment of the quality of management of rural countryside in this country. The case for that has been made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), who cited the statistics. My noble Friend Viscount Ridley had an excellent article published in The Spectator in August, in which he pointed out that on a North Pennine moor,

"a survey of breeding birds was carried out this spring. The results have gobsmacked conservationists. On this one moor, there were at least 400 pairs of curlews breeding. This is about as many as in the whole of Wales. There were 800 pairs of lapwings, 100 pairs of golden plovers, 50 pairs of oyster-catchers, 40 pairs of redshanks, 200 pairs of snipe, 50 pairs of woodcocks, 60 pairs of common sandpipers."

That is an illustration of the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) about the fantastic effect that conservation and shooting have produced in the countryside. Viscount Ridley’s article continues:

"In the early 2000s, at Otterburn in Northumberland, the trust”—

the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust—

"did a neat experiment in which two areas had gamekeepers and two did not, then they swapped for four years. The results were astonishing. With gamekeepers, the breeding success of golden plovers, curlews and lapwings more than doubled, and their numbers rocketed."

I think the case is made.

I fear that opposition to driven grouse shooting is founded not on concern for the stewardship of upland Britain but on emotional hostility to those who participate in shooting, and that the science is being twisted to fit the case for a ban. My right hon. and hon. Friends in this Chamber today have produced a compelling archive of the reasons why this emotional campaign is ill-founded and, if listened to and acted upon, would be seriously damaging to the very countryside that its supporters understandably wish to see preserved.
(Angela Smith) says there are no hen harriers in her constituency at all, but on Friday I saw a video of five hen harriers that had hatched there. I was assured that they were in her constituency by the chap who discovered them. That is what I have been told and I will happily discuss it with her after the debate.

Angela Smith: I feel the need to respond to that point because I have been named. That just is not true. There are no hen harriers in my constituency. They have not nested in my constituency for years. There have been just three nests across the whole of England this year, and none of them is in the Peak district. The hon. Gentleman ought to talk to the national park in which he and I are neighbours to establish the truth. The Peak District national park is on the point of walking away from voluntary partnerships because we are not getting the success on hen harrier nesting that we deserve.

Andrew Bingham: I refer the hon. Lady to an article that appeared in The Derbyshire Magazine written by Jim Dixon, who is the former chief executive of the Peak District national park. The article is about hen harriers, and the last sentence says:

"These harriers raise their precious family on a grouse moor in the Peak District."

That was what the then chief executive of the Peak District national park wrote in 2014.

Angela Smith: In the Peak district, not in my constituency.

Andrew Bingham: The hon. Lady just said that there were none in the Peak district. I shall confirm it with the chap who found them, but he assured me. He actually said that he would be happy to speak to the hon. Lady if she wanted to. I have seen and heard of raptores living and encouraged throughout my constituency. The management of grouse moors requires the control of predators such as foxes, weasels and crows, which actually aids and promotes the survival of birds of prey.

I have seen the ecological benefits that the management of the moors can bring. There are claims that the burning of heather can result in the burning of the peat and so on. On Friday, I saw evidence that that is not the case. When it is done properly, the cool burning of heather does not burn the peat. If we left the heather unburned, it would grow longer and become more of a fire hazard, which, were it to catch light, certainly would burn the peat. The burning of heather, little and often, does not have an ecological impact.

As we have heard, there is also a philosophical opposition, which can be applied to many country sports, from grouse shooting through to fishing. I have never been grouse shooting. My only experience of shooting is a couple of attempts at clay pigeon shooting that were not successful, so I have no vested interest other than the impact on my constituency. Shooting as a whole makes a contribution to country life and the rural economy.

Nigel Adams: Those who seek to ban driven grouse shooting, such as Mr Avery, who my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) referred to earlier, argue that walked-up shooting could be a practical alternative. Does my hon. Friend agree that that argument simply flies in the face of basic economics, given the obvious reduction in the bag and the amount of money that a day’s walked-up shooting would take compared with a driven day?

Andrew Bingham: I completely agree. I think the figures cited earlier were that that alternative would account for only 10% of the economic benefit of driven grouse shooting.

Simon Hart: On enforcement, does my hon. Friend agree that trying to write a law that defines shooting a grouse that is flying towards one as a criminal offence, but leaves it perfectly legal to shoot it when it is flying away, could pose some difficulties?

Andrew Bingham: Yes, that would be completely unenforceable and probably slightly ridiculous. Grouse shooting makes such a huge contribution to country life. Not only does it provide employment and people’s livelihoods, but it helps with social cohesion in rural areas. I fully respect those who hold the view that we should not hunt, shoot or fish any animal, but there is always the alternative. Look at the benefits to rural areas such as mine. Shooting providers spend millions every year on the conservation and management of some of the most beautiful areas of the country, which are often the hardest to maintain.

I have studied this matter in some depth. I have listened to all sides of the argument and I have been out to the moors to see things for myself. I have met many people; at this point I shall mention Mike Price from the Peak district raptor monitoring group, to whom other Members have referred. He came to London to see me and articulated his concerns. The report referred to by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge actually says that the group does not currently support a ban on driven grouse shooting, although Mr Price expressed a desire to see stronger penalties enforced for those who transgress the law. I thank him for the time he took and for his reasoned approach.

As a result of all the discussions I have had, I conclude thus. Grouse shooting provides economic, ecological and environmental benefits not just to the areas where it operates but beyond. The shooting community continues to make its case and should continue to demonstrate zero tolerance of those who break the law. Similarly, opponents are free to make their points and voice their opposition, but it should be based on rigorous evidence that would stand up in a court of law. It cannot be anecdotal, but should be strong enough to lead to prosecution, if required. It is not only possible for birds of prey and successful grouse moors to co-exist; in many ways, they are necessary for each other to survive.

6.46 pm

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I thank the Petitions Committee for selecting this topic for debate. After nearly two and a half hours, most of what is to be said has already been said.

My constituency is in mid-Wales and is very rural. Several grouse moor owners and workers live and operate in Brecon and Radnorshire. Having grown up in rural Wales, I am keen on rural pursuits, although I have never engaged in a driven grouse shooting day. I have the
pleasure of sitting on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. Only the other week I had the privilege of attending the evidence session on grouse shooting. Several right hon. and hon. Members have already referred to Mr Mark Avery, who was on the first panel to give evidence, along with the RSPB. I understand that he is a former employee of the RSPB. It was interesting to hear his evidence, which seemed to be based on ideology and prejudice. He wanted driven grouse shooting to be banned, whereas his former employer wanted no such thing. I want it to go on record that the RSPB does not want to see grouse shooting banned.

There are many different views on grouse shooting—as we have heard today, although I was expecting to hear more from the Opposition—and the perceived ideas that go with it. As I say, I am a lucky man to sit on the EFRA Committee: for many hours and days over many months we conducted an inquiry into flooding, which took us to the south and north of the country. We interviewed people who had been affected by flooding—people whose houses had been flooded right through and businesses that had been flooded and so had to cease trading—and many environmentalists. There are four members of the Select Committee present, and they were involved in that inquiry. I cannot remember one person who shouted from the top of a grouse moor that it is the grouse moors that are causing floods throughout the country. We need to put the evidence into perspective. The flooding this year was caused by many other issues, not by grouse moors.

Antoinette Sandbach: The problem is the grips on the land, which are basically big ditches that were dug out of the moors. They are responsible for water draining off the moors. When they are blocked up, sphagnum mosses help to absorb the water and lessen the risk of flooding. As seen in Mynydd Mynyllod, much of the necessary work on grouse moors is being carried out in co-operation with private landlords.

Chris Davies: I agree with my hon. Friend. When wearing another hat, I am the chair of the all-party group on forestry, and I would love to see a lot more planting of commercial forests in this country. However, that should never be at the expense of grouse moors, because they add a completely different package. At the end of the day, one thing that we seem to have tilted away from in this country in many different spheres is balance. We need to have a balance right across this country, and grouse moors play their part in that. We all want to see flora and fauna in Britain thrive, while also protecting and preserving our rural way of life, which has existed alongside them for centuries. So what can we do? The way I see it, the issue comes down to one simple word: preservation—the preservation of land, the preservation of livelihood and the preservation of our legacy.

The preservation of land is essential to the survival of a number of species of animals, not just grouse. Research from a number of studies has shown the benefits of having properly managed moorland. For example, Natural England has said that an area about the size of 22,000 football pitches has been repaired and revegetated in the north of England alone.

Driven Grouse Shooting Driven Grouse Shooting
31 OCTOBER 2016

Chris Davies: I draw hon. Members’ attention to two moors in my constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire. I sat on the Brecon Beacons national park authority before coming into this place and I had to face a debate exactly like the one we are facing now, only there was a vote at the end of it. Sadly, the national park authority decided by about 18 to six to ban grouse shooting on one of the moors in the Brecon Beacons national park. I could take you there now, Mr Nuttall, and you would see that there are no grouse; in fact, it is a grouse moor in name only. Indeed, not only have the grouse disappeared but so have many other forms of wildlife, including ground-nesting birds.

By contrast, in Radnorshire, there are the hills that surround my home, where I have lived, walked, ridden and hunted for my whole life. I went up there only in the summer with a keeper on that moor and, my goodness me, I saw more in that afternoon—bear in mind that I have lived near that moor and been involved with it all my life—through the professionalism of a keeper, who showed me more and from whom I learned more, than ever I had seen before. As has already been pointed out today, that demonstrates the true professionalism of the keepers on our wonderful grouse moors.

Angela Smith: I thank my fellow member of the Select Committee for giving way. Only 12% of blanket bog in sites of special scientific interest in England is in favourable condition. I am not in favour of a ban on driven grouse shooting, but I am absolutely clear that although there is some very good practice in the management of our grouse moors, it has to be accepted that a balanced position in this debate would suggest that there is still a lot to learn, that there has to be compromise on both sides, that the economic and environmental interests of the grouse moors must be balanced, and that we have a long way to go on this issue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with that point?

Chris Davies: I am delighted to hear my fellow member of the EFRA Committee talking so much sense. Yes, of course I agree—I have already touched on this; in fact, I have forcefully said so—that balance should come back into the equation and back into British life, certainly in the countryside.

I also condemn the persecution of birds of prey, as have other Members, on both sides of the Chamber. There is no room in grouse shooting or any other form of shooting or countryside activity for the persecution of birds of prey. In fact, if Members come to my driven grouse moor in Radnorshire, they will see that kites in particular are now in abundance, whereas they were not before.

The second form of preservation is the preservation of livelihood. As a rural MP, I have seen the benefits of this great industry at first hand. Studies show that the industry creates over 40,000 days of work for many thousands of people in rural England and Wales. That is not to be sniffed at when one considers the number of jobs available in very rural areas. I know first-hand, from a number of constituents who have spoken to me, how difficult it can be to find work in areas without large banks, businesses or warehouses. Our rural areas are the most beautiful places to live, but they are also among the most challenging places to live in.
With farm-gate prices low—as we are seeing, they are slowly rising with a weaker pound, although we will not touch on Brexit in this debate, Mr Nuttall—many farmers have found that they need to diversify in order to make ends meet. Participating in the grouse season is one way of diversifying to keep a farm business running.

Others have given evidence that young people who have worked as beaters have had their first jobs out on the moorland or in the hotels that supply those who go on grouse days. Therefore, the industry fosters an attitude, from a very early age, that work pays. This is not just one-track economic activity; in whole villages and sometimes whole areas, many rural people rely upon grouse shooting for their livelihoods.

Those who take part in grouse days need accommodation, food, clothing and equipment. Often, this is all supplied by local traders and in many isolated areas in our country, grouse shooting has encouraged regional growth. Therefore, we should ensure that we preserve the livelihoods of those in the most rural areas by making sure they have access to economic opportunities for generations to come.

Finally, we must preserve our legacy. We are all concerned about the world that we will pass down to our children and our children’s children. None of us wants a world in which we cannot spot rare and beautiful birds or wander in ancient and well managed woodland and moorland. We each want the world we pass down to be better than the one we came into. However, if we were to outlaw the income that provides us with well managed moorland, I am not sure that the world that we would pass down would be one that we would like to see passed down to future generations. Therefore, it is vital that we also preserve our legacy.

In order to achieve the goals that we set in this sector, we all need to work together, as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) stated. There is no use calling for grouse shooting to be banned on spurious grounds, any more than there is in calling for deregulation to free the industry to do what it likes. We need a balance between the two approaches; balance is key.

Ultimately, we need action to preserve the three aspects that I have referred to in my speech: the land, the livelihood and the legacy of our rural areas. Two endangered species are affected by this issue—the birds and the rural way of life—and we should do all we can to protect and preserve them both.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): We now move to the speeches from the Front Benches.

6.56 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall.

I thank those who took the time to petition their MP about the subject of driven grouse shooting, whether they are among the 123,000 people calling for a ban on it or the 20,000 people who expressed a different view. I am sure that all of them have done their own research into the subject. Therefore, I take issue with the insults that have been made against those who choose to petition their MP through the internet.

I also thank all hon. Members for their contributions today—

Sir Gerald Howarth: I think the hon. Lady’s remarks referred to me. The only point I was making was that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ribbleton (Mr. Smith) said, if people come to an MP’s surgery and talk to their MP, or if they write in their own terms, one is much more prepared to listen to them than to people who have simply ticked a box and then an email is automatically dispatched, maybe in the middle of the night.

Rachael Maskell: I say to the hon. Gentleman, do not make assumptions about the research that constituents make in order to make their point to their MP. All have an opportunity to petition; it is a formal mechanism that this Parliament recognises as a means of forwarding debate. Therefore, it is the duty of this House to respect that process.

Clearly, this debate is needed. There are areas on which everyone can—

Andrew Bingham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I am going to move on. There are areas on which everyone can agree, such as the need to ensure that raptor protection, hydrological management and the wider management of moorland are sustainable. However, there are clearly areas of disagreement, too.

Labour believes, above all, that more research is needed and that is certainly our biggest call on the Government today. However, we also believe that there are some key principles that need to be considered urgently and some areas where the Government must take action now.

Antoinette Sandbach: Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Rachael Maskell: If I may, I am just going to make my opening remarks.

Taking no action over driven grouse shooting is not an option and tighter conservation measures are imperative. Every action taken has consequences on others, and we have heard references to the importance of balance in today’s debate. Our fragile biodiversity and the wider ecosystem demand that we study the evidence.

We have heard again today that historic upland management has undoubtedly been damaging, whether it is about drainage and gripping, or about the industrialisation that we have seen on the moorlands over many centuries, which has been deeply damaging to our environment. However, there are also questions to be asked about land management today.

We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) about the degradation of her local environment and her local moorland, and about the real need to see conservation creating a more sustainable environment there, so as to protect its unique biodiversity. We talk about moorland as if all moors were the same but they are, of course, all different, with their own characteristics. Yes, we must be obsessed with the conservation of this land.
The big issues that need to be addressed are soil, drainage and hydrology; conservation and biodiversity; wildlife crime; and our wider concern about sustainability.

On soil, drainage and hydration, the Boxing day floods brought into sharp focus for me, as for many MPs, the need to concentrate again on the causes of so much flooding. It is Labour Members who have consistently called for further action on catchment management. I thank my hon. Friends. I was here for the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Halifax (Holly Lynch) for raising their concerns about the impact of land management on flooding.

Mr Charles Walker: As I said in my speech, we saw flooding in December 2015 because it had been the wettest two months for 105 years. In some parts of the country, 30 inches of rain fell in a single month. That is why we had flooding; there is no other reason.

Rachael Maskell: I listened carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s speech. Yes, there were unprecedented levels of rainfall and, yes, we are seeing climate change that is bringing increased rainfall. The Environment Agency’s mapping shows that we should expect to see more heavy downpours. However, importantly, the causation of some of the flooding—not all of it—is how the uplands are managed. I took time over the summer to visit the sources of some of the rivers that feed into my city, which also flooded. I observed the deep peat bogs and both the post-industrial land and the driven grouse moorland, recognising the differences in the land use, and also pulled on the evidence that we have much debated today.

Kerry McCarthy: I also visited my hon. Friend’s constituency during the Boxing day floods. During that period we had, I think, two Opposition day debates, at least two statements and an urgent question, and all the Government Front Benchers acknowledged that upland management was an issue and that we had to look at the role played by tree planting and other forms of upland management when considering flood protection. I am surprised, therefore, that the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) does not acknowledge that.

Rachael Maskell: That is very much what the former Minister said in every single contribution we heard about the need to use upland management to deal with flooding. We continue, therefore, to press the issue, and are very disappointed that in the national resilience plan, the decision about how to address the catchment areas was deferred.

A number of interventions are clearly needed. We have heard about “slow the flow” schemes and hydro-retention schemes, but we also need to consider upland management. We are not looking just at the flow of the water, but at the soil and vegetation, and at how we hold the water in the uplands. The research by the University of Leeds on the effects of moorland burning on the ecohydrology of river basins—the EMBER research, as it has come to be known—is one of the most comprehensive studies out there. It shows that where there is heavy rainfall, there is more water flowing more rapidly downhill, contributing to flooding. The research also states that the burning of heather has an impact on hydrology, peat chemistry and physical properties, water chemistry and river ecology. As we know, the University of York is also carrying out a study, which is even more comprehensive and sustained, and we must see the completion of that evidence base as well.

Simon Hart: The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report into flooding will be published the day after tomorrow. I obviously cannot comment on its conclusions because they are embargoed. Would the hon. Lady at least agree to read that cross-party report in full and consider any future comments on grouse shooting in the context of what she discovers in it?

Rachael Maskell: I will, of course, read the report as soon as it is published because, I, like so many MPs, have been waiting for a long time to see the outcome of that investigation. I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing our attention to the report.

We also know that because of heather burning, water is more acidic and contains a higher concentration of minerals such as manganese, silica, iron, aluminium and dissolved carbon, and that it is left to the water companies to purify it, at the cost, of course, of the consumer. The cost of flooding is huge to the public purse—we have heard about the £2.5 billion that the Government have paid out or will pay out over a 12-month period—and also to the insurance industry and individuals themselves. Driven grouse shooting cannot be held responsible for all of that, but it can be a contributory factor, which is why we say that more research is needed.

Craig Whittaker: I absolutely agree with much of what the hon. Lady has said about the need for a wider catchment plan. I am a bit surprised though to hear that she is disappointed with the Government’s response, when last Friday we saw a wider catchment plan for the Calder valley produced, delivered and on the table. That plan includes upland management, and the hon. Lady’s constituency, which also suffered from the floods in December, is covered by a wider catchment plan that is being put together as we speak.

Rachael Maskell: Indeed. I have been one of the proponents of the need to get on with the wider catchment management of water and flooding, but the national resilience plan talks about a delay beyond this Parliament, which is why it is really important that we press on with the necessary changes. Winter is encroaching upon us and our constituents are clearly concerned.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: I want to move on to the next issue. I have limited time and I have generously allowed interventions so far.

The use of lead shot has been much debated in this place, including last December, in a debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). Lead remains a major pollutant, with 6,000 tonnes being discharged into the environment each year, 2,000 tonnes of which is from game shooting. Research is conclusive as to the environmental detriment caused by lead shot usage, and further concern has been expressed by the Food Standards Agency about the way
in which the lead enters the food chain. Lead shot has been banned in Denmark for 20 years. We need to see progress on that.

I want to put it on the record that Labour recognises the conservation work that is being done on the upper moorland, and the professionalism of gamekeepers in executing that work. Conservation concerns have been expressed by Members from both sides of the House today.

We also need to look at cost. The cost is not just to the landowner, as many Members have indicated; there is a cost that is met from European Union funding, including money from the common agricultural policy, which, as the Secretary of State will want us to acknowledge, is public money in the first place, from people across our communities. The money also comes from non-departmental public bodies, such as Natural England and the national parks, and from the voluntary sector. Money from the public is, therefore, very much invested in the uplands. In other words, if the public are funding upper moors activities, they must have a say in how the money is spent. If the impact they see is detrimental, we can expect them to sign petitions calling for change. They have done that, and Parliament must listen.

Therefore, change we must, to ensure that soil, vegetation and hydrology are greatly improved. That must be a prime interest in land management, and if it means a move away from current business models, that is what must happen. I take issue with many of the contributions today about the all-or-nothing approach: either there is driven grouse moor shooting or we leave the land barren to develop itself. It does not have to be an either/or model. Thousands of volunteers work in conservation across the country, including in the upper moorland, and there are other opportunities for managing the land. We must recognise the volunteers who spend hours of their own time preserving our countryside. It cannot be an all-or-nothing approach, and the choice that has been put forward in the debate does not reflect the reality. I will give way on that point and will then conclude my remarks.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way right at the end. On the all-or-nothing point, does she accept that while there are problems—some more real than others—a ban on driven grouse shooting is not the way forwards in terms of biodiversity?

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Gentleman may have heard me calling for more research to take the whole debate forward. That is important. Because of time, I will move on. We need to be cognisant of tomorrow’s debate on sustainability, and the points that Members have made on climate change are important. We have to understand the urgency of the issue. Conservation must be the prime driver and main consideration of our management of the uplands, as opposed to the pursuits carried out on the land. It is a matter of urgency, and we cannot just focus on the economic issues. The economic issues and the environmental issues are of equal importance. The crisis happening across the globe should focus everyone’s attention as a prime issue.

My question to the Minister is: how systemically is she prepared to look at the issues? Can we allow the burning of heather, which reduces the carbon storage properties of soil, impacts on hydrology, removes some mosses and leaves degraded soil and habitats behind? Is that acceptable? We would say no. Heather burning has also been cited by the Committee on Climate Change due to the depletion of carbon-rich peat soil, so how can we sustain that activity?

We know that some landowners will burn peat under agreement with Natural England—that is how the codes are managed—but we heard in the evidence session that some of those burnings go outside the allowed perimeters. We know that there are wider issues, too. We need to know how effective the codes are at managing the land. If there is further, conclusive evidence that peat burning causes environmental harm, will the Government call for a ban? In this post-referendum era, what further obligations will they place on upland managers to revegetate, to protect species and to hold more water in the uplands? This cannot just be a debate about choices and freedoms, as some Members have argued today. It must be seen as a matter of urgency to rescue our consumerist society from draining more natural resources.

Turning to raptors, it is of great concern that just three pairs of hen harriers were found on the moors in the past year. I am told that there should be 300 pairs—100 times the amount. Some 149 moors have no hen harriers at all. The numbers have fallen from last year, when there were 13 pairs. We are losing the species. It is a crisis. Numbers of peregrine falcons, white-tailed eagles and the awesome golden eagle—I once saw a pair soaring as I was hillwalking in Scotland—are declining, too. We need to ensure that we get on top of the issue of predation by humans.

I want to turn to the peer-reviewed research by Dr Ruth Tingay of the University of Nottingham. She has produced 30 peer-reviewed papers and 24 research papers. She highlighted how there have been 252 incidences of raptor persecution over the past 10 years. She highlights whether they were shot, disappeared, poisoned, caught by illegal pole traps and so on. The law is not effective, and we need to move it forward.

I am sure no one in the Chamber would condone wildlife crime, but positive action is needed for the hen harrier. The hen harrier action plan is not working in delivering an increased population, and that must be of great concern to everyone. What additional activity is the Minister prepared to undertake to ensure that we see the hen harrier population increase and tougher penalties on those who abuse the law? Financial penalties are clearly not enough. It is important to apply restrictive penalties, such as removing the right to manage a grouse moor. We also need to look closely at the Scottish licensing system and the shifting of responsibility around vicarious liability. We have seen two strong prosecutions in Scotland under the scheme. We need to look at whether that would lead to better managed moors as we move forward.

In the main Chamber, we have debated the use of snares and the impact that that has, but we need to look at the wider impact on wildlife. We have not heard about the mountain hare and the impact that culling is having on that species.

Mr Charles Walker: On a point of order, Mr Nuttall. The Labour Front-Bench spokesperson has been very generous in giving way, but she has now been speaking for 19 minutes, leaving less than 15 minutes for the Minister.
Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. I am sure that the shadow Minister is coming towards the very end of her remarks, because she has been posing a lot of questions and she will be keen to hear the answers.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you, Mr Nuttall. I am just coming to my concluding remarks. There are many issues that we would want to discuss if there were more time, but time is limited today. A responsible Government must recognise that land management cannot just be a balance of choices. We have to address the ecological crisis facing our nation. I will watch the Minister closely and listen to her response.

7.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, in this debate, which was chosen by the Petitions Committee and ably opened by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). It was triggered by a petition to ban driven grouse shooting, and the Committee also selected the petition to protect grouse moors and grouse shooting for debate. I thank all 20 right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today, especially those who made full speeches and stayed the course. We have heard speeches with passion, insight and clarity. I particularly commend my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Andrew Bingham), who described the extensive research he undertook for this debate. Members made a number of points during the debate, and I will respond to them during my speech.

The level of interest has been considerable, and we have had contributions from all parts of the United Kingdom. Not everyone who intervened has stayed. I thought we had got away from that habit in the previous Parliament. It used to be the Liberal Democrats who popped in, intervened, left and proclaimed proudly that they had spoken in the debate. They are an endangered species, and not one I am trying to save, but it seems that the Green party is adopting similar habits.

As set out in our manifesto, the Government support shooting for all the benefits it brings to individuals, the environment and the rural economy. We are also clear that wildlife should be properly respected and protected. We expect anyone involved in these enterprises to uphold the law in deed and spirit. According to a report by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants, which I recognise was criticised by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), shooting as a whole is estimated to be worth about £2 billion a year to the economy, supporting more than 70,000 full-time equivalent jobs.

It is also involved in the management of about two thirds of the UK’s rural landscape. The Moorland Association estimates that the grouse shooting industry supports 1,520 full-time jobs.

Much has rightly been made by hon. Members, and by my hon. Friends in particular, of the supporting economy, which must be recognised, particularly in the most remote parts of rural England—too many Members spoke about it to name now, but it will all be on the record. The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless) did not do so, although he seems very happy to have huge taxpayer support for the oil industry currently helping Scottish jobs in a fossil-fuel, carbon-busting economy. However, he is no longer in his place.

On moorland management, I think we can all agree on the importance of conserving the habitats on which grouse shooting takes place. It is undertaken on moors in several parts of the United Kingdom. Moorland management is vital for a biodiverse landscape, as has been extensively described. It can offer important benefits for wildlife and habitat conservation—for example, healthy heather provides good habitat for ground nesting birds and attracts butterflies and bees. The control of predators such as foxes also helps ground nesting birds, and without active management and conservation of the land, the landscape would quickly change and biodiversity would be lost. No one wants to see the landscape degrade, as my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) eloquently illustrated after his visits to the moors on the borders.

Extensive mention has been made of the importance of managed grouse moors to the preservation and increase of numbers of several species of bird, such as the golden plover, the curlew and the merlin, a bird of prey. I support the consensus on the importance of healthy, active peat, which provides good habitat for grouse and other wildlife, as well as numerous benefits to the environment and ecosystem services. Dry, degraded peat helps no one. We are absolutely committed to protecting and restoring these soils and have invested millions in large-scale peatland restoration projects, such as the Dark Peak nature improvement area. The Government will continue to work with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peat condition.

The vast majority of grouse moors are in sites of special scientific interest, with Natural England’s consent required for management actions on these sites which could impact their important wildlife.

Angela Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: With respect to the hon. Lady, I have less time than the shadow Front Bencher took, so I will try to get through the points. If there is any chance I can take an intervention at the end, I will. On moorland management and the evidence of non-compliance on burning, if the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) can share that with me, I will share that with Natural England.

The issue of agri-environment funding has been raised. I expect we will continue to support our environment once we have left the EU and that, in the meantime, payments will be made to support environmentally beneficial land management, including the management of specific wildlife habitats, and works to improve the quality of the environment for wildlife, water quality and carbon capture.

As was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), the uplands have complex land ownership and tenure arrangements, with many areas designated as common land. Many agreements result in them going to grazing tenancies, which are critical to undertaking the beneficial management of the moors. I disagree with the hon. Member for Bristol East, who suggested that grouse shooting has been
subsidised. I want to make it clear that agri-environment payments are not subsidies and they are not paid to support shooting activities.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I am afraid I will not give way to the hon. Lady, who was not here at the start of the debate.

Grouse moors contain a range of habitats that require different management methods. Rotational burning is considered to help to maintain healthy heather on the moors at different heights. Short heather provides food for sheep and red grouse and shelter for some ground-nesting birds. Tall heather provides shelter and nesting for other birds. The tapestry, if not the kaleidoscope, of heather plants at different stages of regeneration is achieved by rotational burning, and was cited as key to the success of the Glenwherry project that was referred to by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan). My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) referred to the successful preservation of black grouse in north Wales.

Burning takes place over winter and early spring when there are no birds nesting and the soil is wet. I understand that the peat itself is not deliberately burned and that there is a strong presumption against rotational burning on sensitive areas such as blanket bog, as noted in the heather and grass burning code, which recommends the cool burns that several hon. Members referred to earlier. Natural England’s consent is required to burn on a site of special scientific interest. I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) on alternatives and a reduction in burning. Heather could be cut as an alternative to burning, but that can be achieved only on suitable topography, and it may leave highly combustible material behind if not removed. He will know that several fires have been accidentally triggered. They have taken much resource to tackle and left damaged habitats that have taken years to recover.

A DEFRA-funded project is currently looking into the costs and effects of cutting as an alternative. I know the benefits of peat restoration for absorbing water, but, to be clear—I will cover this again—we know that upland peat is vital for filtering our drinking water, of which 70% comes from the uplands. We are committed to restoring and protecting that upland peat.

The 2013 Natural England study on the effects of managed burning found no direct evidence specifically relating to the effect of burning on watercourse flow or the risk of downstream flood events. It is the study to which my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) referred. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) talked about cod science; I thought he was in a fishing debate. However, he rightly referred to the sustained rainfall that was the decisive factor in the unprecedented flooding in modern times, and he challenged the selective use of statistics from reports. He gave us some interesting analogies to do with bull elephants. I heard an analogy the other day about the River Wear in the north-east, which suffered flooding last year; something the size of the Royal Albert Hall would have been filled full of water in less than a minute, such was the torrent suffered in the north-east.

Dr Coffey: I am afraid I will not give way to the hon. Lady at the end if I have time.

Dr Coffey: I cannot, but I promise to come to the hon. Lady at the end if I have time.

Upland peat is important for carbon sequestration. That is why the Government are committed to working with moor owners and stakeholders to further improve management practices and peak condition. As has already been mentioned, burning is done for heather management, although cool burns are recommended, as I have already said. I absolutely recognise the impact of climate change, but we should also recognise the importance of biodiversity, without which the world would cease to exist.

Although we have heard much about improvements in the numbers of birds, described in detail by several of my hon. Friends, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), I have heard the concerns of some hon. Members that birds of prey, particularly hen harriers, are deliberately being killed. The Government take the illegal persecution of raptors very seriously. On the missing hen harriers in the last fortnight, the matter has been referred to the police. The local wildlife team has been involved and the national wildlife crime unit is aware. I can assure hon. Members that wildlife crime is a Government priority. We recently confirmed £300,000 of funding per annum for the NWCU for the next four years. Raptor persecution is one of six wildlife crime priorities for the UK. The unit has a dedicated group chaired by a senior police officer, with representatives from Government and NGOs working to deliver progress against this wildlife crime priority. It is building an intelligence picture and is due to advise on further action.

We recognise that the legal control of predators is a legitimate wildlife management practice in some circumstances. That is why Natural England will license the killing of certain birds of prey, although it would not consider licensing any activity that would adversely affect the conservation status of a species. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury referred to the Moorland Association study in Berwyn. The issue of hen harriers in Wales is interesting. When grouse shooting stopped, it might have been expected that the populations would burgeon and start to spread, but that has not happened. The populations have stabilised and they have not spread from the area that they occupied.

Dr Coffey: I am afraid I will not give way to the hon. Member for South Antrim (Danny Kinahan). My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley talked about cod science; I will look into them. My officials assure me that stakeholders are carrying out valuable work to look at ways of restoring peat, including through the “bogathon” events. We are committed to working with moor owners and stakeholders through the blanket bog restoration strategy.
On the decline in the hen harrier population in England, the Government are committed to securing the future of this bird. That is why we took the lead in developing a hen harrier action plan, which was launched earlier this year. The plan sets out six complementary actions designed to increase hen harrier numbers in England, alongside the continuation of driven grouse shooting and the environmental, social and economic benefits that it brings. The plan is still at an early stage. Many factors can affect the successful nesting of hen harriers—food supply, weather conditions, predation and persecution—but we absolutely believe that the plan remains the best way to safeguard the hen harrier in England.

The Government have no plans to introduce licensing. As has been said, considerable regulation is already in place. Several Members referred to vicarious liability. I am aware that this principle was introduced in Scotland, but there is little evidence to suggest it has had an impact on the conservation of birds of prey. However, we will continue to monitor the situation and will consider whether the approach is necessary and proportionate to assist in tackling wildlife crime here.

Since the introduction of the offence, there have been two prosecutions, but the RSPB’s report suggests that there continues to be persecution incidents. In 2013 and 2014 a total of 18 poisoning incidents were recorded in Scotland. One particular incident involved the poisoning of 12 red kites and four buzzards, which I am sure we all deplore.

The professionalism of keepers has been extensively referred to; I wish to add my contribution to that. I thank hon. Members for debating the petitions today. I am sorry I have not been able to take any interventions in the short time I have had. However, it has been useful to hear the views of Members from across the United Kingdom regarding moorland management for driven grouse shooting. This is not a binary debate. The Government want to see a vibrant working countryside that is enhanced by a biodiverse environment. The uplands are a treasured asset prized by people for their tranquillity, quiet enjoyment, inspirational nature and recreation. They are also a vital source for goods and services, particularly food and drinking water, and make a major contribution to overall livestock production in the UK.

Central to the provision of services and assets that the uplands provide is the active management of the land by farmers, landowners and land managers. Successful upland policy is dependent on upland communities, particularly farmers and land managers, whose rural businesses are fundamental to the rural economy and whose role in managing the land in the long term will ultimately determine the value of the environmental outcomes.

I will finish by stating that the Government have no intention of banning driven grouse shooting, but we have every intention of bringing to justice those who break the law. We all agree that conserving the upland moorlands is in everyone’s best interests. We will help to ensure that a constructive dialogue continues so that grouse shooting is protected and these valuable moorlands thrive.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Mr Double, you have about 30 seconds to wind up the debate.

7.29 pm

Steve Double: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who contributed to the debate. It is good to see a lively debate with strongly held views. Everyone spoke up on behalf of our rural communities, our environment and the diversity of our wildlife, so it has been a very good debate.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petitions 125003 and 164851 relating to driven grouse shooting.

7.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 1 November 2016

[Mr Gary Streeter in the Chair]

Apprenticeships Funding

9.30 am

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered apprenticeships funding.

I am pleased to bring this important debate to the House and I thank the 55 Members from six parties who helped to secure it. I speak, of course, as a former Universities and Skills Minister, and I am well aware of how important apprenticeships are across the country. There is a further education college in every constituency, so cuts in funding will directly affect thousands of young people all over the UK. It is therefore disappointing that the Government published initial details of those cuts in August without any parliamentary debate or scrutiny.

I do not want to be churlish, so I thank the Minister for the letter that I received from him at 26 minutes past 6 last night. I am grateful for that. That was 56 days after I first wrote to him about those cuts, 45 days after the Prime Minister said during Prime Minister’s questions that she does not recognise the cuts, 21 days after the Minister batted away questions on the cuts during Education questions, and a timely 15 hours before I opened this debate. Unfortunately, the letter says nothing that I did not already know.

It is important to acknowledge that the Government have listened to concerns raised by the further education sector and opposition from Labour Members of Parliament in particular. The written statement that the Government made last Tuesday goes some way to mitigating the worst effects of the cuts, particularly for 16 to 18-year-olds and disadvantaged areas, but that U-turn is a very different line from the one taken by the Department on 9 September in its response to my letter to the Minister, when it made no mention of a consultation or change of heart and stated that the cuts of up to 50% “will help to ensure every young person, regardless of background or ability, has the chance to take their first step into work”.

As is always the case with funding announcements, the devil is in the detail. Despite the Government’s U-turn, areas such as my constituency of Tottenham will face huge cuts. Tottenham is rapidly regenerating, and with the Government apparently committed to building the homes needed to tackle the housing crisis, there should be opportunities for my young constituents to get skilled jobs in the construction sector, yet the Government are cutting funding for 16 to 18-year-old construction apprentices in Tottenham by a staggering 37%. According to the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, funding will be cut by 28% for 16 to 18-year-olds in Tottenham in customer service, 38% for those wanting to go into business administration, 43% for engineering apprentices, and 45% for hairdressing apprentices.

I ask the Minister why. Why does he think that my constituents, who live in one of the country’s most deprived constituencies, should not be able to participate in the construction that is happening across the capital? Why should they not be afforded the opportunity to become engineers? Why do his Government prioritise the academic stream with their new scheme to expand grammar schools while cutting funding for those with vocational backgrounds who want to be construction or engineering apprentices? Is it a simple question: why?

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. The Institute of the Motor Industry described the original cuts as a “car crash”. I suppose a U-turn is not a bad idea when faced with a car crash, but that organisation is still warning that a lot of employers in the motor industry simply will not be able to cope with the existing shortfall in funding and the complexity of the existing frameworks. The Minister really needs to do more work on that if he is to answer the criticisms that have been levelled by both employers and potential apprentices.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. Let me give an early reminder that interventions should be brief.

Mr Lammy: Absolutely. Nissan might have decided to stay, but it may look again at the decision if apprentices do not come forward and participate in the industry. That is very important.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I praise my right hon. Friend for his outstanding leadership on this vital issue. Apprenticeships transform lives. Warren Shepherd, an apprentice in Erdington, moved into the house of his dreams as a consequence of gaining an apprenticeship and becoming a time-served engineer in the Jaguar factory. Erdington is rich in talent, but it is one of the poorest constituencies in the country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the ladder of opportunity is kicked away for people like Warren, the Government can talk until the cows come home about social mobility and building a strong economy in the midlands, but they will not be willing the means to deliver that?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I say to the Government, “Put your money where your mouth is for the great young people of cities such as Birmingham.” That is what this debate is about.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has been pursuing this subject for a long time. Our hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) raised a real question about the Government’s boasts and commitments to west midlands manufacturing. They have made great play of manufacturing, but in Coventry, for example, further education funding has been cut by 24%. That raises serious questions.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Services now account for 80% of this country’s economy. If we are to build manufacturing and have young people who are able to construct wonderful buildings such as Coventry cathedral, which was levelled during the war, we need apprentices.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): In my constituency, apprenticeships are booming. At the new Bridgwater and Taunton College, which is soon to
become a university, the first nuclear apprenticeships have started to fuel training of young people in that booming new industry. For Taunton Deane, everything that the Government are doing is positive—particularly the levy that will come in next year and fuel many more apprenticeships.

Mr Lammy: I encourage the hon. Lady to get into the detail, because that may not be the picture after the cuts that are coming. She may also have seen that the axe is, sadly, falling heavily on disadvantaged areas. I do not know whether there are pockets of deprivation in her constituency, but that is an underlying theme in this debate.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lammy: I will not. I ought to make some progress, because I am conscious that many Members wish to speak.

The national picture is also worrying. Analysis by FE Week of the new funding rates found that children’s care, learning and development apprenticeships now face cuts of between 27% and 42%, compared with between 36% and 56% in August. Hospitality and catering funding will now be cut by between 34% and 45%, compared with between 41% and 60% in August. As the principal of the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London told me, those cuts will only make it harder to get young people into apprenticeships.

Even after the Government’s U-turn, nine out of the 10 most popular apprenticeships still face cuts ranging from 14% to 51%. The best case scenario is average cuts of 27%; the worst case scenario is average cuts of 43%. The Department for Education was presented with that analysis last Thursday morning, less than 48 hours after it published details of the cuts on the gov.uk website, yet no response has been forthcoming. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about the detail of the range of those cuts—after all, he has had plenty of time to prepare.

Helen Whately: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Lammy: I will not at this stage.

I now turn to the disadvantage uplift—the additional funding to support disadvantaged areas that I referred to earlier. That was quietly scrapped completely in the proposals published in August. Last week’s statement promised a “simplified version of the current system of support for people from disadvantaged areas”, yet the Minister has told FE Week that that is guaranteed only for one year, while the Department undertakes a review to work out how best to support disadvantaged young people to undertake apprenticeships. One year? Why does it take so long to work out what needs to be done for disadvantaged young people? It is clear: give them an opportunity! It is quite straightforward, and that requires resources.

What does this mean? Will Parliament be told what is going on or will Members of Parliament have to find out through the media? It sounds to me like more cuts will come in a year’s time. Will the Minister confirm today what will happen to support for disadvantaged areas in 12 months’ time? Will the support be maintained or cut? If it is to be cut, may I assure him that I will be back here, along with many other Members of Parliament, to oppose that once again?

On Tuesday, the Secretary of State told Parliament: “Apprenticeships transform lives and are vital in making this a country that works for everyone.”

Apparently, the changes made since August “will ensure apprenticeships are high quality…and provide opportunities for millions more people.”—[Official Report, 25 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 6WS.]

If the Government are serious about social mobility, will the Minister explain today why the Government are pushing ahead with cuts of anything between 27% and 45% for nine of the 10 most popular apprenticeships? Does he have a response for Paul Warner of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, who warned: “It is completely self-defeating to cut funding, because that is just preventing disadvantaged young people from getting on”?

The apprenticeship levy will raise £3 billion from large employers and will replace all current Treasury funding of apprenticeships. If the Government are making a saving by passing the cost of funding apprenticeships to the private sector through the levy, why cannot the Treasury give some of that money back to reverse the funding rate cuts and provide support for disadvantaged areas? I hope the Minister will be able to explain.

It is also important to look at the context in which the cuts are happening. The Brexit vote was underpinned by people living in our post-industrial towns in the north and the Midlands and in our seaside towns, who are feeling left behind and left out of economic growth. Youth unemployment stands at 13.7%, with 624,000 people aged between 16 and 24 unemployed; more than 100,000 of them have been unemployed for at least a year. The unemployment rate for 16 and 17-year-olds is a staggering 27.7%. It is interesting to look at other countries. Relative to population size, we are doing worse than Slovakia, worse than Hungary, worse than Ireland, Portugal, the United States, Canada, Australia, Estonia and New Zealand. We are doing four times worse than Germany, three times worse than the Czech Republic and twice as badly as Japan, Denmark and Sweden in terms of the proportion of our young people who are not in education, employment or training.

Last year, the Treasury found that “the UK’s skills weaknesses...are of such long standing, and such intractability, that only the most radical action can address them.”

I ask the Minister: is this the radical action that his Treasury was talking about?

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): In fact, the national picture is that the youth unemployment statistics are down to 13.7%, which is down on last year, down from the height, and close to the lowest they have ever been, which was 11.1%.

Mr Lammy: Unless the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that the figures I just quoted are wrong, we should not be happy with the picture of youth unemployment in our country. Many Members in the Chamber are well aware of the young people walking our streets literally because there is not enough to do. I might just remind...
him that I have seen two riots in a generation, so I know something about idle hands making very dangerous work indeed. We need to put these young people to work. We need apprenticeships for them. We need more than rhetoric from the Government, and we certainly do not need cuts in this part of the economy.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has warned that “we are in the grip of our worst construction skills crisis in almost 20 years.”

That skills crisis will hold back big infrastructure and house building projects. Post-16 education was cut by 14% between 2010 and 2015 and last year the Public Accounts Committee warned of a “financial meltdown” in further education.

Further education is just about on its knees. Most of the Members in this House grew up in a period when they could go into an FE college that was open well into the evening, not just for young people but for adults—adults could also get into FE and skill up. I ask hon. Members to find me an FE college open past 8 o’clock in the evening where an adult can skill up and I will give them a beer. It is not happening! We should not have a debate in Britain about grammar schools; we should be having a debate about night schools. Bring back night schools! Instead, we see cuts in funding for young people and no mention of the importance of adult education in an economy that will be more reliant on talent on its own shores in the coming years.

Helen Whately: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that vocational education is incredibly important for young people and the economy, but will he bring a little more balance into his argument and recognise that since 2010-11 vocational education has improved? The UK has made progress in international rankings such as PwC’s recently published young workers index and in 2020 we will spend double what was spent on apprenticeships in 2010.

Mr Lammy: I would rather not rely on PwC reports, if the hon. Lady will forgive me. I would rather rely on what I see happening in the country. We have a lot more to do. I gently remind the hon. Lady, who is a new Member, that having been Minister for Skills in the previous Labour Government I am well aware of how Labour lifted apprenticeships, put all the effort in and grew them to a figure by the time we left office. Now, unsurprisingly, this Government are about to dismantle them.

The National Audit Office found that the Department for Education must do more to ensure that all apprenticeships meet basic quality requirements and that the Department had not even set out how apprenticeships funding cuts are snuck out of the back door on a Friday afternoon in the middle of the summer recess in the hope that no one will see them. In a written statement placed before Parliament last Thursday, the Secretary of State committed the Government to a “fundamental mission of social reform to deliver our vision of an education system that works for everyone” as part of delivering on “the Government’s vision for an economy that works for all.”—[Official Report, 27 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 16-17WS.]

I therefore ask the Minister a simple question: can he explain today how cuts in apprenticeships funding of 30%, 40% or even 50% fit into that mission to deliver an education system and an economy that works for all and not just for the privileged few?

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Colleagues, Front-Bench speeches will begin at 10.30 am, which gives us 40 minutes for the eight people who have caught my eye, so there are five minutes per speaker.

9.49 am

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter, and also a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), whose first-hand experience and wealth of knowledge were apparent. He delivered his speech with passion—good luck to the shadow Minister following that. My hon. Friends and I can probably be grateful that the right hon. Gentleman is not on the Front Bench; it was an impressive performance.

For me, the importance of apprenticeships is summed up in the fact that 90% of those who complete one will go on either to work or to further training. That compares fantastically with the figures of 80%, which is the percentage of the working age population in work, and 48%, which is the percentage of people with a disability who are employed—up 4% but still considerably less than 90%. I will focus on people with learning disabilities, who in this country have a 6% chance of having a meaningful, sustainable career.

I know that the Minister is incredibly passionate about this subject. When I was the Minister for Disabled People, he was lobbying me to do something about it. My view was transformed after a tricky television interview in which I was told that Governments of all political persuasions have tried, tweaked and made changes, and made almost no difference, with the figure bobbing between 5% and 6%. I went on a visit to Foxes Hotel in Bridgwater—a working hotel, which took on young
adults with learning disabilities who were taught independent living combined with practical working skills in the hotel and restaurant. That was done in conjunction with local restaurants, hotels and care homes. Of the young adults who completed the three-year course, 80% ended up with one of those employers, and half of them—about 46.6%—were paid, in contrast to that figure of 6%.

I was so impressed that I asked representatives to meet me at Westminster, and I asked them, “Why can’t we just have one of those in every town?” It would not necessarily be a hotel; the key is to identify the skills relevant to each town. In Bridgwater, tourism, care homes and restaurants are where the jobs are; in other towns it could be manufacturing or engineering. Our constituencies each have their own skills gaps. The reply I received was that the frustration lay in the work placement training. There was sufficient funding to take on almost as many students as they could fit into the hotel for the first two years, but the one year in a work placement was the bit that cost the money. I said, “But surely that is an apprenticeship?” They patiently train someone who will typically take a little longer to get the skills, but the advantage for employers is that, with that support and patience, they get someone who will probably continue in their role for the next 25 years—and will probably be the happiest person in the workforce. It is a win-win situation, but there was a problem, as I have explained.

I met the Skills Minister and we formed a taskforce chaired by the present Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). Knowing that a Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) explained. It probably be the happiest person in the workforce. It is a silly age at which to start apprenticeships. We send out a business rate mail-out every year. Please will he lobby them about university technical colleges? I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important debate.

I am proud to be one of the few MPs currently in the House who completed an indentured apprenticeship. I remember being offered a place as an apprentice bricklayer and an indentured apprenticeship. I remember being offered a place as an apprentice bricklayer as a teenager and nearly dancing with joy. Back then, an apprenticeship was very much something to aspire to. It was a path that people chose because they, and especially their parents, understood the brand. In many families, young people were told, “If you get an apprenticeship, you’ll always have a trade to fall back on.” However, successive Tory Governments devalued their reputation. It was the last Labour Government who breathed new life into apprenticeships, with capital support for new buildings and substantial increases to vocational funding models. The Government claim that they want to create 3 million apprenticeships by 2020. That is a laudable aim, but in this House I have repeatedly said that rather than having arbitrary targets on numbers, we need to assure quality. I do not want the House to get me wrong; if all the projected 3 million apprenticeships are at level 3 with a decent wage rate, I am in.

Faced with increased university tuition fee debt, young people are now choosing vocational routes into the workplace instead of academia, but the Tories have overseen one of the worst skills shortages in living memory. Research from the Liverpool city region apprenticeship hub suggests that the number of apprenticeships starts in Merseyside and Halton has fallen by almost 25% over the past five years. The Minister will know that construction sector output is vital to his Government’s macroeconomic policy; but the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians has warned that urgent action is needed to tackle the growing skills shortage, and the Construction Industry Training Board has forecast that the industry requires nearly 50,000 new entrants a year up to 2020. That far exceeds the number of construction apprentices currently undergoing training, which is roughly half the figure given.

Amanda Solloway (Derby North) (Con): As a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, I realise how important apprenticeships are. About three weeks ago in Derby we opened the National Construction Academy, which offers valuable, meaningful apprenticeships for that vital industry. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the plans to extend that around the country are a good thing, and to be commended?

Steve Rotheram: I said earlier that it is a question of whether the apprenticeships are proper level 3 ones—high skill, high quality, and in high-demand areas. I would of course welcome any initiative to increase people’s opportunity to get a proper job at the end of an
apprenticeship programme. However, the Minister is presiding over an exacerbation of the problem and not tackling the fundamental issue.

In the Liverpool city region, the number of national vocational qualification level 3 apprenticeships starts last year was a fraction of the total needed simply to backfill the numbers retiring or leaving the industry. That simply cannot be allowed to continue. The Tories have a track record of failing young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. They scrapped the education maintenance allowance, trebled tuition fees and took away maintenance grants for university students and replaced them with loans, saddling the poorest with ever more debt. That tells us all we need to know about Tory ideology; they want the best only for the privileged few, not for the many.

Our devolution deal, with an area-based review for our city region, at least provides us with the opportunity to shape training better, on the basis of local need—if the Government grasp the nettle. At this point I should declare an interest. Devolving the skills agenda further would allow the incoming metro mayor to implement a skills strategy that would train the next generation of tradesmen and women, equipping them for the high-skill, high-paid, high-aspiration jobs that we need to build and sustain our future economic growth. However, central Government have not devolved apprenticeship funding and delivery and they have full control over the new apprenticeship levy that employers are obliged to pay if their wage bill tops £3 million a year. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss how the metro mayor of the Liverpool city region will be able, as it states on page 8 of the devolution deal, to “collaborate to maximise the opportunities presented by the introduction of the apprenticeship reforms (including the levy) and work together on promoting the benefits of apprenticeships to employers”?

What exactly does he believe that collaboration between the Government and the metro mayor will entail? How does he envisage us maximising those opportunities? Does he agree that it is imperative that, following the upcoming spending review and apprenticeship reforms, metro mayors have local control over and are directly responsible for apprenticeship funding and influence over the employer levy? If not, will he explain how he believes it is possible for a metro mayor to achieve improvements and address skills shortages locally without those powers? Apprenticeships must be at the heart of that strategy.

If we are to do that, we must also provide our young people with the proper advice and guidance to make informed decisions. It was an act of civic vandalism by the Government to dismantle the Connexions service. It is built into the course. Businesses often raise the same concerns about people’s preparation for the world of work. Apprenticeships are key to solving that problem, because the potential employee not only will have the practical skills but will have been trained with a specific job role in mind, and will therefore be job- or industry-ready.

It is really important that apprentices go into an improving and increasingly successful economy. The continuing economic recovery in Britain over the past six years is a fantastic achievement by the coalition Government and the present Government, and means that anyone doing an apprenticeship or any other course will have a job to go into afterwards.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): Is it not also true that there is a significant return for the taxpayer—especially when compared with universities, where the return is much less—of £26 to £28 for every £1 that the Government put into apprenticeships? Promoting apprenticeships is a good thing for the taxpayer.

Chris Green: I agree entirely. Apprenticeships are a fantastic investment in the economy but also a great investment in the individual.

There is still a problem with the perception of apprenticeships. I sympathise with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) in that regard. We need quality apprenticeships. It seems that companies often find resistance within the school system when trying to recruit people for apprenticeships. That could be to some extent due to the recognition of apprenticeships—their reputation has become tarnished over a period of time—or to the fact that schools need to achieve academic targets to be recognised as successful, rather than targets on the number of people going into an apprenticeship.

Training providers and employers in my constituency, such as Alliance Learning in in Horwich and MBDA in Lostock, are working to change those negative perceptions with the delivery of superb apprenticeship programmes. MBDA delivers fantastic apprenticeships, but people are often unaware of the level to which they can be taken. For example, someone can be paid to study and gain a full bachelor’s or master’s degree in subjects such as advanced systems engineering.

I am delighted that the Government are continuing to support young people in moving into work by allocating £1 billion to the youth contract and ensuring that apprenticeships for under-25s incur no national insurance costs for employers.
Karlin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said. Does he agree with my suggestion in the Public Accounts Committee that a UCAS-style system for young people would help them to navigate their way through the system? It could also help employers to receive young people, rather than young people having to send hundreds of applications themselves.

Chris Green: I am sympathetic to that idea. If someone goes down the academic route, they have the path laid out and guidance. Apprenticeships do not have that, and perhaps it would help if we had that system in place, but there is a huge range of different kinds of companies and organisations providing apprenticeships, so I can see there being significant problems with that that are perhaps not there with the more academic route.

Since 2010, my constituency of Bolton West has seen an increase of more than 4,000 apprenticeships. Hon. Members will be pleased to know that I have an apprentice in my office in Westhoughton. However, employers have raised concerns with me about the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017. The additional tax is being levied for the best of reasons, but it may disrupt existing training programmes as employers that currently provide excellent training will have to reconfigure what they do in order to recoup some or all of the levy.

We must also be cautious not to force companies to rebadge existing training programmes to hit the Government’s target of 3 million apprenticeships in this Parliament. What assurances will the Minister give to companies with existing training programmes that are anxious about the introduction of the levy, and that feel as though they have to contrive their courses in such a way as to recoup some of the money they will be losing?

I want apprenticeships to become an increasingly normal route for ambitious young people, as well as for employers that are dedicated to growing their own talent and increasing the skills base of the nation.

10.6 am

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important debate.

Apprenticeships are an important part of the labour market and should always be about employment and employability. Many young people are offered a precious route into the workplace that would be barred without the support offered by employers and the Skills Funding Agency in England and Skills Development Scotland. However, that route into employment must take into consideration the life experiences of the young person entering the workplace. Many of the young people are coming from supportive backgrounds, with parents who can help them into employment by doing simple tasks; any parent of a teenager will know that the toughest task in the day is getting them out of bed. If there is not a supportive parent there to do that, or to wash their clothes or make sure that there is food in the fridge, those barriers become much greater.

Years ago, I taught a young boy called Sean. His mother was not on the scene and his father had addiction issues, so Sean, as well as getting himself to school in the morning, took his five-year-old sister to school, and as a result was often late. Sean needed an understanding employer to enable him to move successfully into the world of work. For the first couple of years, he was much more time-intensive than other new starts, but through the perseverance and tenacity of that employer he is now one of their most valued and loyal members of staff.

It is well understood that employers would be unable to invest so heavily in intensive training without Government support, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Would the employer have taken on the extra risks associated with young Sean if that support were cut?

I also have particular concerns that there is not a strategic view of the skills being developed through the apprenticeship programme. According to a recent National Audit Office report, the Department for Education has not set out how it will use the increase in apprenticeship numbers to deliver improvements in productivity, or how employers will be supported to deliver the apprenticeships that offer the most value to the economy. We have a situation where an unscrupulous employer can take on an apprentice in an already saturated area of the labour market, so that when the young person moves on, there is no real prospect of employment. Meanwhile, areas such as science, technology, engineering, maths and digital continue to struggle with shortages. This levy does not seem to be taking that into account or delivering on it.

BAE Systems is a large employer in my constituency and it is committed to its apprenticeship programme. At the moment, it has 2,036 apprentices in full-time training, and 67 started in September this year. BAE is also using over-training as part of its strategic plan, so if it perceives it will need to fill 30 positions, it trains up 40 young people to ensure that the skills shortage in supply lines can be met. It is disappointing that the UK Government have been unable to have the same strategic foresight as many responsible employers.

The concerns raised by many Scottish employers are different from those discussed this morning. Although apprenticeship policy is devolved, the levy is UK-wide. Many employers in Scotland will be paying into the levy pot, but it is not yet clear whether any revenue generated will find its way back to Scotland. Essentially, this employment tax has been introduced across the UK to deliver on the UK Government’s ambitions in England. The levy undermines the Scottish approach to modern apprenticeships, which, unlike what we are hearing about this morning, is not just about vocational jobs or vocational training; it is also about degree-level apprenticeships. Employers throughout the UK need Government support to train apprentices, but employers in Scotland need assurances that the levy paid in Scotland will come back to Scotland, to support our apprentices.

10.11 am

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for securing this debate. When we consider the skills gap, is it not true that every vocation going, a debate on apprenticeships and on ensuring people have the skills they need is timely indeed.
With your permission, Mr Streeter, I would like to briefly talk about my own experience. I left school at 15 and served a traditional apprenticeship as a Cornish mason in the construction industry under a Conservative Government. That skill has enabled me to feed my family and build my home, and it has supported me during a very long journey to become an MP. The apprenticeship also enabled me to stay in west Cornwall, where I grew up. That can be a significant advantage of serving an apprenticeship.

During the previous Parliament, I had a small construction business and took on an apprentice site carpenter. While I enabled him to get a trade, I also saw how the modern apprenticeship programme works in practice. More recently, I have taken on an apprentice in my constituency office and, even in those few years, I have noticed an improvement in the advice and support available to employers.

As Members can tell, I am a big fan of the apprenticeship programme. It is an important part of our young people’s journey to skilled employment. In spring this year, I hosted an event with the Cornwall Apprenticeship Agency. Local employers could come along to my constituency office and quiz a representative of the agency to find out about the pros and cons of offering that form of on-the-job training. I was very pleased to hear the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson). During his time as Minister for Disabled People, he encouraged me a great deal to look at how we can support people with learning disabilities, and I ran one of his reverse job fairs just two weeks ago, so I thank him for that.

In a rural part of the country such as west Cornwall, a modern apprenticeship really is an important part of a local young person’s career path. For so long, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly have suffered because our young people have found they must leave the county to find the skills and jobs they need. That has left us in a situation where we have a chronic shortage in many sectors, especially construction, farming and engineering. Quite often, these potentially well-paid jobs have disappeared because we have not had the people to fill the vacancies.

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is making a passionate case. I come from Somerset, which is not unlike Cornwall in terms of its skills shortages and gaps. We are below national productivity levels. It is important that businesses design these apprenticeships, and that is what the Government’s new scheme is all about. We do not want bland apprenticeships in any skill; we want them tailored to business, which is what my local businesses are all coming to me and saying. I, too, am going to run a course, because people want the knowledge to go forward.

Derek Thomas: That is a fantastic point. When I stood in the election and finally won, I met and worked with local businesses, and they kept telling me that they need courses provided by the college to provide the workers they need and the training their young people need. It is important that businesses lead the way in ensuring that they have the skills they need to move forward.

We have massive vacancies in Cornwall, and clearly we cannot continue like this. The modern apprenticeship programme, if communicated properly and successfully delivered, gives young people the opportunity to train locally, work locally, live locally—in my part of the world, it is important that we look after our local retailers—and go on to raise a family locally. Rather than just welcome the Government’s ambitious target regarding the number of apprenticeships, it is essential that we meet it, simply because we do not have the people to do the jobs whom we need at the moment.

I heard the points that the right hon. Member for Tottenham made about funding. However, the great challenge we face is to engage more small businesses to take on apprentices. It makes sense that the Government are focusing on and prioritising funding, meaning that 90% of all funding for small businesses will be met by the Government. It makes sense that small businesses do not pay anything towards training people under 18 years of age. The real challenge is not so much the amount of money but how it is spent, as well as improving links between our schools and employers, so that young people and their families are aware of the opportunities available to them in the areas where they live. That would have a significant impact on the skills gap in west Cornwall and across the country. I welcome this debate, but I argue that we should concentrate on how we equip and enable young people to do apprenticeships, rather than fall out about the money available.

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I call the one and only Jim Shannon.

10.16 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Streeter. May I first thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for presenting an excellent case? We are all here because we feel passionately about this issue. I have spoken about apprenticeships many times in this House—unsurprisingly, Mr Streeter—and when I was a Member of the Legislative Assembly in a previous life. There is a reason for that: apprenticeships are a vital part of our country’s future. It is essential that we do not leave ourselves with skills gaps and that we have knowledge, ability and opportunities at every age group and level.

I want to give a Northern Ireland perspective to the apprenticeships scheme and speak about something that is close to my heart—the Prince’s Trust. I often have pointed to the great apprenticeship schemes at Bombardier and other major employers throughout Northern Ireland. I welcome the fact that the importance of this training has been recognised in Northern Ireland. In my constituency, there is an opportunity for everyone in pharmaceuticals, food processing, light engineering and agri-food, which is a growth industry.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this debate. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need an investment of time and effort by Government and those in the hospitality industry to bring forward apprenticeships in catering to underpin that industry?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that important comment. The tourism sector can, should and must grow. One way of doing that is through the apprenticeship scheme; she is absolutely right. I fully support that, as I am sure all of us here would.
Businesses and companies must step up to the bar and be prepared to take people on. That is why when the scheme was announced I openly welcomed the initiative to create provision for 3 million places—how tremendous to have help in ensuring that work schemes are available to young men and women alike. However, I was not so excited when I realised what exactly was happening with the scheme. That is why I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham on bringing this issue to the Chamber for consideration. What seemed to promise more help in fact seems to have the opposite effect, with the number of apprenticeships for perhaps the most vulnerable group—16 to 18-year-olds—being cut. I know that the changes impact all ages of apprentices, but time demands that I focus on only one strand, and that is young people.

I will never forget reading the dire statistics from research by the Prince’s Trust two years ago, which laid bare a direct link between joblessness and suicidal thoughts, as well as self-harming, alcohol and drug abuse. The figures do not make good reading but they are the reality for many people.

About one in three—35%—of youngsters in Northern Ireland experienced mental health issues, compared with the UK national average of 19%, which is almost one in five. The research also revealed that long-term unemployed 16 to 25-year-olds are twice as likely as their peers to have been prescribed anti-depressants and to believe they have nothing to live for. Over one in three—34%—young people said that they always, or often feel down or depressed, compared with a national average of 32%, with the long-term unemployed significantly more likely to feel that way. Over one in four—29%—said that they feel like an outcast, compared with 24% nationally, and to believe that their peers have been prescribed anti-depressants and to talk about having nothing to live for. Over one in five—21%—admitted that they feel like a waste of space, against the national average of 17%, with the long-term unemployed more than twice as likely to feel that way.

Those stats tell the story of young people and how they feel about their lives in Northern Ireland. They show why Northern Ireland Members are here today and why we are pleased to be able to take part in the debate.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): A point was made earlier about some schools perhaps looking at the content of skills and at keeping the level up, but surely careers officers in schools play a pivotal role in helping to advise young people to go down the vocational route.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend always brings a wealth of knowledge to these debates and I thank him for his intervention. Careers officers and school staff have an important role to play. The correlation with the figures is clear, which is why, with others, I have fought and pressed for more apprenticeships schemes and why, with great respect to the Minister, I was so disheartened to see the details of their new scheme. I was pleased to hear of the so-called U-turn, but the Government must rectify the shortfall and do what they said they would do: create more apprenticeships and more training opportunities.

We will all have read the figures provided by Government and the figures, which are disputed in articles such as those by FE Week, that instruct that the introduction of two measures to arrest the decline—paying an extra 20% on the funding band limit for 16 to 18-year-olds, and promising £60 million of “additional support in areas of disadvantage”—has not and will not stop or address the shortfall. Indeed it is alleged that most frameworks will still feel cuts of 20% or more.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), who has just left the Chamber, has done exceptionally good work in his constituency for the apprenticeship schemes in Bombardier. I am conscious of the time, Mr Streeter, so I will hurry along. It was announced that the cuts to construction skills at level 2 would range between 27% and 50%. Later, it was announced that they would range between 14% and 37%, which could still devastate the sector. In sectors such as hairdressing—I do not have worry about that—and engineering, FE Week analysis revealed that at levels 2 and 3 there could still be maximum cuts of some 50%.

I stand firmly with the right hon. Member for Tottenham and thank the Government for the changes, but they are not enough. We already have a society in which too many young people feel worthless and they need the help and attention that these schemes provide. Let us do what we can for young people. They are crying out for help, support and particularly hope. Let us give them that hope today in this debate and from the Minister.
earlier, at 14.7%. That is still too high and it is higher than its lowest level: 11.6%. However, its highest ever rate was 22.5%.

Next year, the all-party group will look at the pathways from education to employment, and apprenticeships will feature highly on the agenda. The Minister has been invited, or will be invited, to meet the group—he may not know it yet. We warmly look forward to him coming to the group, because I know his commitment in this area.

One point has not been made in the debate, or at least if it has, I have missed it. The apprenticeship levy has been much discussed, but funding must be sustainable. However, I know that smaller businesses will welcome the Government’s model because 98% of businesses will not have to pay the levy. They will pay 10% of the training costs and the Government will pay the balance—90%—so the majority of businesses in my constituency will welcome the funding arrangement and the fact that they have to contribute only a relatively small amount.

Time may not permit, but I am going to attempt to mention two businesses in my constituency and give examples of where they are going in relation to apprenticeships. First, PME Group is a marine engineering group. You will be interested, Mr Streeter, to know that it recently won the 2016 south-west national apprenticeships award in the small employer of the year category. I invite him the Minister to consider the model because almost 50% of its staff have completed or are in the process of completing an apprenticeship. Other businesses may also care to look at that model.

Secondly, TestLink, which is based in Upton in my constituency, repairs and services ATMs—the cashpoints we all rely on when we run out of money. It was recently named one of the 20 mid-market companies of tomorrow. A large number of its staff are on apprenticeships. Not all of them are young or would be in the age group covered by my all-party group for youth employment, but they are benefiting from an apprenticeship and the skills and qualifications that come from it.

Time also permits me to mention the Dorset young chamber programme, which was launched last month. I am part of the steering group that, I hope, will set it on the right course. It provides a link between schools and businesses in the area. So far, three schools have been linked up with local businesses. It is a great initiative under the chief executive, Ian Girling, and I am delighted to be part of it.

I want to pick up a point made by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) in relation to the quality of apprenticeships. Both Members are right, but I strike a note of caution: quality does not necessarily mean a higher level. I believe we can have a quality apprenticeship even at level 2 and that those apprenticeships are perfectly valid and necessary, and that there is still a market for them. I agree that all apprenticeships must be of a high quality, but that does not necessarily mean of a high level.

10.28 am

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve again under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for this very important debate. If my voice gives out in the middle of my speech, it is a sign of how important the subject is. I declare an interest as a former further education lecturer who helped to train many apprentices.

In his speech, the right hon. Gentleman described passionately the effect of cuts in his constituency and the effect of the proposed cuts on prospective apprenticeships for young people. Those in pockets of deprivation will suffer more. That is not the message the Prime Minister gave on the steps of Downing Street. Figures for those not in education, employment or training—NEETs—figures—in the UK are much worse than they are in other developed countries, and skills shortages are holding back economic progress. That is a problem we have in Scotland, too. I appreciated his reference to idle hands making very dangerous work.

Having taught young people, I know the difficulties in mental health and other areas when they are not gainfully employed in doing what benefits them, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also mentioned.

The construction skills crisis is the worst in decades, as has been mentioned. Construction Industry Training Board figures are alarming. I came to London and had never seen so many cranes, but I do not know who is operating them. We need to look at that.

The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) spoke about apprenticeships for those with learning disabilities, and about hospitality training offered in Bridgwater, where workplace training cost money but was not recognised as an apprenticeship. I thoroughly commend his efforts towards getting the academic element reduced for those who will never pass it, but who could turn out to be the best employees a company has. I was at a Department for Work and Pensions event in my constituency on Friday asking employers to take on more people with disabilities of all kinds—the apprenticeship programme must take that forward.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) spoke about the drop in apprenticeships in Liverpool. He and many other Members touched on the lack of will from the UK Government to fund deprived areas. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said that companies find resistance within the schools system. As a member of the Education Committee, I can confirm that we have spoken to various experts who say that it is very difficult for young people in schools to get good careers advice leading them towards apprenticeships because the focus in schools is on the academic side and on moving on to universities.

Again, I can relate to that from my own experience. Not all schoolchildren want to progress academically, but they all want jobs. Apprenticeships could be the best route forward.

Michael Tomlinson rose—

Rebecca Pow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marion Fellows: Certainly, but please do not fight over me.

Rebecca Pow: Does the hon. Lady agree that under the Labour party under Tony Blair, every child was encouraged to go to university? What is her view on whether that put a different focus on apprenticeships? I wonder whether that had an influence on the change of thinking within our schools.
Marion Fellows: I cannot entirely agree with the hon. Lady, but over the years there has been a focus on degrees. For example, nursing was not an apprenticeship but training. Everyone agrees now that that is not the best route for the entire school population and that we should look at improving our skills base. We are one of the best economically developed countries in the world but our skills base is falling behind that of other developed countries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke of the need for Government support. She also spoke about the National Audit Office report that pointed out that the Department for Education has not set out how it will increase apprenticeship numbers to deliver improvements in productivity, or how employers will be supported to deliver the apprenticeships that offer the most value for the economy, including in construction, digital and all the skills gaps.

The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) mentioned his experience of apprenticeships, both as an apprentice and as an employer. Modern apprenticeships are definitely the way forward and the message has to be got out that apprenticeships now are the not the same as the apprenticeships of 20 or 30 years ago. The one and only hon. Member for Strangford—to coin your phrase, Mr Streeter—gave a comprehensive view of Northern Ireland, focusing on the mental health issues faced by young people there. That is reflected in the mainland countries as well. We need to look after our young people and provide what is best for their futures.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), a member of the all-party parliamentary group on youth employment, said that the unemployment statistics are coming down. That may be the case, but we very much need to focus on what we offer young people. He also said that small businesses will welcome that initiative because they will prove to be best for all our young people. The Scottish Government with Skills for Scotland are working with partners to develop foundation apprenticeships from schools, so that young people who are still in school can get work experience and then, possibly, leave school and move straight into a proper, more advanced modern apprenticeship.

My final remarks, Mr Streeter, will be on another thing that is interesting in Scotland and does not seem to happen here. On the worth of qualifications, which has been touched on in the debate, it is important that apprenticeships are of quality and allied to a quality framework. Some doubt is being cast on some apprenticeships. Ofsted has already looked at Jaguar Land Rover and is cutting its marks—it is no longer good, in that sense, and will have to improve what it does. In Scotland, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework is a unified framework that covers both vocational and academic skills. The Minister should look at having something similar in England to make absolutely sure that our young people get the best-quality apprenticeships possible, at whatever level they undertake them.

10.39 am

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on an absolutely splendid speech and on the inspirational lead he has given in challenging the Government on these issues, with 55 Members across the House helping to secure this debate.

We have had an excellent, positive debate across the Chamber today, with individuals offering their experiences, the range of which I have been particularly impressed by. I warmly thank my hon. Friends from Birmingham—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)—and my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) for their interventions, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), who had very important things to say about how we should take forward apprenticeship budgets in future.
My right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham really hit the nail on the head when he talked about the glacial pace of the Government’s response. We know this matter was left in the Minister’s in-tray to deal with when he took office, but, as my right hon. Friend said, the elephant in the room remains adult skills and night schools. The Minister will have to confront those issues, as well as clearing up the mess he was left to deal with in the first place.

I wrote to the Minister at the beginning of August when the original proposals were made, underlining then what the problems would be. I said that “these changes have the potential to cause catastrophic consequences for young people in the most deprived areas,” and that they “offer a damaging lack of support for young apprentices and further weaken...attempts to widen participation and increase social mobility.”

I also said that, as a Blackpool MP as well as shadow Skills Minister, I was really concerned about getting small employers on board.

With apprenticeships—my goodness me! If wishes and exhortations and five-year plans from this Government could move mountains, we would have not 3 million apprentices by 2020, but 6 million. However, as we know, the devil is in the detail, and the Government’s attempts to use a one-size-fits-all approach have not worked.

The Minister was present at the FE Week campaign event that I hosted on 14 September. I have seldom heard in a packed Committee Room in this House as uniform a chorus of concern across the piece. Concerns are shared not only by me and my right hon. Friend but by leading figures across the sector, including the Association of Employment and Learning Providers. Those expressions of concern and the investigative work done by FE Week in putting this process together have driven the partial U-turn.

I congratulate the Minister and give him full credit for having shaken up his officials—and perhaps even shaken a few extra coppers out of the Treasury’s pockets— and for listening to the concerns. It was said of Julius Caesar that he came, saw and conquered; the Minister has come and seen but he has not yet conquered, because the devil is in the detail, as my right hon. Friend said. Plenty of questions about the proposals remain unanswered.

Let me give an example from the analysis done by FE Week since the U-turn on Monday. Before the U-turn, cuts of 27% and 50% to construction skills at level 2 were calculated; after it, the cuts still ranged from 14% to 37%, so there is little to be complacent about. Those cuts could still devastate the sector, as we have heard. In other areas, such as hairdressing and engineering, it is not necessarily good news either. The Government are struggling post-Brexit to orchestrate an industrial strategy. FE Week analysis has revealed that at levels 2 and 3, there could still be a maximum drop of 49% to 51% respectively. There is huge potential and a pressing need for high-quality apprenticeships in the service sectors, social care, leisure and visitor services, yet we know from the analytics that children’s care, learning and development—an absolutely crucial social care issue—could be cut by 42%, and hospitality and catering by up to 45%. No one has told me where the tablets from Sinai are saying how the funding will be delivered beyond year one. There are big questions about that, so will the Minister tell me what conversations he has had with the Treasury in advance of the autumn statement?

I am sure the figure of £3 billion—or £2.5 billion for England—that will eventually be raised by the apprenticeship levy will continue to be bandied around, but as we know, only £1 billion of that is new funding; £1.5 billion is going to the Treasury. I ask the Minister, when he is looking at the money we will need beyond year one, what is he already doing to knock on the Treasury’s door?

The cuts are going to hit a wide range of employers and providers, including in the third sector. I remind the Minister of a letter that he had from YMCA Training, which said that despite the disadvantage uplift, there is the loss of youth contract funding, which will not help support for the most hard-to-reach young people. Mark Dawe, the chief executive of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, also remains to be convinced, even about the details of the current proposals. He recently commented online:

“I hope...we review the deprivation payments, as...committed” but “Personally I can’t see how a system allocating £600, £300 and £200 just on frameworks can equate to a system that was paying up to 32% on” the “funding cap...ie over £8.5k in this scenario for one learner compared to £600.”

The Minister has to address those really important issues.

We all want to know what the situation will be at the end of the year. Will we revert to the situation as it was last Monday? Will the Minister pass on to his right hon. and hon. Friends the message that it is not too early to be thinking about what they do when they have spent the £60 million? A 20% uplift for 16 to 18-year-olds is a necessary step to replace what was lost, that would have been lost under the previous proposal, but will the Minister tell us how that compares with previous measures?

As someone who, like so many in this House, has always been keen on supporting people with disabilities to progress in the world of work, I welcome the learning disabilities taskforce that was led by my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), but it is important to stress that these issues have to be taken forward to completion, because we know that on completion disabled people will do a lot better.

The Government’s equality assessment included the aim to achieve gender parity in the working population by 2030, but I see little detail on how that is likely to be done in terms of what the Government are doing on apprenticeships funding. The Minister may want to comment on that.

For the last few months, we have, with a wide range of stakeholders, been pressing the Government for more detail on the levy. Despite last week’s revised paper, there are still issues, particularly about the digital apprenticeship delivery, that I remain to be convinced on. The Confederation of British Industry certainly is not. It said that “six months out...major questions remain about its readiness.”
The EEF said that the “Government must carefully prepare a final implementation plan ... and that employers as well as Government need time to prepare for the sea change”.

How is the Minister going to reassure businesses and providers on that detail?

What is the Government’s capacity to deliver all this? As Paul Warner, the policy director of the AELP said, the Department faces “capacity challenges”. The head of the Skills Funding Agency’s technical and professional education admitted to a workshop last week that she was unsure of capacity and resources. The Government have scrapped the UK Commission for Employment and Skills; staffing levels at the SFA are down 50% from 2011; and now the Government, with their hastily thrown together Technical and Further Education Bill, are saying that the Institute for Apprenticeships will have responsibility for all technical education. That makes considerable sense, but where will the money and other resources come from?

Just last week, the Minister was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) what budget would supply funding for the costs of the Institute for Apprenticeships. He was told:

“It is expected that part of its budget will be provided by funding freed up from savings across the Department.”

Well, that is a vague response. It does not show us the money or give us the confidence to believe that the Minister will be able to take these things forward in the way we need.

Just six months out from the implementation of the levy, the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education still has a shadow chief executive working two days a week. We know that there are worries about rebadging and the unintended consequences of forcing employers to reduce investment in other areas; and there are still substantial worries about small and medium-sized enterprises. The Minister still has to address those big concerns. We need to look into how large employers can help to retrain, reskill and supply a lot of those surplus apprenticeships.

In conclusion, the Government need to look at other issues, as well as this short-term stopgap. They need to look into the performance of careers and enterprise, as a lot is needed on that. They also need to look into devo-max, giving some power back to the people and areas of the country to produce the apprenticeships that our people deserve.

10.50 am

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on securing this important debate and on the work he has done, but I was disappointed that he did not feel that it was right to mention the £13.4 million spent by the Government in his constituency on the new digital college, which I was proud to open with him only a couple of weeks ago; the 920 apprentice starts in his constituency over the past year; the Government’s doubling of apprenticeship spending to £2.5 billion by 2020; the 619,000 apprentice starts that we have had since May 2015; or even—dare I say it?—the record on people not in education, employment or training. The previous Government left us with 1 million unemployed young people. Between 2014 and 2015, the proportion of 16 to 18-year-olds in education or work-based learning increased to 90%, which is the highest figure on record, and the proportion of 16 to 18-year-old NEETs fell to 6.5%, which is the lowest rate since records began. I was also disappointed that the right hon. Gentleman did not mention the 500% increase in higher apprenticeships since 2010, the £7 billion to be spent on further education and training, and the extra incentives given to the frameworks. His speech was partial and disappointing given his record in standing up for apprenticeships and skills.

I congratulate my many hon. Friends, and hon. Gentlemen and Ladies of all parties, on their thoughtful speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) was a brilliant Disabilities Minister. We are very supportive of the work done by him and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) to encourage more disabled people into apprenticeships. We fully accept their recommendations and we are implementing them.

On the levy, we are increasing the incentives to employers and providers by £1,000 each for those on a healthcare plan or those from care homes; specific disabilities providers will get an extra £510 a month, and up to £19,000 will be provided for adaptation. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon will know about the £2 million that we put by for support for mental health apprenticeships; that money supports roughly 2,000 participants. It is worth mentioning traineeships, on which something like 19.7% of those with learning disabilities are represented. That has not been mentioned in this debate.

I am very happy to meet with the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), and I am meeting him on Thursday about another issue. There are no existing plans to devolve the levy funds to specific areas. We are creating a system that simplifies funding across England, making it easier for employers to navigate. We will be reviewing how the disadvantage funding works over the next 12 months.

There were some thoughtful speeches, including from the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). I say to her and to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) that the devolved Administrations will get a fair share, and we hope to make the announcement shortly. The hon. Member for Glasgow North West made important points about apprentices getting real jobs. It is good that 90% of apprentices stay in work. Surveys show that the satisfaction of those apprentices is incredibly high.

I could talk about many of the issues raised today, but in the time available I want to go through those raised by the right hon. Member for Tottenham and Labour’s Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden). Hon. Members have to see what the Government are doing in the overall context of the £2.5 billion increase by 2020. A huge amount is going towards increasing funding rates for STEM frameworks—something that too was not mentioned by Opposition Members. Just under half of 16 to 18-year-olds will attract more funding thanks to the uplift in STEM frameworks. Huge amounts of money are going into
support for disadvantaged apprentices, as was acknowledged by the right hon. Gentleman and others today. A significant amount is going towards helping small employers, as those with below 50 employees will pay no training costs at all. There are all kinds of other incentives. Some 25% of frameworks will be replaced by the new apprenticeship standards by the end of the year.

**Jim Shannon rose—**

**Robert Halfon:** I am sorry, but I cannot give way because very little time remains.

More money will be spent on standards. A huge amount of money is going into the system to ensure that 16 to 18-year-olds and those who are socially disadvantaged are properly represented. Many of the frameworks that apply to adults are the same as those applied to 16-year-olds, yet the ones for 16 to 18-year-olds can cost double the amount. The surveys and the evidence show that they do not need to cost as much, and that, often, only a few hundred pounds would make a difference.

We are moving into a new world. The apprenticeship levy is changing employer behaviour. Businesses will choose different kinds of apprenticeships because of the move to standards, and would-be apprentices will choose different kinds of apprenticeships. The way the discussion has gone among some Opposition Members, it is as if we were comparing apples with apples. However, the world is changing and we are now comparing apples with pears.

**Mr Lammy:** Will the Minister give way?

**Robert Halfon:** I will not, because I only have a few minutes left to speak, and I think that the right hon. Gentleman had a fair crack of the whip.

We are putting a huge amount of money into FE funding, guaranteeing that £7 billion will be spent on FE funding and training. We have put money into a transition year and traineeships. Of those who do traineeships, 60% are aged 16 to 18 and 50% go on to get work, apprenticeships or education. Some £50 million has been spent on traineeships thus far—again, that was not mentioned in the debate.

Of course, we are doing a lot of work on welfare reform to help with jobcentres and so on. An enormous amount of money is going towards helping 16 to 18-year-olds and people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

To use some frameworks as a way of saying that the Government are not helping the poorest is entirely wrong. I have five priorities for apprenticeships.

**Mr Lammy:** On a point of order, Mr Streeter. The Minister is reliant on the new standards, which only just over 3,000 apprentices have taken up. More than 99% are on the current frameworks, which is the subject of the debate, and the Minister has not addressed that at all. He is trying to hoodwink the House.

**Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair):** That is not a point of order. The Minister may continue.

**Robert Halfon:** The right hon. Gentleman should check his statistics. There have been more than 4,000 starts on standards, and 400 standards are in development. Many frameworks are going up, and we are putting a huge amount of money into uplifting the STEM frameworks. That is what employers want, and we are designing an employer-led system.

We are raising the prestige of apprenticeships, helping the socially disadvantaged, and introducing the levy to change behaviours and so that the cost is borne evenly throughout society. We will reach the target of 3 million; as I said, we have had 619,000 since May last year. We are raising the quality of apprenticeships through the Institute for Apprenticeships and through degree and higher apprenticeships, which many thousands of people have taken up.

The Government are transforming the country into an apprenticeship nation. I am proud of the work that has been done, and of the officials who have worked hard to ensure that we listen to employers, as we said we would when we first announced the levy.

10.59 am

**Mr Lammy:** It is disappointing that the Minister has said nothing about funding cuts. He has been reliant on the extra £2.5 billion that he said is coming in. He is robbing Peter to pay Paul. Will he confirm that there will be funding cuts that will lead to deserts—

**Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair):** Order. We must move on from this excellent debate to a debate on another interesting subject.

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).*
Martin Luther King’s 1967
Visit to Newcastle

11 am

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered commemoration of Martin Luther King’s 1967 visit to Newcastle.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I thank everyone who has come to this important debate.

Like most, if not all, MPs, I make no secret of my pride in representing my constituency, the area in which I was born and grew up, and this debate is about a day in Newcastle’s history that is a particular source of pride to me. On 13 November 1967, Newcastle University awarded Dr Martin Luther King an honorary degree. It was no accident that Newcastle was the only university outside the United States to honour King in his lifetime. From the trade union movement to the co-operative and fair trade movements, we have a long and active history in the struggle for social justice.

The university’s historic decision was made all the more remarkable by Dr King taking the time to come to Newcastle to accept the award. He was accompanied by his secretary, Andrew Young, who went on to be a Congressman, a mayor and an ambassador for the US. Rev. Gerald Durley, who was an aide to Martin Luther King at the time, told me that Dr King was absolutely exhausted. He had been imprisoned just two weeks earlier for five days, and he was suffering from a serious cold. He was in the UK for a mere 24 hours, a short break from his busy schedule that included, among other things, campaigning for Carl Stokes in his successful bid to become the first black mayor of Cleveland, Ohio. Dr King was assassinated five months later in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was speaking in support of striking refuse workers. His decision to come to Newcastle must be seen in that context.

In accepting his award Dr King broke with Newcastle University tradition by giving an acceptance speech, which was to be his final public speech outside the United States. Dr King’s “I have a dream” speech is rightly famous across the world, but few people are aware of the powerful speech he gave that day in Newcastle. He held the audience spellbound as he spoke of his struggle for racial justice and against the “three urgent and indeed great problems that we face not only in the United States of America but all over the world today. That is the problem of racism, the problem of poverty and the problem of war.”

I will be quoting from Martin Luther King a number of times today and, of course, I cannot aspire to his eloquence, but I hope that by recording some of his words the House will gain an impression of how powerfully he spoke and of his impact that day. Dr King was right that our world “will never rise to its full moral, political or even social maturity” until racism, poverty and war are eradicated. The struggle for humanity is a continual, day-by-day battle to defend and enlarge the territory of social justice. We must passionately, unrelentingly work in that struggle, whether in the UK, the USA or anywhere else in the world.

King’s work had huge impacts, and not just upon the legal and political rights of black people. His life is an inspiration for individuals across the world, including me. My earliest memory of him is of reading the “I have a dream” speech for the first time. I remember exactly where I was—Boots in Eldon Square, Newcastle. My eye had been caught by a poster of an African-American woman with doves flying out of her huge afro. I remember wondering whether that look would work for me. [Laughter] Black women and hair.

After being drawn to the poster, I was caught even more powerfully by the words: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” I was about nine or 10 at the time, and I was really moved. I was struck by the power of those words, and of course I identified with Dr King’s little children. I hoped his words would come true not only for them but for me. That was at a time when the only black people on TV seemed to be singers, dancers or African despots. Only someone like Martin Luther King could help inspire me to dream that I could one day be the Member of Parliament for my hometown.

When the three great problems of racism, war and poverty are still all too real for millions of people, we all have a responsibility to take forward Dr King’s legacy. To mark the upcoming 50-year anniversary of the degree ceremony, Freedom City 2017 will be celebrated across Newcastle and Gateshead. It takes its inspiration from Dr King and the themes of his speech at Newcastle University. The landmark event will launch a three-year cultural programme of international artistic and political significance. World-renowned artists and local communities will come together to produce new artworks responding to Dr King’s iconic speech and legacy.

Working with local delivery partner Northern Roots, Newcastle University and community, faith, civic, artistic, business and academic organisations from across Newcastle and Gateshead, Freedom City will have dozens of events, programmes and workshops so that everyone in the community can get involved. I cannot emphasise the scale of Freedom City enough, but I will mention a couple of events about which I am particularly excited.

A bronze sculpture of Dr King, incorporating a quotation from his acceptance speech, will be installed on the university campus in November 2017. There will also be a day of celebration and remembrance of those who risked and lost their lives in the march for freedom, called “Freedom City on the Tyne.” It will pay tribute to all those who marched with King, either physically or spiritually: from the Jarrow march to Sharpeville, Peterloo and especially the famous Selma confrontation between Dr King, his marchers and state troopers on the General Pettus bridge.

The Freedom City project will be launched on Friday of next week, ahead of the 49th anniversary of King’s degree ceremony, with community groups, schools and citizens from Newcastle reflecting on King’s legacy ahead of next year’s celebrations. The American embassy gave £30,000 to support Freedom City in its initial stages; I pay tribute to it for that. The American ambassador, Matthew Barzun, who is coming to the end of his term, has been a particular champion of this project and friend of Newcastle, and I would like to record my gratitude to him. This great festival also owes a debt of
gratitude to Arts Council England, which has given us an award of £595,000 from its Ambition for Excellence fund in recognition of the festival’s ability to “stimulate and support ambition, talent and excellence across the arts sector in England.”

Freedom City will take forward the legacy built around the creative case for diversity, changing the way artists and organisations present diverse arts in participatory, programmed and presented work. It will go further; too: it will educate and inform young people on the themes of Martin Luther King’s speech and will encourage reflection on how those themes relate today to our social history and our future.

The lives of those who fought for an end to racism still play a role in inspiring citizens today, and not just in Newcastle. Hull has chosen to honour William Wilberforce in its city of culture celebrations, which will also take place next year and will complement Freedom City. What are the Government’s plans to follow these great northern cities in taking forward King’s legacy? They have a responsibility to every child to make sure that, in King’s words, “they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to visit Newcastle during the celebrations and discuss how King’s legacy can be taken forward. Will the Minister accept that invitation?

Newcastle was lucky enough to host Dr King during his lifetime, but the memory of his work should be kept alive to inspire every British citizen. Black History Month, which is a fantastic celebration of black achievement, has just ended, but there are still many stories to bring to light. Dr King’s visit in 1967 was all but forgotten—I myself growing up in Newcastle was not aware of it—until Professor Brian Ward of Northumbria University rediscovered the film of his speech. I recommend it to everyone; it is a fantastic speech and the film is available on the Freedom City 2017 website. Other materials are now coming to light, including fantastic footage of the first black newscaster in Britain, Clyde Alleyne, interviewing Dr King for Tyne Tees Television during that visit.

I hope and expect that the Government, along with the people of Newcastle, will continue to champion the men and women—women’s voices are too often overlooked—who struggle against inequality throughout the world and in this country. We must also set our own house in order. Parliament is yet to truly represent the country it seeks to speak for. Have the Government considered an annual event to mark the struggle for diversity in politics? Freedom City 2017 will be officially launched here in Parliament on Martin Luther King day next year, but we would be happy to share that important date with the Minister, the Government or official parliamentary commemorations.

The battle against injustice is by no means over. Some 50 years after Dr King came to Newcastle, it is still the wealth and status of a child’s parents that will determine his or her potential to a greater extent than almost anything else. That is why Freedom City is so important. I want every child in Newcastle and beyond to know not only that Martin Luther King came to Newcastle, but that he came for them, to speak to them. Those three themes of poverty, racism and war not only speak to them but are to be answered by them—by every child and every adult in Newcastle and throughout the country.

Everyone in every generation has a role to play in addressing those great challenges. Just as Martin Luther King saw the struggles around the world as part of the struggle for civil rights in America, there should be no limitations to our horizons. We still cannot say that every child in Newcastle and the rest of the country has the opportunity to be judged by their character and not by their race or their background. I certainly believe that it is my job as an MP to work to achieve that.

When we can say that has happened, I believe Dr King’s legacy in Newcastle will truly have been fulfilled.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab) rose—

Mr Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I understand that Chi Onwurah has permitted her colleague, Dawn Butler, to make a short contribution to this debate.

11.15 am

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) for securing this important debate here in Westminster Hall on an important and powerful subject. As she said, Black History Month has just finished, and Martin Luther King’s words are still as valid and poignant today as they were at the time. He said:

“A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

The letters in our mailbags and the daily emails we get resonate with that.

I support my hon. Friend’s call for an annual event in this place, and I am pursuing that idea. It is important that one of the oldest democracies in the world should talk about how far we have come with race relations but also acknowledge how far we still have to go. I cannot believe that she was lucky enough to have had Martin Luther King in her constituency; it makes me quite envious. When he received his award—I watched that speech over and over again, and it became more powerful every time—he said:

“I can assure you...that you give me renewed courage and vigour to carry on in the struggle to make peace and justice a reality for all men and women all over the world.”

When the Opposition fight for equality laws and ask the Government to re-implement the equality assessments that they have said they no longer need because they are a tick-box exercise, people in this place often wonder why we push for those things so much. Martin Luther King put it beautifully:

“It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can restrain him from lynching me”.

That is why we push so much for equality legislation: to move forward and continue to move forward until we have true equality in the world.

My hon. Friend talked about her journey here as a Member of Parliament representing Newcastle. Lots of little girls and boys and young adults who look at representation in the House and see people such as her
and me will feel that they too can make it anywhere they like, as long as they have the drive, ambition and support—and the right legislation to help to make it happen.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. May I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on securing this debate? It is important that we commemorate one of the greatest African-Americans, Martin Luther King, and his visit to Newcastle nearly 50 years ago. He came to Newcastle on 13 November 1967 to accept an honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law from the university. As we heard from the hon. Lady and her Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler), it was an extremely powerful speech that captured the mood at the time and still endures today.

Britain today can claim to be a successful multi-ethnic and multi-faith country. In recent years, members of African and Caribbean communities have achieved in many different areas, such as business, sport, the arts and government, as well as in this House. We know that we still have a very long way to go, but we believe in a United Kingdom by every definition, which means that the Government will stand up against injustice and inequality. It is only by doing so that we can make the country work for everyone, not just a privileged few.

Last December saw the 50th anniversary of the Race Relations Act 1963, which historic legislation opened the way to all the subsequent equalities legislation. We can all be proud of the UK’s world-class equalities legislation, but we know that it is not enough on its own. We must all champion equality and recognise and challenge discrimination.

We have in place a strong legal framework that protects all individuals against racial and religious discrimination, and against racially and religiously aggravated hate crime. Following the spike in hate crime and racist incidents taking place in communities after the vote to leave the EU, the Government stepped up efforts to tackle the scourge of hate crime. We have published a new hate crime action plan, which focuses on reducing hate crime, increasing reporting and improving support for victims. The scenes and behaviour we saw over the summer—including offensive graffiti and abuse hurled at people because they are members of ethnic minorities or because of their nationality—were absolutely despicable and shameful. We must all stand together against such hate crime and ensure that it is stamped out wherever it happens.

Fighting disadvantage and extending opportunity is the surest way to build strong and cohesive communities. My Department’s current integration programme is focused on bringing communities together and celebrating what unites us rather than divides us, through projects such as Near Neighbours, Holocaust Memorial Day and Mitzvah Day.

In Newcastle, over two years between 2012 and 2014, we funded Show Racism the Red Card to deliver a programme of work designed to combat the influence of the far right on young people’s attitudes and behaviours.

With the Arts Council and the British Library, we funded the Enterprising Libraries project, which in Newcastle helped to create 385 new businesses and more than 660 jobs over a two-year period to 2015. Of those who have started a business using the Newcastle Business & IP Centre services, 11% described themselves as black, Asian and minority ethnic, against a national average of 6% of businesses being led by members of a minority ethnic group in 2014.

The Government are committed to creating a fair society in which all people, of whatever ethnic origin or background, are valued and able to participate fully and realise their potential. The Prime Minister could not have been clearer about her determination on this issue from the very moment she arrived in Downing Street. We are making real progress, with black and minority ethnic employment rates at their highest levels for 15 years, but there is clearly more to do.

We are certainly not complacent, which is why the Prime Minister launched a race disparity audit in August to look at the racial disparities in our public services. It will stretch right across Government and highlight the differences in outcomes for people of different backgrounds, including in health, education, childcare, welfare, employment, skills and criminal justice. Gathering and publishing such information has been shown to have an effect on improving public services and outcomes for certain racial groups.

By looking at how racial grouping affects treatment in public services, the audit will be comprehensive and, where possible, linked to geography and income. This is the first time that a Government rather than an independent body will carry out an audit of racial group disparities in public services. The audit will inform the Government’s approach to ending the injustices that many people experience. Work on the audit has already begun. We envisage that the large and ambitious programme of data collection and interrogation will take some months, but we hope to have the first tranche of data published before summer 2017.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for his kind and entirely true words about Newcastle earlier. The audit he is talking about is of great interest. Will he give a little more detail on what data will be collected on the users and/or deliverers of public services? I was pleased to hear that it might be separated by region. In addition, I hope he will not forget to respond to my invitation.

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady’s invitation did not escape my attention and I will address it in a moment.

On the audit, the Prime Minister has been clear that she does not want there to be disparities in how our public services are provided. The audit will look comprehensively across the range of public services, and we will look in depth at the challenges and barriers in the treatment of people from BME groups. As I said, it will be linked to geography and income where possible. I hope that, in the not-too-distant future, we will be able to provide further information on how the audit is progressing. It will inform the work not only of the Government but, we hope, of other Members of the House.

We are continuing to work towards the ambitious goals set in 2015 to improve opportunity for BME people, such as on take-up of apprenticeships, employment
and university places, and recruitment in the police and armed services. We have stretching and challenging targets but are absolutely determined to meet them.

Two reviews started earlier this year: the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) is looking at the treatment of and outcomes for BAME individuals in the criminal justice system, and Baroness McGregor-Smith is examining the obstacles faced by businesses in developing BME talent, from recruitment right through to executive level.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central mentioned the Freedom City 2017 events. It is fantastic to hear about such an initiative and it is great to see that the Arts Council is supporting it significantly. It is also good to hear about the support being provided by the US embassy. I understand that the initiative will involve not only several world-renowned artists but many local artists from the Newcastle area, and that it will focus on the values of freedom, togetherness and empowerment.

I very much look forward to seeing that work come forward, and can certainly give the hon. Lady my commitment to come up to Newcastle. My sister currently lives in Northumberland, but she is moving to the edge of Newcastle, hopefully in the next few weeks. I am sure she will be glad to see me when I go up to Newcastle, so I really do look forward to that event next year.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for accepting my invitation and I hope to meet him and his sister in Newcastle. Will he say something about parliamentary diversity and some kind of celebration and action to increase it?

Mr Jones: I apologise that I did not cover that point in my speech. I shall certainly look into it. I would be grateful to hear more information from the hon. Lady about what she envisages such action would look like. If she can please provide that information, we can look to see what might be achieved in the House.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Lady again for securing the debate. We should take this opportunity to remember the huge contribution made by people from Africa and the Caribbean, many of whom gave their lives fighting for this country in the first and second world wars. As a Government, we reiterate our commitment to standing up against injustice and inequality, making this a country that works for everyone and not just the privileged few.

Question put and agreed to.
signed up and not all of them turned up. What more can be done to influence those countries that are causing some of the major difficulties that we have?

Dame Caroline Spelman: We have clearly made some progress in the climate change talks, and climate change is one of the things that definitely threatens, or aggravates the loss of species. There has been a significant breakthrough between some of the big players over climate change. For a long period, large countries such as America and China just would not engage, so we have made some progress on that issue, but, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, we need the rest to be as good as the best. I am sure that the Minister heard what the hon. Gentleman would like the UK Government to be doing to encourage that to happen.

In fact, 90% of the biodiversity on UK territory is situated in our overseas territories, precisely because they are less heavily developed. The Government made the groundbreaking decision to create the largest marine reserve in the world around the Pitcairn Islands and are on their way to doing the same for Ascension Island, South Georgia, St Helena and Tristan da Cunha, in a blue belt strategy around the world's oceans. If all those are achieved, the area offering some form of protection will be greater than the size of India. That would make a significant contribution to Aichi target 11, which is on marine protected areas.

That points to the clear value of helping less developed parts of the world to protect vital species. Frankly, the cure to some disease that is currently a scourge of human society could be deep in the Amazon jungle. We have every interest in helping the poorest.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. Does she agree that the UK Government often sign up to agreements that are worthy in principle, but the overseas territories that then become subject to those agreements do not always receive reciprocal finances to implement them? I know that in places such as Anguilla particularly and the Cayman Islands, that is placing an undue financial burden on their Governments.

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend and I were members of the Environmental Audit Committee together. He has recently rejoined the Committee and I know that he looked closely at the predicament of overseas territories such as the Cayman Islands which would not naturally be in receipt of funds to help them to address this kind of issue. It is clear that we all have an interest in their being able to do so. I am sure that his comment was heard by the Minister.

The approach of helping the world’s poorest countries to reduce and halt the loss of species was at the heart of our agreement in Nagoya. It inspired 193 countries to agree unanimously to own and solve this problem together. So everybody was present and did sign that Nagoya agreement. However, there were lengthy discussions about access to, and the benefits arising from, the world’s most biodiverse populations. That was the heart of the matter. The world’s richest nations wanted to be able to access some of the most biodiverse parts of the world, perhaps to find a cure for cancer, but in return the developing nations wanted to share in those benefits and for us to help to resource them in protecting those areas. That was the nature of what we agreed to, which was a genuine example of a negotiated deal.

Historically, the UK has provided international leadership on this approach and there are many examples of how we have done so. The most recent is the opening of the new David Attenborough building in Cambridge, which will become the new global focal point for research and practice to transform our understanding about the conservation of biodiversity.

Even before I became Environment Secretary, the UK was providing resources to prevent deforestation under the so-called REDD-plus scheme, which stands for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries. If one is going to try to reduce deforestation in very poor countries, it is important to find a way to support those people who have not known any way of sustaining themselves other than by cutting down trees. If they are paid to maintain and look after the trees and to sustain the forest, deforestation will be reduced.

It is worth noting that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will spend more than £300 million of official development assistance by 2019-20, including funding to help to tackle the serious criminal industry of the illegal wildlife trade, which definitely threatens endangered species, and to deliver projects to conserve biodiversity and to reduce poverty worldwide, including in the UK’s eligible overseas territories and in developing countries, which will help developing countries to phase out ozone-depleting substances. When it comes to global biodiversity, no man is an island.

I have seen for myself how paying farmers in places such as the Amazon not to cut down their trees but to manage their forests can help us all, for the Amazon is the world’s largest carbon sink. However, the next challenge in Latin America is to prevent the adjoining native savannah, the forest of the Cerrado in Brazil, from being ploughed up to grow soya. Over half of that area has been converted to agriculture since 1950. At present, the Cerrado shelters 5% of total global biodiversity and one in 10 of every Brazilian species. Almost half of its 10,000 plant species are found nowhere else on our planet and wild animals that are threatened by the loss of the habitat include the jaguar, the maned wolf and the giant anteater. I saw there an extraordinary plant, the like of which I had never seen, called the shauvarinho, which captures water droplets on tiny fan-like leaves that have adapted to survive drought. It is not, therefore, just the plough that destroys species on that savannah; the area is also very vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

As I have highlighted, we now have the tool accurately to measure the rate at which we lose species and the cost to the economy of that loss: the national ecosystem assessment. For example, bees, should they die out and should we have to replace what they do, would cost the country £400 million a year. These days, we can put an economic value on the loss of vital species.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The right hon. Lady was talking about projects in Latin America. She might be aware of the Yasuni national park in Ecuador. The Government there tried to raise money internationally, so that there would be no oil drilling in what is one of the most biodiverse places on earth—an absolutely
pristine area. They could not get the international sign-up, however. Does she agree that that is something we all value, on a global level? Ecuador obviously needs to feed its people and boost economic growth, so in the end it was forced to go down the drilling route.

Dame Caroline Spelman: That speaks absolutely to the heart of the current debate on how we use international development assistance. The truth of the matter is that the issue is an increasingly difficult one, as people experience hard times themselves. I am disappointed to hear it vocalised that charity begins at home and that we should not be helping people abroad. I certainly do not share that view, but it is incumbent on us all as politicians to explain why helping people in very poor countries benefits everyone in the end. We must all work harder at getting that message across.

To come back to the bees, the fact that if they took their pollinating brushes home we would face a very big bill for substituting what they do underlines the importance of the debate about the demise of pollinators and explains why it is such an active one. The principles we agreed to in Nagoya bind us to reverse the trend of species loss, and that will take time and resources. The wealthy nations that signed up to the Nagoya agreement are the ones upon which it is incumbent to bring resources to the table to help poorer nations, if we are to arrest that decline.

The sequence of meetings known as the conference of the parties, or COP, has seen some progress in agreeing, in principle, to double biodiversity financial flows. I say in principle, because at COP 13, the next in the series—due to take place in Cancun in December—there will no doubt be more discussion about the amount of resources we need and who precisely will bring them. At that meeting, countries will discuss the practical delivery of the targets agreed following Nagoya. The excellent analytical work that is being undertaken by non-governmental organisations, including the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, to measure the level of ambition of, and the practical progress being made by, the signatories to the original agreement will be published to coincide with the meeting. It is the Ministers who go to Cancun who will have to face up to the reality of whether they walk the talk, so I hope that the UK Government will continue to provide the international leadership they are known for in this area by sending a Minister to the meeting.

Our efforts to halt the loss of species in our own country are going to come under close scrutiny. The reality is that most of the world’s most precious biodiversity is not on UK territory. The very fact that the British Isles has been developed has forced nature into retreat, but that does not mean we should not continue to strive to protect the species that are endangered here and to restore the lost natural capital. For example, a key action is to implement an intelligent and forward-looking biodiversity offsetting strategy for major infrastructure works. There are many infrastructure plans in the making, so there will have to be an awful lot of offsetting.

One of those plans is on my doorstep. High Speed 2 will go straight through my constituency and there is the opportunity to restore the biodiversity lost through enhancement of the Blyth river valley so that the urban populations of the west midlands conurbation can enjoy the green space and appreciate what nature has to offer. We know how important that is for overall wellbeing. I hope that the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will consider carefully proposals being put forward by Birmingham City University to regenerate the lost natural capital in the area.

The UK has made good progress on marine protection. It is committed, under the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009, to deliver an ecologically coherent network of well-managed marine protected areas within UK waters. However, critical gaps in the network remain, including protection for mobile species, such as seabirds. The third and final tranche of the English marine conservation zone designation is due to come forward next year and it is those critical gaps that I hope the Government will now be able to fill.

I have some key requests for the Government. I welcome the statement of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in response to the “Living Planet Report 2016”. It is encouraging that she has emphasised her commitment to protecting and restoring our natural environment for future generations. She has also called on us all to play our part. Indeed, every individual can play a role in arresting the loss of species. I certainly advocate that anyone who has not done so take part in the RSPB’s bird count once a year. The count will enable us to have some sense, against a baseline, of whether the common species we all grew up with are thriving or declining. That is particularly important when it comes to the demise of farmland birds, and everyone can do their bit.

The Secretary of State has highlighted two key areas in which the UK has been successful, one being the blue belt protection for our overseas territories and the other helping to tackle the illegal wildlife trade. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State will attend the next IWT conference in Hanoi, Vietnam, next month, providing the kind of leadership for which the UK is known. However, as I have already mentioned, it is critical that we send high-level ministerial representation to December’s conference of the parties in Cancun. I cannot stress enough how important it is that a Minister is there—193 countries are present at the meetings. We often underestimate the capacity that the UK has, because of its heritage and the leadership it has provided on the issue, to be involved as a facilitator, in particular between countries that are dragging their feet a bit, and to get their agreement. I really hope that a Minister will be able to attend.

We must be visible and vocal as a leader on the world’s stage, and establishing a clear presence in December will be an opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to continuing as an environmental leader. That will underline that the UK still wants to be at the forefront of the fight against biodiversity decline.

It is evident that tackling biodiversity loss will require a multisector approach, and in that we are helped by the fact that since the Nagoya agreement we have the framework of sustainable development goals—SDGs—which provides a context for our actions and our approach. The SDGs have the power to create a safer, fairer world, but we must now implement them ourselves, with careful cross-Government co-ordination and a clear focus on the challenges outlined in the report.

Goals 14 and 15 are directly connected to the convention on biological diversity and the Aichi targets, and they address reducing biodiversity loss on land and in the
marine environment. Many of the targets are due for completion in 2020—in less than four years’ time. However, at the current rate of progress, those will be the first of the sustainable development goals the UK will fail to meet. As we know, the deadline for most of the SDGs is 2030. So there is real pressure, and an urgency to get on and implement what we can to achieve the targets.

It is important that DEFRA and the Department for International Development work closely together on implementation. I found, as Environment Secretary, that DFID was extremely helpful to the cause; indeed it gave me the money to be able to provide assistance in very poor countries where species were endangered. I sincerely hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us that DEFRA continues to work closely with DFID in that area.

Dr Offord rose—

Dame Caroline Spelman: I was about to finish, but I will give way.

Dr Offord: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree that it is welcome that the Natural Capital Committee reports directly to the Chancellor? That ensures that policy is accompanied by finances and reinforces and reiterates to us that nature does not come for free.

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is completely right. I should have said that it is not only about DEFRA and DFID working together; the Treasury holds the purse strings. He is right that the Natural Capital Committee—its chair, Professor Dieter Helm, provides outstanding leadership—reporting directly to the Chancellor is the best way of reminding the Treasury that nature comes at a price and that we need to reflect that in the decisions we make and the resources it gets.

I hope that we will shortly see a clear plan from the Government on the sustainable development goals. DEFRA’s forthcoming 25-year plan for the environment is also a key opportunity. I hope that Ministers will use it to set out how they will work to reduce the UK’s international carbon footprint, as well as to protect nature at home. Ministers will need to carefully weave together the domestic and international dimensions. We must emphasise intergenerational accountability and include mechanisms to assess the impact of policy on nature and the natural capital we wish to leave for our children.

2.51 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I forgot that pleasantry in yesterday’s heated debate on grouse shooting.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on her excellent opening speech. She emphasised the need for Departments to work together on these issues, but I think it is also incumbent on all parliamentarians to work together, too. They are not party political issues and there is consensus in the House on them. We should all continue to press the Government as hard as we can to deliver and halt the declines in biodiversity. It is refreshing to see debates in this Chamber being led by former Secretaries of State who have stayed loyal and interested in their briefs. That is not always the case, but when we get that expertise and experience coming back it enriches and strengthens our debates.

If we do not act soon to halt the declines in our biodiversity, it could be too late. The World Wildlife Fund’s “Living Planet Report 2016” shows the scale of the task. As was pointed out earlier, although I will repeat the figures because they need repeating, global vertebrate populations fell on average by 58% between 1970 and 2012 and freshwater species such as amphibians and fish have declined by a shocking 81%. We are facing a global biodiversity crisis, and the need for action is urgent.

The problem should not be analysed by contrasting the performance of developing countries with that of advanced economies. I have seen that recently in print and in the media, and it is not helpful to describe the declines we have seen in that way, suggesting in some way that richer countries are doing better because they can afford to deal with the problem. I hope that does not help us all and it is not accurate, because wildlife in the UK is far from thriving. If Victorians took a walk in our countryside today, they would be shocked at how sparse our wildlife really is. I have listened to my parents talk about that frequently; they say that the decline has been dramatic since their childhood, 50 or 60 years ago.

We have seen huge declines in biodiversity, even since then.

Our planet’s biodiversity—or to put it another way, the natural capital that we depend on—is on the verge of collapse. If we are not careful, we could see the demise of the global environment we all depend on—the quality of the air we breathe, the quality and range of the food we eat, or the water we drink. In the final analysis, there will obviously be a negative impact on the global economy, too. It is becoming apparent that we could be entering a new epoch: the Anthropocene, a new geological epoch in which the size and scale of human activity is affecting our most important environmental systems on a planetary scale. The list of endangered species is never-ending, and if action is not taken soon, many species will disappear before our very eyes.

Declines in our ocean biodiversity are of particular concern. The living planet index shows that marine species have declined by 36% since 1970. That cannot be allowed to continue. It is estimated that our oceans provide annual economic benefits of up to $2.5 trillion a year—it is an international index, so it measures things in dollars. If we manage oceans effectively, they could help to underpin the relevant sustainable development goal and provide food security for many millions living in developing coastal and island states. Unfortunately, evidence suggests that because of poor management, including the over-exploitation of fisheries, that ambition will not be met. While Governments understand the importance of our marine environment, evidence is growing that their critical role in securing future resilience is still not given sufficient priority.

The UK can and should be playing a key role in taking forward and implementing sustainable development goal 14, which relates to our oceans. The right hon. Lady repeatedly stressed that point. We have strong economic and cultural ties to the sea—I grew up in a
coastal community, so I understand that well. I am not originally from an inland community, as Sheffield is. Even though many of our communities have secured livelihoods from our seas, we import a huge volume of seafood from many developing nations. We have international trading links that give us even more of a responsibility to work collaboratively on these issues. Our strong marine research expertise could help the Government in prioritising the actions needed on this specific aspect of global biodiversity. We also need to play our part internationally by building strategic partnerships with developing countries. Those partnerships are incredibly important when it comes to ensuring international resilience for our oceans.

That brings me neatly on to the EU’s common fisheries policy, which provides a multilateral forum for taking action to rebuild resilient fishing stocks in European waters and a sustainable fishing industry. I know I will upset the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) with that point, but fortunately she is a Parliamentary Private Secretary, so she cannot respond on this occasion. The Government must remain actively engaged in the CFP for as long as we remain in the EU. I say that as the daughter of a fisherman and as someone who grew up in the biggest fishing port in the world. I feel strongly about the issue.

We must also start putting in place plans for continuing engagement and action on illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing once we leave the EU. We therefore need assurances from Ministers that once we leave, the protections against unethical fishing, if I can put it that way, afforded by membership of the CFP will be embedded into UK fisheries policy. If we are going to build our status globally as a soft power on biodiversity issues, we need to continue the best practice established in the European Union. Whatever Brexit provides for the future, we must as a country remain committed to the policy of maximum sustainable yield and must retain fishing quotas in the form of total allowable catches by species. Not to do so would be wrong and would risk a return to the days of over-fishing and the consequences that that brought down upon all of us. I therefore ask the Minister to give assurances in her closing remarks.

Marine protected areas are a critical tool for conservation. It is estimated that protecting just 30% of the world’s oceans could result in net benefits of between $490 billion and $920 billion over 35 years. Currently, just 3.9% of the world’s oceans are designated for protection, despite a global commitment to achieve 10% by 2020. Many of the marine protection areas that do exist lack effective management plans. We need to play our part in addressing that weakness. The Government must continue designating an ecologically coherent network of marine conservation zones around our shores, as the right hon. Member for Meriden pointed out. We also need to continue the creation of a blue belt around our unique overseas territories by putting into place large-scale marine protected areas overseas, which will contribute to delivering on our 10% target.

Will the Minister commit to delivering a truly comprehensive and ecologically coherent network of marine conservation zones around the UK, with the management plans to match? That is the key weakness in our implementation of the Marine and Coastal Access Act so far. We need effective management plans for that network and we need them quickly. Also, will the Minister commit to the 10% target for MPAs around the UK’s overseas territories?

Although the world’s oceans face huge pressures, there is evidence that sustainable management and conservation work can reverse biodiversity declines and bring life back to the world’s seas. For instance, North sea cod stocks are now on an upwards trajectory because of the strong management measures implemented through the EU’s cod recovery plan. It is worth putting on the record that the decline in those stocks was not caused by the European Union. It never was. Those stocks were heavily depleted before the EU’s management regime came into effect. Nobody ever asks why the fishing fleets of the east coast, where I come from, went to Iceland to catch fish. Why go all that way? Why face all those dangers? It was because they had depleted the North sea stocks. The measures needed to put that right have started to work and the UK has a responsibility to continue on that trajectory. The experience of working with the European Union and internationally, as we have over all those years, also underlines the importance of the UK Government continuing to work co-operatively with other Governments, both in the EU and more widely, to ensure that our fisheries are sustainably managed.

A key opportunity for the Government to set out their own stall will be the forthcoming 25-year plan for the environment. The Minister could use the opportunity of the plan to reduce the UK’s international footprint by setting out a trajectory and a clear strategy for how we will achieve that, as well as protecting nature at home. At this point I will refer to yesterday’s debate and hope sincerely that the plan will include measures to deal with the decline in the health of our blanket bog and upland environment in the UK, which is a source of particular concern to me.

When might this extremely important plan be published? Are the rumours that it is being reviewed because of Brexit true? If that is the case, what exactly is being reviewed in the plan? Are we going to see more ambitious plans for improving the environment as a result of Brexit, or are we going to take Brexit as a chance to reduce our environmental standards? The House deserves some clarity on that point.

We are at a crossroads both as a country and as a planet. We need action and we need it now. The UK needs to play its full part and lead from the front internationally in reversing the decline in our biodiversity not only for our generation, but for the many generations yet to be born. Let us not forget that the environment is our legacy to future generations. The world belongs to our children. If we forget that legacy and forget the important fact that the world belongs to our children, we will never be forgiven for abdicating our responsibilities.

3.5 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing the debate on global biodiversity today.

The report laid before us by the World Wildlife Fund and the Zoological Society paints a bleak picture of wholesale ecocide on a scale unseen for aeons. Faced with such catastrophe, it would be easy to retreat into
dependent on resilient, diverse ecosystems. In recognition and wellbeing are just a few of the things that are purity, which has been mentioned, and human health the backbone of actions and projects.

Departments and other stakeholders are needed to form true here as it is in Scotland or anywhere else. Integrated, been mentioned, Government. That realisation is as the remit of a single area, organisation or even, as has been made on all of our actions in the first half of 2016. showed no progress, or even a continued decline, progress second half of 2015 there were still some areas that our required area of protected land and fresh water. the area of peatland that is required of us and exceeding the 10% stipulated by the UN. We are restoring twice part of our marine-protected area network, exceeding its first progress report, published in 2015, shows that we are starting to of at least 15% of degraded ecosystems. Its first progress show.

For example, target 11 aims to have at least 17% of freshwater bodies and 10% of coastal and marine areas under protection by 2020. Target 15 aims to enhance ecosystem resilience and the contribution of biodiversity to carbon stocks through the conservation and restoration of at least 15% of degraded ecosystems. Its first progress report, published in 2015, shows that we are starting to turn this juggernaut around: 16% of our seas are now part of our marine-protected area network, exceeding the 10% stipulated by the UN. We are restoring twice the area of peatland that is required of us and exceeding our required area of protected land and fresh water. There are still actions that need to progress faster, but we can take heart from the fact that although in the second half of 2015 there were still some areas that showed no progress, or even a continued decline, progress was made on all of our actions in the first half of 2016.

Driving the strategy is the realisation that biodiversity loss is a problem that must be tackled at scales beyond the remit of a single area, organisation or even, as has been mentioned, Government. That realisation is as true here as it is in Scotland or anywhere else. Integrated, co-operative forms of management involving multiple Departments and other stakeholders are needed to form the backbone of actions and projects.

The natural world must no longer be seen as something desirable but expendable. The question “Can we afford that?” has an ecological answer that is at least as important as its financial and political answers. We face choices that will manifest in the near future. As individuals, we tend to be myopic; we prefer to deal with present outcomes at the expense, often, of future ones. That is a given. Our choice is to consider the long-term loss and decline of our wildlife, and decide on the best course of action to prevent the continuation of that decline.

To end on a somewhat brighter note, I will mention that, although the picture is bleak, there is still some ecological resilience left. The vast majority of species are not yet at the point of no return. If we act, we can reverse what is happening. If there is a concerted international effort, we can turn it around globally. Let us not create a global extinction event as our legacy.

3.11 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, to see you in the Chair, Mr Evans. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing the debate; as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, she has very much retained an interest in the issues that she dealt with as Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have often had conversations in passing, in the corridor—particularly about marine conservation zones. I appreciate that in her new role as Second Church Estates Commissioner she has adopted a more conciliatory approach to bats in churches than her predecessor; we had some run-ins in our time. I am sure the bats appreciate it, too.

Today’s debate is timely, given the publication of the excellent “Living Planet” report by the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Zoological Society of London. I urge everyone to read it. Biodiversity has intrinsic value, but our survival also depends on it. It is a key indicator of the health of the planet, and we should treat it as seriously as climate change. It was frustrating for me, both during the Brexit campaign and the Paris talks, that the focus was always just on climate change and energy policy. There was not the discussion of the natural environment that there should have been, particularly given that so many of our protections stem from the EU.

The “Living Planet” report makes disturbing reading, but that should not come as a surprise. Year on year we have heard reports of mounting evidence of the decline of biodiversity. Each report adds to the imperative for action by Governments around the world. We have heard that we shall fail to meet the Aichi biodiversity targets by 2020, and that global wildlife populations fell by 58% between 1970 and 2012. On current trends, our vertebrate populations would decline by two-thirds by 2020.

It is disappointing that public funding for biodiversity fell by 32% from 2008 to 2015. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge highlighted, that is potentially even more of a threat with Brexit on the horizon. I hope for reassurances from the Minister today. The Government have, through the Natural Capital Committee, recognised the potential economic value of the natural environment, and are trying to do work that builds in the costs, financial or otherwise, of damaging
it. However, there is a lot more work to be done if that is really to be embedded in policy making.

There is a tendency for most attention to be paid to iconic species such as pandas, tigers and killer whales, which are under serious threat. There is a lot of talk about them, and there have been some successes. As the WWF highlighted, the giant panda has been removed from the list of endangered species of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, thanks to China’s efforts to protect habitats and re-establish forest. Tigers are still critically at risk, but their population has increased by 20% since 2010, thanks to collaborative efforts by Governments, communities and conservationists. The Government have been very committed to the agenda of the convention on international trade in endangered species, with respect to the shark population, for example. However, species that we have never heard of—and, in some cases, can barely see—are also in dire need of attention. In his foreword to the “State of Nature” report, David Attenborough said:

“If we and the rest of the backboned animals were to disappear overnight, the rest of the world would get on pretty well.”

However, if invertebrates were to disappear, “the land’s ecosystems would collapse.”

We need action to protect all biodiversity, whether vertebrates, invertebrates or plant life. All of those have suffered from human activity. Poaching, and the international wildlife trade, are an obvious cause, with elephant populations in Tanzania falling by 60% between 2009 and 2014. I, for one, would welcome further action to stem the global ivory trade that contributes to that—even the historic ivory trade.

Less visibly, as the global population has risen, our use of fertilisers, pesticides and transport, greenhouse gas emissions, our reliance on medicines and our water use have all increased. They all have a negative impact on biodiversity. It is the human population that has caused so much habitat loss for other species, whether through pollution, intensive agriculture, climate change, building or resource use that exploits natural resources.

As I mentioned, in Ecuador the Government were very committed—probably top of the league when it came to biodiversity and the beauty of the country—but they face pressures, in a country struggling to make ends meet, with the knowledge that such a wonderful site as the Yasuni natural park is home to oil reserves. As the right hon. Member for Meriden and I have said, there is a global role to be played in helping such countries to protect their wonderful biodiversity. We need international co-operation and the UK to take a lead in talks, rather than turning its back on the world, which some might think the referendum result would lead us to do.

As part of that, we need a commitment from the Environment Secretary, or the Minister who is present today, to attend December’s conference of the parties to the convention on biological diversity taking place in Mexico. We need to lead by example. There has already been mention of the Environmental Audit Committee’s report on the British overseas territories; only a tiny fraction of DEFRA spending goes to them, although they are home to 90% of the biodiversity for which the UK is responsible. As the report revealed, DEFRA did not at the time have a single staff member dedicated to working full time with the overseas territories.

We had a private meeting of the Environmental Audit Committee today, with some overseas territories representatives, to talk about some of those issues. I do not think I am betraying any confidences if I say that, in particular on the subject of the blue belt or the marine protected areas, there were pleas for things to be territory-led. Some of the people who attended were very happy with what has happened, because it was led by the people in the territories, but in some cases there are still issues to do with not being compensated for loss of income from fishing licences. Money may be going in, but it goes to the marine protected areas and does not compensate the Administrations—of Ascension Island in particular. I hope that the Minister will consider that. The overseas territories appreciate that they have a role to play in protecting the wonderful marine environment, but they need the resources to do it without suffering as a result.

When we discussed the EAC report a couple of years ago, I think about 0.3% of the biodiversity conservation budget was spent in the overseas territories. As I said, they are home to 90% of the biodiversity, so that suggests quite an imbalance. More than 32,000 native species have been recorded in the overseas territories and more than 1,500 of those are found nowhere else in the world. The territories are home to at least 517 globally threatened species. Our lack of knowledge and attention risks those species becoming extinct. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office works closely with the overseas territories on some issues, particularly business, but we need a closer relationship on environmental issues as well. The marine protected areas are a very welcome contribution but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge said, we need to complete the network of English marine conservation areas and ensure that they guarantee the robust protections that our marine life needs.

We have been talking about overseas, but the latest “State of Nature” report found that 53% of the UK’s wildlife species declined between 2002 and 2013 and 15% of our native species are under threat of extinction. The report’s launch was very well attended and the Secretary of State spoke but, as so often with these things, the warnings are taken to heart in the short term but very quickly forgotten. I hope the Minister will tell us a little about how the Government intend to take those concerns forward. The report said that insects and invertebrates were under particular threat, despite being crucial for pollination and healthy soils, and concluded that the UK is “among the most nature-depleted countries in the world”, having lost significantly more than comparable western European countries such as France and Germany.

I understand that we may get a framework for the much anticipated 25-year environment plan in the next few months, but we will not see the plan until later next year. That plan must rise to the enormous domestic and international challenge we face. The signs are not encouraging. The “State of Nature” report identified policy-driven agricultural change—the intensification of farming—as the most significant driver of declines.

I know that Ministers have taken on board the need for more links and connections between the two plans that we have, but when the Environment Secretary gave evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee on Brexit only a couple of weeks ago, she implied that
one plan was about the economics—the selling of food, farming and food production—and the other plan was about the natural environment. I do not think that that is good enough, as the two are so interconnected, even with footnotes explaining the connection. I am sure that the Minister has heard these representations many times before and I hope she is listening again. If the Government are genuinely interested in protecting biodiversity, DEFRA must commit to the EU birds and habitats directive and pollution reduction targets post-Brexit.

I want to conclude by bringing the debate down to a local level. Bristol is fortunate to have the Avon gorge, which has been designated a special area of conservation under the habitats directive. It is home to Bristol whitebeam and Wilmott’s whitebeam, which are not found anywhere else in the world and—I found this out only in the past couple of days—we also have the Bristol onion. The Avon gorge is the only place where it is found in mainland Britain. It is very pretty, with big purple flowers, but it is under threat from invasive species.

My favourite Twitter account, NoExtinctions, looks at attempts on obscure islands to stamp out invasive species that put particular species under threat. Lundy island did a very good job recently stamping out the rat population. NoExtinctions is a great account to follow to see what is going on in very obscure, unheard-of places around the world.

Bristol has developed its own pollinator strategy. Urban pollination strategies are incredibly important as there cannot be a divide between the town and city. “Get Bristol Buzzing” plants nectar and pollen-rich flower meadows in public spaces, in parks but also on roundabouts and wherever there is a spare piece of land.

I am also a species champion. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Buglife has asked a number of MPs to be species champions and now have about 30 or 40 MPs. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) is one.

Angela Smith: So am I—for the hen harrier.

Kerry McCarthy: As is my hon. Friend.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I would just like to say that I am the bitterna species champion and I am proud to say that bitterna babies are booming, so that is good news.

Kerry McCarthy: I am glad. If anyone is not a species champion, I should say that more are needed, so Members can sign up.

I am a swift champion. It is urban habitat loss that is responsible for the decline in swift numbers. The RSPB told me last week that in Exeter they are introducing a planning requirement for new-build developments to include swift bricks or boxes—a really simple measure that will increase the number of places where swifts can nest and could be replicated across the country. I will certainly be urging Bristol council to take that on board, and I hope others will too.

3.25 pm

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. You will not know this, but you are actually one of my favourite MPs, based on the image on your magnificent Christmas card of you casually leaning on the Terrace with your mug. It is etched in my memory and is one of my favourites from last year.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): There is another on the way.

Calum Kerr: I look forward to it. I should get my act together and one-up you on it—I will get my thinking cap on.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on securing this debate and kicking it off with a very well informed contribution. I confess that at first I was worried it was going to be a little bit too self-congratulatory regarding some of the things that had gone before, but it was not at all. There were some very good suggestions and proactive ideas for the Government to take forward. I congratulate her on bringing the subject before the House.

I thought the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) was particularly bold in bringing up the issue of fishing until I realised that the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) was not able to contribute to the debate, and suddenly it became an inspired move. I shall note that move for myself in future. Although there was much discussion about the blue belt, the hon. Member for South East Cornwall is a black belt when it comes to defending her local fishermen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John McNally) gave a lovely speech about the Scottish hills and bonnie glens that we are all so proud of, but as he rightly said it is about so much more than that. He gave a very honest report card on the Scottish Government’s efforts—some that we are very proud of and some that we need to work harder at.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) is a redoubtable champion of this whole issue. I hear she even braved yesterday’s Westminster Hall grouse debate to put forward an alternative view. Although I may not agree with her on that subject, it is really important to have voices on all sides that provide balanced argument. I thank her for her contribution today and for joining the fray yesterday. She made some excellent points. Throughout the debate, the importance came across of the Government joining up the dots of all the different plans to create the right picture for the future.

I googled the Bristol onion, which Members may be interested to know is also known as the round-headed leek. It is beautiful, with purple flowers.

Kerry McCarthy: I was going to say that it is also known as the bald-headed onion, but I think it is the bald-headed onion—I had better make sure I got that right.

Calum Kerr: The phrase I always use is that God only made so many heads perfect; the rest he covered up with hair.

The hon. Lady mentioned swifts. I was looking at my front lawn recently and my front grass is looking a little the worse for wear—I am sure all MPs can relate to
that, unless they have a gardener—apart from one little, very green patch, which is underneath where the swills nest, so they are also good for fertilising the front lawn.

As someone relatively new to politics, one of the reasons why I have liked this debate so much is that I cannot help but observe that we are all in some way guilty of living in the present, as my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk said, and not projecting forward to consider the longer-term implications of our decisions. MPs’ inboxes are full of short-term issues that need fixing, so it can be all too easy to ignore longer-term challenges. At times, we struggle to think beyond the five-year parliamentary term but, as we have heard today, the WWF’s “Living Planet Report” claimed that we are potentially facing the first mass extinction of species in 65 million years. If that is not a wake-up call, I do not know what is.

The scale of the challenge must not deter us. We have a duty to our children and their children not to be deterred from this enormous task. All efforts to focus the minds of policy makers in this place are welcome. If major declines in biodiversity continue, we risk nothing less than the collapse of the life-support systems that sustain us all. There is no synthetic alternative to those precious natural ecosystems. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat and the economy that underpins our standard of living all ultimately depend on biodiversity.

These problems reach far beyond DEFRA’s remit. This ought to be a common policy concern across all Government Departments, but let us be honest: we have very little sense of what approach the Government will take to the environment after Brexit and all its potential impacts on regulation and conservation programmes. I hope the Minister will give us a perspective on that today. Let me give one example of the Government’s approach. In a recent study, ecologists found that 65% of the areas earmarked for potential shale gas extraction have an above average level of biodiversity. I would be interested to learn how the Government think they can square such roughshod policies with their headline claim that they want to leave the natural environment in a better state than they found it.

In contrast, Scotland is a global leader on climate change. The Scottish Government have already achieved their target to reduce emissions by at least 42% by 2020. At the last count, Scotland generated the equivalent of 57% of its electricity consumption from renewables, and we aim to generate 100% equivalent of Scotland’s electricity from renewable sources by 2020. The UK Government’s recent contribution has been to slash support for renewable energy, much to the exasperation of the sector. I do not want to dwell too much on the differences because nature does not have any regard for national borders. I would much rather use the remainder of my time to talk about programmes under way in Scotland to protect our remarkable natural environment.

Scotland provides the major part of the UK’s contribution to the EU’s Natura 2000 programme. More than 15% of our land is designated for a wealth of habitats and species. Natura 2000 is the largest co-ordinated network of protected areas in the world, offering a haven to Europe’s most valuable and threatened species and habitats. Scotland remains a stronghold for a number of species, such as the Atlantic salmon and the freshwater pearl mussel, which are now threatened or extinct elsewhere in the EU. Additional conservation efforts include the network of sites of special scientific interest, targeted conservation efforts for species such as the red squirrel and reintroduction programmes, or species such as the white-tailed eagle, the red kite and the beaver.

After Brexit, there will be no compulsion on the UK to set targets for energy saving or green energy, which are both essential for meeting Scotland’s ambitious climate targets. On top of that, we face losing the protection that European courts offer if the UK Government fail to meet their commitments to the environment.

In conclusion, preventing the potential mass extinction of species due to the impact of human activity is about nothing less than keeping the only planet we have habitable. No country can tackle these challenges in isolation; they demand transnational co-operation, binding commitments and mutual trust. Given the Government’s claim that Brexit will revive Britain’s role on the global stage, let us hope that they choose to take a long-term view and put our duty to protect the planet and the diversity of life upon it at the heart of all they do.

3.35 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. This has been a fantastic and detailed debate. I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) not only for bringing her interest and expertise to the debate but for championing the relationship between natural capital and development, and its importance to the sustainability of this planet.

I first want to make an interjection about the species that I champion in York, the Tansy beetle. This year, its number grew substantially, despite York’s being under floodwater for several months. We have so much to learn about the behaviour of these species and what happens there. I am trying to grow the Tansy plant at home to help that species be even more productive in the future.

Last year was a very important year for us all. Not only were we signatories to the UN sustainable development goals, but we had the agreement in Paris on climate change. Both are very important indeed for challenging the real issues facing our planet at this time. Often in this place, we involve ourselves in debating the minutiae of operational processes, as opposed to taking a step back and looking at the big issues of our time and the global crises we are facing in this era. Therefore, it is a shame that there are not more parliamentarians here. I trust that this is the beginning of a process, not the end.

There are 169 targets that came from the 17 sustainable development goals, addressing issues such as climate action, life above the water—on land—and life below the water. What we have learned from these processes is that we alone in isolation will not make a difference. It is in the strong global partnerships we form that ambition can be realised.

The most important reason for staying in the EU is that it gives us an influential voice. Now that we have a determination to take another path, it is important for the Government to make sure we have that voice in the future. I call on the Minister today to say how we will have a voice on that global stage to ensure sustainability in the longer term. That was the point that my hon.
Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) was making with regard to fishing policy. Fish do not stay static in waters; they move. Therefore, it is so important that we have a seat at the table and a voice in that debate.

As we look at the global challenges that we face, we know that the environment is often at the heart of those issues—whether it is about population migration, for instance, or what is happening to our planet at this time. Our population has multiplied five times since the start of the last century. We know that we have got to address how we are consuming our planet at this time. We are using up 1.6 planets-worth of resources every year. That is not sustainable. We have to take a different direction if we are to be sustainable into the future.

I have to question the Minister again about the policies that are being pursued by her Department—for instance, over trade. Why, rather than focusing locally, are we trotting halfway around the world to build stronger trade relationships with emerging economies, as that increases our carbon footprint and therefore the damage that can be done to our planet? We need to ask challenging questions about what we are doing at the moment.

Biological diversity is a huge global asset. The interlinking of each element is so delicately balanced, as we have heard in today's debate. The lack of prioritisation of the importance of this issue is seen as a serious threat to specific species and the whole ecosystem. That is why, 24 years ago, the convention on biological diversity moved things forward, acknowledging that we need to be putting things in order. That is why the Aichi targets, of which we have heard so much today, have set out the global framework for moving biodiversity forwards and are so important to ensure sustainability in future. Those 20 targets drill down to another 114 more specific actions—again, targets and actions coming out of global plans. We need to respond with our UK biodiversity action plan.

Around the globe, nations have put together their plans—high on ambition, but delivery makes the difference. It is so important for us to ensure that we can deliver and, obviously, we have heard about the serious risks that we will not now deliver on the plans by 2020. That is deeply concerning in a developed country, that we cannot put that in order. That is why the report that stimulated today's debate, the "Living Planet Report", by WWF and ZSL, and earlier this year the "State of Nature" report made startling reading. We do not have time to waste, we cannot delay and we cannot say that we missed our targets because we did not do the right actions, because the next generations will not forgive us for that. Therefore, it is so essential that we move forward.

We have been failing the targets. We want to know how we will complete the network of marine protection areas. How will we ensure that we have planted enough trees? What is happening to our air quality, with 50,000 people in our own country dying each year from poor air quality? And our soil has only around 32 harvests left to sustain the future. So we have real concerns moving forward.

The fact is that where we are, the analysis has been done, the reports have been made, the targets have been set and monitoring processes are being put in place, but the issue is political ambition and delivery. That is where my concern sits. If we are honest, this House saw the movement towards the Climate Change Act 2008, put forward by Labour, which was really momentum building, moved the whole issue forward and delivered a world-changing agreement on the back of it. That legislation was leading the world, but we have not seen the same on biodiversity and we are certainly not seeing the same importance being placed on that agenda by the Government.

That really concerns me, and my biggest call today is that this agenda is mainstreamed into every area of departmental and Government work. We may look at issues in their silos, when it is very easy to say, “That’s a DEFRA issue,” but as the right hon. Member for Meriden said, this one links in with development, industrial strategy and, as we have heard, energy strategy. It is so important that we mainstream this agenda into the future.

The reality, and another concern I have, is that we are a consumerist society, which is a focus of what I am looking at. How do we address consumption? We cannot keep consuming our planet, living our lives and saying, “These are our rights!” without serious consequences for generations to come. We therefore have to look at how we take that forward. That is why I was disappointed that the Minister did not embrace issues such as the circular economy when she appeared before the Select Committee. We have to move these issues forward—it is so important.

I have been heartened, I have to say, by the Welsh Labour Government addressing the issue of how we change behaviour and move things forward in their Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. This Act is about improving the social and economic environment, as well as cultural wellbeing in Wales. It is the first serious attempt to see driven changes in behaviour towards the wider environment. We have also heard today about Scotland and about putting these issues at the heart of economic strategy.

Loss of natural capital impacts on so many things—not just our air, land and sea, but our health and wellbeing, and our communities and livelihoods. With poor air quality and 5.5 million people dying prematurely, we also know that 663 million people do not have access to clean and safe water. In the UK, soil degradation is leading to 2.2 million tonnes of lost soil every year and, across the globe, only 15% of soil provides the quality needed to grow our crops. Therefore, we have to drive change forward.

In concluding, I want to say first, as many colleagues have already said, that the 25-year plan has been delayed and that, although we know a framework is on the way, what my hon. Friends have said is absolutely right: the reality is not sustainable. We have to take a different direction for generations to come. We therefore have to look at how she is mainstreaming this issue right across Government. If she has not been to date, how will she take that forward?

Secondly, I want the Minister to give feedback on how she is mainstreaming this issue right across Government. If she has not been to date, how will she take that forward?

Thirdly, also called for across the House today, we can work together across the House on moving our biodiversity system forward. The reality is that the
planet is so fragile, and the Government do not have a monopoly of wisdom on these issues, but if we work together we might just have the solutions needed to change behaviour. If change of behaviour starts at home, then every single parliamentarian has a responsibility back in their constituencies to lead things to a new place. We have even more responsibility in this place. Will the Minister therefore be prepared for a cross-party working group to look specifically at how we move the whole agenda around biodiversity forward to ensure that we do not miss our targets? If Government miss their targets, we are all affected, and the next generation is too. On those three requests, I would like an answer from the Minister.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) for securing the debate. She has great experience in this field, as she eloquently illustrated. I also welcome back several hon. Members who were in this Chamber yesterday. Large elements of that debate covered biodiversity, and in particular we discussed actively managed heather moorlands, which I learned are rarer than rain forest.

Angela Smith: When talking about heather moorlands, it is always best to remember that they are built primarily on blanket bog, and it is the bog itself that is really endangered and degraded by environmental impacts over a 200-year period.

Dr Coffey: Which I am sure is why the hon. Lady will welcome our strategy to tackle the matter.

As referred to extensively, last week WWF and the Zoological Society of London published the “Living Planet Report”, which included specific data and conclusions about the direction of travel and certain species being in decline. That is clear, but we need to be slightly cautious in extrapolating to a global scale from the detail of specific datasets in the report.

Biodiversity loss is a global problem that needs a global solution. Through schemes such as the Darwin initiative and the international climate fund, the UK supports projects that directly help developing countries to protect their biodiversity. Over the past 12 months, we have seen the agreement of a range of measures at international level, from the adoption of the Paris agreement on climate change last December, to which the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) referred, through to last week’s agreement to create the world’s largest marine protected area in the Ross sea in the Antarctic. As part of that landmark decision, countries also agreed to a proposal by the United Kingdom to protect areas after ice shelf collapse and retreat.

The global community has adopted targets to drive action on key areas of concern, most recently in 2010 under the convention on biological diversity, on which my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden was herself instrumental in reaching a final deal. Last year, those targets were reflected in the global goals for sustainable development. At the CBD meeting in December, we will hear that while there has been significant progress towards some of the 2010 targets, without further action many will not be achieved by 2020. The UK’s core aim for the meeting is to promote effective international action to halt the loss of biodiversity. We will work to agree strategic actions to mainstream biodiversity across other sectors, as well as to gain recognition for the important links between biodiversity, climate change and the global goals.

Our scientific expertise is globally recognised. UK scientists led the vital assessment of pollinators that will be presented to the CBD meeting and that provides the evidence to end up in international action. As we have heard, the December meeting will centre on the theme of mainstreaming, which is about taking on an integrated approach and putting conservation in the broader context of long-term prosperity and sustainability.

Our 25-year environment plan will help us to achieve mainstreaming in the United Kingdom—certainly in England and perhaps in other parts of the United Kingdom—and will put in place the foundations to ensure that everyone has the chance to become responsible stewards of the natural environment.

To answer Members’ specific direct questions, it is not possible for Ministers to attend all such meetings, which means that it is necessary to take strategic decisions about whether to attend. I confirm—I have already made this clear to the House in other ways—that a Minister will not be going to Mexico this December, but a considerable amount has already been achieved and our officials are clear about the levers that they can pull to achieve our strategic objectives.

Dr Offord: Having been a Parliamentary Private Secretary myself, I am aware of the ministerial code. If no one else is able to attend, perhaps an able PPS would be able to go.

Dr Coffey: I am not aware that there is any leeway in the ministerial code for PPSs to attend as Government representatives.

Dr Offord: Will the Minister give way a second time?

Dr Coffey: No, I will not. There is an option for a PPS to accompany a Minister, but PPSs are not Ministers and therefore cannot represent the Government in that way.

I will give some examples of levers that can be pulled. DEFRA has invested £140 million of international climate finance and committed a further £200 million to forestry projects that protect the world’s most biodiverse rain forests. For example, in Brazil, which is home to 12% of the world’s forests, our investment is protecting biodiversity by helping farmers transition to low-carbon technologies. By working with other Departments, such as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for International Development, we can deploy international climate funding as part of our climate change efforts, which help biodiversity.

I assure Members that the Government take global biodiversity loss seriously, as demonstrated by the strong UK presence at several significant international meetings this year that have addressed that subject. Between September and December, there will have been four major international meetings: the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species meeting, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources congress, the Vietnam conference
on the illegal wildlife trade, and the CBD meeting. DEFRA will continue to be a strong influence at those meetings.

I attended the CITES meeting and the Secretary of State will attend the IWT meeting later this month. At CITES, we adopted measures that will protect critically threatened species such as pangolins, opposed the resumption of commercial trade in ivory, adopted enhanced global rules on hunting trophies—the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) correctly pointed out that that is about much more than just the iconic big animals—and in particular made groundbreaking moves on rosewood. I learned at the conference that more than two thirds of what CITES protects is flora rather than fauna. While in South Africa, I visited Kruger park specifically to see UK Government-funded tracker training to help stop rhino poachers. [Interuption.] 

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. There is a Division in the House. Minister, I think I am right in believing that you are nowhere near coming to a conclusion. You still have seven and a half minutes.

Dr Coffey: I'm afraid so. Well, not afraid—delighted.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Quite right too.

3.52 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

[Mr Adrian Bailey in the Chair]

4.7 pm

On resuming—

Dr Coffey: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

To reiterate, while in South Africa, I visited the Kruger national park specifically to see UK Government-funded tracker training, which is intended to stop rhino poaching. It is extraordinary to think that success is measured by the fact that, instead of two to three rhinos being poached a day, it is down to one a day. I am pleased to say that the canine unit is particularly successful. It has a dog called Killer, who has managed to get more than 100 poachers—it does not kill them; it just stops them—and in the 24 hours I was there seven poachers were found. Well done, Killer and the trackers.

To talk about the UK, in January, we published our latest assessment of UK progress with national and international commitments on biodiversity. As at the global level, our indicators give a mixed picture, but I do not think it is quite as bleak as painted by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). There are many areas in which we are doing well. We are world leaders on natural capital accounting. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), who is no longer in his place, referred to the fact that the Natural Capital Committee reports to the Chancellor; it does so through the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Economy and Industrial Strategy.

We lead the way in protecting our marine environment and have delivered on the commitment to create a blue belt of marine protection across the UK’s overseas territories, announcing new areas of protection around Pitcairn, St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha. Seventeen per cent of UK waters and 21.8% of English waters are now designated as marine protected areas.

We have announced plans to ban the sale and manufacture of products containing microbeads, which can cause harm to the marine environment. Since the publication of the Government’s “Biodiversity 2020” strategy in 2011, an additional 15,000 hectares of our most important wildlife sites have been restored to a fully healthy state. More than 90% of our most important wildlife sites are in a healthy or improving condition, hitting our goal for 2020 already.

Our new countryside stewardship scheme is more targeted at our most important habitats and species and includes, for the first time, a wild pollinator and farm wildlife package as well as support for farmers, through the facilitation fund, to work together beyond their own farm gates. Some of our water companies are actively managing upstream habitats and so reducing their costs in purifying water, while conservation groups have found innovative ways of funding habitat management, such as providing cut reeds as biomass for bioenergy plants, as seen in the Waveney valley.

We have set in hand the creation of nearly 115,000 hectares of priority habitats such as meadows and traditional orchards, which is well over halfway towards the 200,000 hectare “Biodiversity 2020” target. We have achieved 63.45% of priority habitat in favourable or recovering condition. Woodland cover in England is at its highest level since the 14th century and I am confident that our manifesto commitment to plant another 11 million trees over the course of the Parliament is on track.

There are now otters in every county in England, and we have improved the fortunes of the bittern, the curl-bunting and the greater horseshoe bat. A comprehensive national strategy has been in place since 2008 to tackle the threats posed by invasive non-native species and we have championed the introduction of the EU invasive alien species regulation to bring other member states up to UK standards.

However, it is clear that there are definitely still areas in which we need to do more, which have already been highlighted—for example, we need to reverse the negative trends on farmland birds, butterflies and pollinators. One way we hope to achieve that is through our 25-year environment plan, which will build on our successes and, together with the food and farming plan, set the direction for policy. We are consulting on a framework in the next few months to help us to develop the 25-year environment plan. We will set out what my officials say is a game-changing approach—a new approach to managing the environment, building on already good pillars of success.

Extensive reference has been made to the overseas territories. The UK is custodian of precious and unique environmental assets, including in the overseas territories, many of which are small islands that are highly vulnerable to environmental challenges, in particular through human activities and the introduction of invasive species. I am pleased that leaders and representatives of the overseas territories are in London this week to meet the Government to discuss a range of issues, including climate change and the environment, and I look forward to my meetings tomorrow.

I will take away the point made by the hon. Member for Bristol East about dedicated officials and compensation.
not going directly to the overseas Administrations. We know that the Darwin Plus fund, which was established in 2012, brought funding for environmental projects into one place to support the implementation of agreements such as the convention on international trade in endangered species and the convention on biological diversity. So far, 70 projects have been funded across 14 overseas territories, including Anguilla and the Cayman Islands, totalling well over £400 million.

During the last minute of my contribution I will try to address some of the other specific points raised. My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden referred to the critical gaps that need to be filled in marine conservation zones. We will be consulting on that next year. I clearly do not know the geography of her local area as well she does, but I know that the biodiversity off-setting strategy for HS2 is being carefully considered in the work between my Department and the Department for Transport.

The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge spoke of fishing. I point out to her that the UK has led the way in marine conservation, for which I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). Let us be clear: we want to ensure that, in any future co-operation scheme, there is no sliding back by any party on the important marine conservation progress that has been made.

The hon. Member for Bristol East referred to the Avon gorge and the Bristol onion—I wonder whether that is as tasty as it looks. She also referred to swifts, urban habitat loss and the innovative planning requirements in Exeter. That is a good example of local action, and it shows how local nature partnerships can work really well. I am sure that her mentioning it in the House today will bring it to the attention of other local nature partnerships.

The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (Calum Kerr), ably supported by the hon. Member for Falkirk, reminded us of Scotland’s contribution to helping the UK achieve its international commitments. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked a bit about trade around the world. The country has to earn its living, and there are huge opportunities for environmental services. Air quality is a personal priority of mine that I wish to take forward. On the circular economy, let me be clear: I support the principles, I just do not like the name. In fact, many companies are already leading the way on that, and I assure her that the UK is actively involved in the negotiations.

The decision to leave the EU means we now have a unique opportunity to design a set of policies specific to the needs of Britain, its species and habitats. We will continue to provide strong international leadership on biodiversity and to work with the EU. Our goal is to leave the natural environment in a better state than we found it for future generations. I thank all hon. Members who participated in the debate.

4.14 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am delighted that you have been able to join us for the latter stages of the debate, Mr Bailey. I am sure you will have picked up in that short time how important this issue is for the future of our countries and for future generations. I thought it was put incredibly neatly by the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally), who said of our generation, “Let us not create a global extinction event as our legacy.” I cannot underline that more. The debate has been an important contribution to making sure that, as far as possible, we leave a really good legacy for the next generation. I thank all hon. Members who took part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered global biodiversity.
Coeliac Disease and Prescriptions

4.15 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered coeliac disease and prescriptions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I am grateful for the opportunity to hold a debate that raises awareness of the problems facing those who suffer from coeliac disease and of access to gluten-free food prescriptions. It would be remiss of me not to thank the work of Coeliac UK, the national charity that represents people with coeliac disease, for not only supporting the campaign around the prescription of gluten-free food, but for its work to support sufferers.

Coeliac disease affects one in every 100 people in the UK. I declare an unwelcome interest: I actually suffer from coeliac disease, although I do not get prescriptions for gluten-free food. It is also worth noting that there are some half a million people in the UK who are completely undiagnosed, according to Coeliac UK.

Coeliac disease is a serious medical condition in which the body’s immune system attacks its own tissue when gluten is eaten. The only medical treatment currently available for sufferers is a strict adherence to a gluten-free diet for the rest of their lives. In the late 1960s, gluten-free food was first prescribed to prevent long-term health complications. However, that rationale has now been withdrawn such prescriptions.

The fact that their position lacks supporting evidence for complications. However, that rationale has now been withdrawn such prescriptions.

food was first prescribed to prevent long-term health problems, could put him at risk.

To Coeliac UK’s FOI request, which came from North East Essex CCG, where sweeping assumptions have been made that are completely devoid of any systematic research. That CCG stated:

“We appreciate that there is a large cost-differential between supermarket value brands and GF [gluten-free], but many people

within the CCG buy their bread from bakers or do not buy the supermarket value brands and the cost differential is therefore much reduced.”

That type of anecdotal evidence, used by CCGs to justify their decisions about patient care, is in direct conflict with a paper produced in September last year entitled “Cost and availability of gluten-free food in the UK: in store and online”. It said:

“There is good availability of gluten-free food in regular and quality supermarkets as well as online, but it remains significantly more expensive. Budget supermarkets tend to be frequented by patients from lower socioeconomic classes stocked no GF foods. This poor availability and added cost is likely to impact on adherence in deprived groups.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The issue does not apply only to elderly people. I have had a number of young people write to me about this, who are very concerned that they may not be able to get gluten-free foods on prescription any more. Has he looked at the possible costs for people who are at the lower end of the earnings scale?

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. There is evidence—including from my own family—that gluten intolerance and coeliac disease run in families. If a young family includes several children with this condition, the cost could be significant.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): To reinforce the point, my constituent Sheryl Rees has drawn my attention to the fact that her son was diagnosed with coeliac disease when he was two. He is now 11. She pointed out the cost of gluten-free items. For example, a small loaf is £3. A pizza is £4. Pasta is £2 a pack. Basically, she is paying double. She has a family of six. This is really impacting on her family’s budget.

Mr Jones: The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point, especially in terms of families with children. There is also a question of availability in some rural areas. Larger supermarkets stock some of these products at the prices he mentioned and higher, but in other areas the products are not available.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Jones: I will make a bit more progress.

We have a situation where, in places such as east Essex, the needs of patients are being discounted despite a complete lack of any type of research. I am concerned that more CCGs across the country will begin to use inadequate justifications as a precedent and follow a similar path. That leads me back to my earlier point about the big problem of under-diagnosis. I am afraid we will see a bigger problem if gluten-free prescriptions are not made available to those on low incomes.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On the specific point of failure to diagnose, until 20 years ago I had never heard of coeliac disease, and then I went out with a young lady who, as a teenager, had repeatedly gone to her GP knowing something was wrong. Coeliac disease was never diagnosed until she suffered something analogous to a stroke, which left her permanently all but unable to read. Although she has bravely developed
Mr Jones: The right hon. Gentleman raises a serious point about the life-changing effects that coeliac disease can have. I was only diagnosed by accident, in my 30s; my mother was not diagnosed until she was over 70. Early diagnosis is important, but it is not uncommon for people to live a long time without one being made.

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 included a duty on CCGs to have regard for National Institute for Health and Care Excellence quality standards, but NICE guidance on prescribing gluten-free food for the management of coeliac disease has only recently been published. It says:

“Gluten-free products are more expensive and are usually only available from larger retailers, making access more difficult for people on low incomes or with limited mobility. As coeliac disease can affect more than one member of a family it can also be an additional burden on the family budget” as the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) said.

To address this, healthcare professionals should help people who may need support to find suitable gluten-free food products on prescription to enable them to maintain a gluten-free diet.”

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I declare an interest, having been diagnosed in my late 20s. My cousin and all my second cousins are exactly the same. In fact, at university I was diagnosed with ME because I was so unwell and unable to work at various points.

This debate is an opportunity also to talk about the low incomes and limited mobility that can affect people’s access to these basic items. We must also make a plea through Coeliac UK to supermarkets to ensure that what they provide, which is very expensive, is of better nutritional quality, with lower levels of salt and fat. Although these foods are gluten-free, they might be full of some awful stuff as well.

Mr Jones: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point, but I assure her that the products available today are completely different from when I was first diagnosed. The bread then was like cardboard, and today it is very much different.

There is a general duty for GPs to prescribe treatments for health conditions via the FP10 prescribing system where treatment is available, and in the case of coeliac disease that is a gluten-free diet. There is also a duty in legislation for CCGs to reduce inequalities with respect to patient access to services and outcomes, but because of the lack of explicit recommendations on prescribing from NICE, CCGs are being given a fairly free hand to make decisions that run contrary to reducing health inequalities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Prescription of gluten-free food as medication clearly needs to be regulated by the NHS across the United Kingdom. One of my constituents said to me this week:

“The disease is antisocial and can lead to isolation.”

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the supply of food on prescription can have social benefits, as well as mental, physical and emotional benefits?

Mr Jones: It can. There is some anecdotal evidence about the connection between coeliac disease and mental health. The hon. Gentleman raises an interesting point.

This situation is creating considerable uncertainty for those who rely on access to gluten-free staples on prescription, and it is the vulnerable who are most adversely affected. Individuals with the disease are not eating gluten-free food out of choice or because it is some type of fad or Hollywood diet. They do so because they have to. It is people on fixed incomes or on benefits who receive free prescriptions and those whose households rely on deliveries from community pharmacies who will suffer most if prescriptions are withdrawn.

A number of people have written to me ahead of this debate, and I would like to draw Members’ attention to their cases. Patricia said:

“The diet I and many others follow is not a fad. It is necessary as it will affect my health and wellbeing if not followed, and might actually result in my admission to hospital—an extra strain on the NHS.”

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman consider students in this category? Many of them are on low budgets. They might be tempted not to buy the right food and then end up being sick and in the NHS, costing the state more money.

Mr Jones: That is the main point. What some CCGs are doing is a false economy, because one hospital admission will cost more than the annual cost of prescriptions for an individual who adheres to a gluten-free diet.

Another person living with coeliac disease, Janice, who is a constituent of mine, wrote to me saying:

“I strongly believe that these plans will cause more expense to the government when coeliac patients can’t afford shop priced gluten-free foods and don’t stick to their diet and end up with cancer of the bowels”, as well as other conditions. She went on:

“I am a pensioner and find it increasingly hard to afford luxuries like biscuits and cakes. If I have to add gluten free bread, pasta and cereals to my shopping list this will cause more stress. I cannot have any form of gluten, even in small doses, as I am violently ill.”

As well as a failure to consider the evidence before making decisions to withdraw gluten-free prescriptions, there is also evidence of a lack of public consultation by CCGs. Coeliac UK has been doing a good job of holding CCGs to account. One example it provided is of Trevor, who told Coeliac UK that he has never received confirmation in writing that the policy had changed; he was informed only when Coeliac UK told him. He was diagnosed 10 years ago and has only ever had bread on prescription. He is unable to work and has ongoing medical problems. His nearest shop is a Co-op, which does not stock gluten-free products, and the nearest shop that does is some six miles away. That creates problems for people such as him.

The CCGs that have already removed access to prescriptions for gluten-free products have not outlined or implemented policies that offer alternatives to safeguard patients, such as access to specialist dietary or nutritional advice. When a coeliac patient is taken out of a CCG’s responsibility because their gluten-free food prescription has been withdrawn, that CCG can no longer monitor them or determine the changed policy’s impact on that
patient’s health. This is an important factor, and I am concerned that it has not been taken into account by a number of CCGs.

In areas where gluten-free products are not prescribed, there is now no opportunity to encourage dietary adherence nor a prevention strategy for long-term management of people with coeliac disease. Effectively, patients who suffer the condition in these areas will be offered no support by the NHS. Although CCGs are engaged with local authorities and wellbeing boards to explore alternatives, none has yet been put in place.

The NHS has a good track record of involving the public in consultation, but the lack of consultation on the decision to withdraw prescriptions for gluten-free products is a disgrace, added to the fact that charities such as Coeliac UK are not consulted before such decisions are made.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The point he is making is direct and correct. The nine-year-old daughter of my constituent, Helen Frost, has coeliac disease and Helen is worried that prescriptions for gluten-free products may be taken away. The uncertainty is adding stress to a situation that is already difficult to manage.

Mr Jones: That is not even taken into consideration, as my hon. Friend says.

My concern is that cutting prescriptions for gluten-free products is a simple and easy target for CCGs under financial pressure. The entire prescription cost to the NHS in 2014 was £26.8 million or 0.27% of the total prescription budget—£194 per patient. The procurement system that the NHS has in place is not working. The market for gluten-free products in the UK in 2014 was some £211 million, but the annual NHS budget was around £27 million or 13% of that total market. I do not know why the NHS cannot negotiate contracts with some commercial companies. Failure in procurement will clearly have an impact.

I turn to the issue of pharmacists. Back when we had primary care trusts, some pharmacy-led supply pilot schemes were set up in a handful of regions in England. When a patient was diagnosed with coeliac disease, the pharmacy-led scheme allowed patients to access gluten-free food service: a pharmacy-led scheme based on pilots in the UK.

Will the Minister seriously consider introducing such a scheme in England? It would save time and money and be a better way of managing people with coeliac disease. It is worth noting that the annual cost of gluten-free food is lower than the annual cost of items other than gluten-free food and to manage their coeliac disease. However, with the establishment of CCGs, that seems to have gone out of the window—except in Scotland, which has a national gluten-free food service: a pharmacy-led scheme based on pilots in the UK.

The other thing that has happened since the 1960s—I think the hon. Gentleman will concede this—is that the supermarkets and the retail trade have begun to get their act together in selling these products, although of course they are not available to everyone. Many supermarkets now have areas with gluten-free products, including bread and pasta. The products are more expensive than the equivalent non-gluten-free products, but they are certainly more available than in the past and a real alternative. Added to that, the fish and meat part of the diet, which is the same for sufferers and non-sufferers, is available to both.

4.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on leading the charge on this subject. There is clearly consensus in the Chamber on the direction the Government should take. I will make a few points about where we are and what I think we need to do, and leave time for him to sum up.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. In a half-hour debate, the mover does not have the opportunity to sum up at the end, so you have a little more time than you thought, Minister.

David Mowat: Thank you, Mr Bailey.

As the hon. Gentleman said, one in 100 people in the UK suffer from coeliac disease. Interestingly, I was not aware of it until a year ago, when I was tested for the disease—fortunately I was negative. It is a significant disease that benefits from early diagnosis, and the points made about diagnosis were valid. Coeliac disease is an autoimmune condition: gluten damages the small bowel and the immune system feeds on it, resulting in a range of symptoms including diarrhoea, iron deficiency, tiredness and weight loss. It can exacerbate, if not cause, osteoporosis and mental health issues.

As we have heard, the only treatment is a gluten-free diet, which has two components. Meat, fish, fruit and vegetables do not contain gluten and generally do not need to be prescribed, but staple foods such as bread, pasta and flour and non-staple food such as biscuits do contain gluten. Since the 1960s, when the medical community was becoming more aware of the disease, those staple and non-staple foods have been prescribed pretty much, it is fair to say, without limit until recently. We spend something like £28 million a year on these prescriptions and in the great scheme of NHS costs that is not huge when considering the cost of cancer drugs and so on. It is true that we are now seeing a postcode lottery emerge, and I will say a little about why.

The other thing that has happened since the 1960s—I think the hon. Gentleman will concede this—is that the supermarkets and the retail trade have begun to get their act together in selling these products, although of course they are not available to everyone. Many supermarkets now have areas with gluten-free products, including bread and pasta. The products are more expensive than the equivalent non-gluten-free products, but they are certainly more available than in the past and a real alternative. Added to that, the fish and meat part of the diet, which is the same for sufferers and non-sufferers, is available to both.
Kevin Foster: The Minister is making a valid point about supermarkets. Will he suggest to CCGs such as Torbay in south Devon that there is a halfway house and that instead of scrapping the prescription of gluten-free products they could provide vouchers that could be taken to a local supermarket?

David Mowat: That is an interesting idea, which I will consider, but I am not briefed to talk about it. The position of most Members on this issue is very clear from the tone of this debate and the points being made, and we will respond to that.

Rebecca Pow: Will the Minister give way?

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: First to my hon. Friend, and then to the hon. Lady.

Rebecca Pow: This is highly relevant. I, too, have been contacted by constituents who have suggested this voucher idea—that the bona fide coeliacs get the staples and so many vouchers a month, not for all their products, but for the bread, pasta and absolute staples.

Liz McInnes: Is the Minister aware that the annual cost per diagnosed patient of prescribing gluten-free food is £180 per year? Weigh that up against the cost of avoiding infertility, bowel cancer and osteoporosis. What is the obvious conclusion for any NHS professional?

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Before the Minister responds, can I point out that he has been very generous in taking interventions, but the debate has to finish at 4.45 pm?

David Mowat: I made the point earlier that one in 100 people suffer from coeliac disease, and that £28 million is not a huge amount of money in the context of the entire NHS. I am sure the hon. Lady's arithmetic stands up to that, and those are fair points.

If I may, I will set out the postcode lottery that has emerged. So far, 11 out of around 200 CCGs have ended all gluten-free prescriptions; 27 offer only bread and flour; 20 offer only bread, flour and pizza; 92, which is still by far the majority, broadly follow the Coeliac UK guidelines and offer a full range based a little on age, gender and other restrictions; and only four CCGs now have no restrictions whatsoever. The arguments about this are clear. Many poorer people, in particular—low-income people—are affected by the need to source their gluten-free products in different areas. CCGs are under pressure—the whole of the NHS is under pressure—and choices have to be made. It is true that £28 million is not a huge amount of money, but with £28 million here and £28 million there, we are soon talking about real money. It is true that choices have to be made, but it is not clear to me that this is an area in which the right choice is always being made.

In the couple of minutes available, I want to set out the actions that I think we should take. First, the hon. Member for North Durham correctly said that the community pharmacy sector has a role in this and is not so far being utilised as much as it could be. I think that he was wrong to say that it has stopped doing this in the transition from PCTs to CCGs. Something like 200 community pharmacies—15% of the total—do stock and sell gluten-free products. We are doing a review into the community pharmacy sector, trying to get it more focused on services. This is a very clear example of the sort of thing that we should be paying it to do, and when the Murray review is complete. I will—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will hold me to account on this—endeavour to make sure that that happens.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned consultations. CCGs should not withdraw gluten-free products without a consultation. My understanding is that in all cases where that has happened, a consultation has taken place. If he can provide me with evidence of that not being so, I will follow up and take action. The information I have been given is that consultations should always have taken place.

Finally, there is the issue of the postcode lottery. It is true that we give CCGs a lot of power in our system, in terms of making clinical decisions. The idea behind that is that they look at local considerations and balance the various options that they have. However, I will see to it that a review is done, hopefully within the next six months, of prescribing policies, and we will endeavour to come together with something that is more consistent, in a way that means we can actually make progress on this. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I thank everybody that has made an intervention in this debate. It has been a good debate, and a useful one for us to have had.

Question put and agreed to.
4.45 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the National College for Wind Energy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I wish that this debate was not necessary, but with the autumn statement in just three weeks’ time, once again the Government look set to omit a deal for the proposed national college for wind energy, meaning that the project will stay stalled. The college was first announced in December 2014 by the then Business Secretary, the former Member for Twickenham. Three other colleges were aimed at addressing existing or forecast skills shortages in particular industries, and the policy included £80 million of Government funding to be matched by employers. However, difficulties at the due diligence stage of developing the bid with the private sector meant that the funding application could not be submitted in time, and the project was not included in last year’s autumn statement.

The original proposal was for a hub-and-spoke model. The college located in the Humber area would deliver training, allow partners to use the site for expertise that was not available elsewhere, and act as a co-ordination point for other skills providers located elsewhere in the country in order to maximise access. Following the failure to develop a funded plan for that before the deadline, alternative proposals were suggested, including one whereby there would be no physical college, but merely a national college badge for training providers as a guarantee of quality. I am glad that that idea no longer seems to be under consideration.

I will come to the various barriers that are preventing the deal, but it is important to note that this proposal was a pre-election promise by the coalition Government to invest tens of millions of pounds into the Humber region and to boost our local offshore wind industry. As it stands, that is a broken promise, which can be added to a pile of pre-election northern powerhouse funding commitments that quickly unravelled after last May.

Clearly the Government need to take the wheel if the college is ever going to be delivered, but I am now really concerned that the new Government are neglecting this proposal. When I and colleagues representing constituencies in the Humber, who I am delighted have joined me here today, met the previous Ministers for Business and Energy—the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) and the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—back in March 2016, they assured us that they remained committed to delivering the college, but now it simply does not seem to be on the Government’s radar. Following the appointment of the current Cabinet in July, I wrote to the Secretary of State for the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, calling on him to work with the Education Secretary to ensure that a suitable proposal for the college was ready in time for this year’s autumn statement. I am still waiting for a reply.

The Prime Minister sent an awful signal to the energy industry when in one of her very first acts she scrapped the Department for Energy and Climate Change. She now has to show the industry that she is serious about giving it the attention that such an important sector of our economy requires. The day after my application for this debate was granted, my office received a call from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. It wanted to know whether it or the Department for Education needed to send a Minister to respond today. That suggests that there has been absolutely no communication between the two Departments on this subject for four months, and that is incredibly disappointing. I say to the Minister here today that when he goes back to his office, he should pick up the phone to his colleagues in the BEIS and get to work on delivering what was promised.

When the college was first announced less than two years ago, the then Business Secretary said:

“The UK can no longer afford to lag behind countries like France and Germany, which have invested heavily in technical skills at the highest level for generations. The National Colleges will function on a par with our most prestigious universities, delivering training that matches the best in the world. They will help build a strong, balanced economy that delivers opportunity across all regions in the UK.”

That all remains true today: skills provision in this country does not match its ambitions and there is still a need to support industries such as offshore wind that provide good jobs outside London and the south-east. As a relatively young and fast-growing industry that demands high levels of skills, it is no surprise that offshore wind sites have sometimes struggled to find workers already equipped with the necessary capabilities for the jobs. Mike Parker, who was chair of the Humber local enterprise partnership’s employment and skills board, said that the national college would be “a major step forward in helping the UK bridge that gap.”

RenewableUK, the trade body for renewable energy, has highlighted some of the challenges specific to offshore work in training employees. Personnel need to receive training in real working environments, and it has to be done safely; such conditions are difficult to replicate. That accounts for the need for advanced skills training in the construction and operation of turbines offshore. It takes four years of training to become a wind turbine technician.

A RenewableUK study from two years ago found that more than a third of wind and marine energy firms were having difficulty filling certain positions. The TUC argued in its “Powering ahead” report that the skills gap in renewables requires training to be given equal weight to what are currently described as the three pillars of energy policy: security, affordability and sustainability.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. The Humber local enterprise partnership has prioritised skills and training and it has done a good job. Does she agree that a Government commitment to deliver and complete their promise on wind energy, by agreeing to get the college moving forward, would be a real, much-needed vote of confidence in the Humber LEP and the Humber region?

Melanie Onn: I could not agree more. The significant skills gap across many industries has been noted and recognised in the local area. The Humber region is particularly eager to capitalise on the growth in the offshore industry, whether we are talking about Siemens,
The significant thing about Michael, in his own words, was this:

"Seven months ago I was on jobseeker’s allowance, and had no plans and nothing to bring to the table. North Sea Services didn’t judge me for all my tattoos and took me on. Seeing the wind turbines close up is mind-blowing. The work that goes into them is unbelievable. I’m trying to show them that I’m worth keeping on."

Happily, North Sea Services did keep him on, and Michael was part of the vessel crew that took my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) and I out to visit the Humber Gateway turbines in June. His story shows why it is so important that this industry continues to grow and that the college is developed: so more young people in towns such as Great Grimsby have a chance to make something of their lives, and to have a job they can be proud of.

Great Grimsby was one of three sites in the Humber region that were originally touted to host the college. I want to say why it would be so important for the development of my town, and I hope that my neighbouring colleagues will excuse me for championing my town as the host town for the college. For more than a century, Great Grimsby was a one-industry town. Fishing not only employed thousands of local people but gave them their identity, their community and their pride, and we are still feeling the effects of its decline. My constituency has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country, and because of the lack of opportunity one in three of our children grows up in poverty.

I have said it before, but it is true: offshore wind has brought a renewal of hope to Grimsby. It is playing an important role in redefining what my town offers not just to our own people, but to the rest of the country. We are already the renewable energy capital of England and being home to the national college for wind energy would be vital for the same reason. It would also give more local people the opportunity for a proper career, with high-skilled work—something that until recently young people felt they would have to go to the big cities to find.

The Prime Minister said last month that the Government’s industrial strategy was

“about identifying the industries that are of strategic value to our economy and supporting and promoting them through policies on”,

among other things, “training” and “skills”. She also spoke about the importance of economic revival in parts of our country that have lagged behind London and the south-east for too long. If this Government are to live up to the Prime Minister’s conference speech, they need to show leadership and get this project moving again. If industry is now reluctant to commit funds to the project, citing greater risk, lower growth, and a lack of clarity on skills policy, the Government should assuage those concerns by committing to support the industry.

We have seen in the past week that the Government are willing to support specific industries and even individual companies, as with Nissan. It is good news that Nissan’s future in Sunderland is secured, but it is just as important that the Government meet their commitments to the wind energy industry. The Government should also remind the energy companies that they have a stake in this. They have received large subsidies from taxpayers and have a responsibility to ensure that their business benefits the towns and cities in which they operate, and
it is in their interest to build a workforce for the future. I hope that the Minister gives us, at the very least, an assurance that the Government have not given up on this project and will set out how he plans to move forward with it.

4.59 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn)—my Member of Parliament—on securing the debate and on outlining the importance of such a college to the Humber region and, even more important, to the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area, which is very much dependent on the development of the offshore renewables sector for the local economy to succeed and develop. In order to do that, as she pointed out, the correct training facilities are essential. We want to get local people, particularly younger people, trained up so that they can take advantage of the new industries.

At the moment, too many highly-skilled workers are being imported from Denmark, Germany and the like. We must get to a situation in which our younger people develop skills so that they can move into those jobs in the near future. As has been pointed out, the companies have a duty. I think that the hon. Lady was a bit too critical of the Government. I have never been shy of criticising the Government when necessary, as my Whip has happily confirm, but on this occasion we have seen a commitment, certainly from the coalition Government when the original announcement was made, and subsequently.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman said that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) was critical of the Government. Does he not agree that it is a bit damaging, to say the least, that the Prime Minister—within a few minutes, apparently, of taking office—scrapped the Department that everybody, including all those investors, were looking to in order to make things happen?

Martin Vickers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I do not agree. There is an obvious synergy between the various Departments that were merged into the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—BEIS, as I think we are supposed to call it. What matters is that there are spokesmen such as my right hon. Friend the Minister who are determined to develop skills and the energy aspects of the Department, so I will sweep aside the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby knows, there are facilities in our region. She, like me, will have visited the Grimsby Institute. I know that she has visited HCF CATCH, the training facility at Stallinborough in my constituency. We also have the newly established Humber University Technical College in Scunthorpe. There has been a clear and positive contribution from the Government and some parts of the private sector.

The hon. Lady is right that we urgently need to develop the college in the Humber region, preferably on the south bank and, even more preferably, in the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area. I am even prepared to support her bid to have the college in Grimsby, because it is in danger, in some respects, of being one of the left-behind towns to which the Prime Minister has referred. Grimsby is in urgent need of regeneration, which, in part, has to come from the public sector. The private sector will get on board, but the Government need to show willing. The hon. Lady and I have been supporting each other in trying to develop and bring forward a number of other projects in north-east Lincolnshire, hopefully in the not-too-distant future.

I think, to be very local, that the east marsh area and perhaps the Freeman Street area, with such proximity to the docks, would be ideal locations if there were a new build. From my conversations with the LEP, I know that there are discussions about whether the college should be a new build or whether we concentrate too much on new builds. However, locating the college on such sites would be particularly helpful with regeneration.

Melanie Onn: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in supporting a call for a new build precisely to evidence the support of the Government for assisting a grand regeneration project for Great Grimsby?

Martin Vickers: I am very happy to support the hon. Lady. As I mentioned a moment ago, the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area, particularly the rundown areas of Grimsby, are definitely in need of regeneration, which has to come from a public sector-led development.

In conclusion, I urge the Minister to give a positive lead. From previous discussions with him, I know how committed he is to training, apprenticeships and giving every support to our young people. It would be a real bit of encouragement to those in our area if he could give a positive lead and answer the questions raised by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and me.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing the debate and on putting forward a compelling case for why the proposals for the college should go ahead. I am not going to get involved in the discussion about whether it should be in Great Grimsby or Cleethorpes, largely because I do not know what I am talking about when it comes to that—not that that has ever stopped me in the past.

Education is devolved in Scotland, so that side of the debate has no implications for Scotland. However, the industrial side of things, including the ability to provide the marketplace with enough skilled folk, very much resonates with Scotland. Energy policy, which is a reserved matter, also has an impact on the general attractiveness of the whole United Kingdom as a destination for investment in renewable energy. In the past few weeks, we have slipped further down the Ernst and Young rankings for countries with renewable energy attractiveness—from 13th to 14th—after not being out of the top 10 for a decade or so. That is regrettable.

I will not talk about the educational merits. National colleges are not a model that we have used in Scotland; our investment is through existing educational providers. However, I will talk about the message sent to the investment community, young people and the whole industry by announcing something like the college and then not funding it once it has gone ahead. This is
another of the substantial number of announcements that the Government have made in the realms of renewable energy that have been unhelpful and that have probably added to the UK’s diminished investment attractiveness.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned that it was unfortunate—I do not think that that was her exact word, as it is probably worse than that—that the Department for Energy and Climate Change has been abolished. I share that frustration. The justification for abolishing the Department was to put industrial strategy back into the political lexicon. Well, taking climate change out of the political lexicon was particularly short-sighted. The biggest challenge facing us as a species perhaps deserves a bit of recognition by the Government.

I understand the argument made by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) about the synergies that can be created by bringing the two Government Departments together. Unfortunately, it does not sound as though those synergies are working well, if the hon. Member for Great Grimsby cannot get a response to a letter for several months. I have also found that letters are going unanswered, and colleagues in the Scottish Government are having incredible difficulty getting proper information out of the new Department. We all understand that putting new Departments together takes time and will cause confusion for a while. We also understand that Brexit is eating up an awful lot of the Government’s time—for their thought process and to think about what can be done—but there is a day job that needs to be done properly, particularly when it comes to the investment and skills for vital industries that have a four-year lead-in time, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby mentioned.

The joined-up approach that is supposed to come from BEIS needs to come quickly, and the college is a particular example of where that could happen. The proposal is on the table. Put the money into it. Provide that incentive for others—a vote of confidence in an industry that will require significant investment in skills. We have huge question marks on the electricity supply industry that will require significant investment in skills. There will be a benefit if we invest, technologies and industries such as offshore and onshore wind go unfilled or we will have to bring people in from Germany, Denmark or wherever. Electricity will still be needed if we do not build onshore or offshore wind, but we will get it from Norway, France or Holland.

Let us think about a joined-up approach, as BEIS is meant to do. If we invest in skills and provide certainty that we will build x amount of offshore wind and y amount of onshore wind, the money, the jobs and the energy security will follow. It is a pretty simple proposition, but it is one that the Government must get right.

5.12 pm

**Gordon Marsden** (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I warmly congratulate and applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this debate. As she said, she has a long track record on this issue. It is extremely disappointing that, almost two years after the proposed national college for wind energy was first announced, the Government still have not finalised the funding or the strategy and still have not given an open date for developing a college that would help to address the skills shortages in the industry and the wider region.

I obviously listened with great care to my hon. Friend’s speech, but I also listened to the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and what he said about the importance of seeing the whole area as a forcing point for these technologies. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) spoke a great deal of sense about the need for a holistic approach.

In a way, the little episode that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby described, about the Department that never was, indicates the issue. The hon. Member for Aberdeen South and I were both relocated, if I can put it like that, in the summer period, and I am no stranger to changes to the machinery of government. I remember the issues that were discussed in 2007 when the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, as it was called, was split from the Department for Education.

When we have such changes, such necessary disruption, it only becomes more important that things that have been sitting in the filing tray, virtual or actual, should be looked at with greater urgency by the incoming Department. That is not too much to ask when we know that offshore wind presents a great opportunity for expanding our low-carbon generation profile and can play an important role in helping us to decarbonise the power sector and meet our climate change targets.

In August 2016, a strategic review of east coast port facilities identified the offshore wind sector’s enormous potential to accelerate economic growth on the east coast of Britain. It found that east coast ports have the capability to support the ambitious pipeline of offshore wind projects that will be built out on the North sea in
the decades ahead. The construction of such major infrastructure projects will stimulate economic activity in some of the most economically deprived areas of the UK.

As we have seen in other industries, such as the nuclear industry or the aerospace industry—I am particularly familiar with the aerospace industry, having BAE Systems only a few miles down the road from me in Blackpool—supply chain companies would serve projects in British waters and export goods across the world. We all know that jobs created directly in an industry are often exceeded two or threefold by the jobs created in the supply chain. The secret ingredient in that process, of course, is skilling and training, particularly high skilling and training. That is one of the reasons why the college that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby is so strongly advocating would be essential.

My hon. Friend has said that the Humber area is an ideal location for the college. Grimsby is the renewable energy capital of England, not least because of the involvement and investment of Siemens in the region since 2014. Siemens has announced its decision to invest £160 million in wind turbine production and installation facilities across two locations, and its port partner, Associated British Ports—ABP—is investing a further £150 million in the Green Port Hull development.

In my first spell as shadow Minister for further education and skills, I was privileged to visit Hull to meet the local enterprise partnership and other stakeholders about their hopes and expectations for this project. We spoke about how crucial it is for the area’s wellbeing and the local enterprise partnership’s strategy. When I moved across to become shadow maritime Minister, I was lobbied on the issue by the excellent port group, ABP, because it was keen to see progress. Now that I have returned to shadowing the Department with responsibility for further education and skills, I find that the same issue has cropped up again in my new portfolio, which shows how important and widespread the project is. We need to cut across the silos of Government to get the results that my hon. Friend wants.

The then chair of the Humber LEP employment and skills board, Mike Parker, welcomed the project in 2014:

“Our economy is growing; building on their Grimsby presence, Siemens are set to locate in Hull, and E.on, Centrica, Vestas and Dong Energy have chosen the south bank of the estuary as their preferred sites. Supporting the generation companies is a growing supply chain of maintenance and facilities management. Wind energy generation is still relatively new and demands higher level skilled employees, the lack of an able qualified workforce has led to the sector facing a serious challenge in filling vacancies.”

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes made that point when he spoke about generating skills locally, rather than importing them from Germany and Scandinavia.

Melanie Onn: Does the shadow Minister agree that growth and new investment from DONG Energy, which has decided to establish its operations and maintenance base in Grimsby, make it even more vital that we have enough young people and skilled local people able to take on jobs at the site when it is built?

Gordon Marsden: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend makes a critical point: there has to be a synergy—a symbiosis, if I can put it that way—between the timing of the creation of these new initiatives and the supply chain of skills to feed them. Getting that wrong would not only cause great disruption in that supply chain but send out a message to other potential investors that this is not an area in which to risk their money.

Let me quote again from the former chair of the Humber LEP skills and employment board:

“Having a dedicated National College will be a major step forward in helping the UK to bridge that gap.”

The need to tackle skills shortages has not shrunk but increased over the past two years. One has to ask why the Government have still not committed to the college.

In response to the strategic review carried out earlier this year, the new Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), commented:

“The UK is the world leader in offshore wind and it’s important that we make the most of the many jobs and business opportunities that arise from this growing industry.”

What more appropriate way to achieve that than by taking action on this project?

When the college was first announced in 2014, it was envisaged that it would open its doors in late 2016. A significant feature of the college—not least in view of some of the issues that the Minister and I discussed in an earlier debate in this Chamber today about the balance of skills and apprenticeships—is that it would offer new and mature students professional qualifications and short courses in addition to bespoke programmes designed and sponsored by employers.

Beyond the specifics of this project in Grimsby, that would help to address the bleak situation that many adult learners face in further education and higher education. As the Opposition argued when we debated the Higher Education and Research Bill, we really need to put the same emphasis and passion that have been put behind the apprenticeships programme into the expansion of adult learning and skills. Those are the areas in which we have lost big time over the past four or five years, especially in comparison with our continental counterparts.

The TUC’s report “Powering ahead”, which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby has already mentioned, states—rightly, in my view:

“The TUC believes there should be a fourth pillar of energy policy: skills...It is...essential that if today’s workers are to become tomorrow’s workers, using new technology, they will need the skills for this change. Upskilling must become a normal and regular part of a worker’s life. That is crucial. We will have more than 13 million job vacancies over the next 30 years, but only 7 million school leavers to fill them, so reskilling adults is paramount. That growing skills gap has to be at the heart of the agenda to bridge the gaps and shortages appearing across the workforce. There is so much potential in lifelong learning, but unfortunately the Government are still moving too slowly and letting the sector down.

Wind energy is a growing industry. Employment is expected to increase and engineers, technicians and other specialist roles will therefore be in greater demand. Many of those roles can and should be filled by young people starting their careers. However, there are other roles, including at other levels, in which experience will be extremely important, particularly in coastal environments. We know that there are already large skills gaps across
the wind energy sector and that 37% of vacancies are found to be difficult to fill. A national college in Grimsby would go a long way towards providing a strategy on addressing those shortages and would help new and mature students to advance their skills.

I have great sympathy for Grimsby in this case. Like me, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby represents a coastal constituency that has seen challenges.

Second-level towns, particularly seaside and coastal towns, have been particularly challenged in recent years by the decline of traditional industries and traditional sources of income. They are the towns that particularly need regeneration and the benefits that come with it—skills, jobs and potential spin-offs—especially given all the unknowns and uncertainties that their communities face, whatever happens as a result of the 23 June referendum.

Opposition Front-Benchers, alongside the TUC and others, have been pushing for a review of the increasing demands on adults to take out advanced learner loans to fund vocational upskilling. As the TUC report “Powering ahead” states:

“In light of the fact that the bulk of funding for apprenticeships will switch from government to employers in the coming years, there is a strong case for government providing more direct subsidy for retraining and upskilling of adult employees in priority areas as the economy transitions to a sustainable industrial scenario.”

If funding for the college is an issue, the Government really ought to give their attention to it. They have to rebalance their skills basket to focus on adult workers as well as on those starting out. The message of the Leitch review, which is now nearly a decade old, is still very pertinent: because of the democratic demands, new technologies and new skills cannot simply be left to face, whatever happens as a result of the 23 June referendum.

The take-up of advanced learner loans is not very good: only about 50% of the money allocated is being used and the rest is being sent to the Treasury, so the Government need to find a way to incentivise adults to take out loans. Initiatives such as the potential national college for wind energy would offer a fantastic opportunity for people over the age of 24 or 25 to gain new skills and a path into employment in a fast growing, vital industry. As well as dealing with today’s skills, a college such as the one proposed for Grimsby could also promote cutting-edge research into new skills for generation 2.0 and 3.0 of these innovative new technologies.

I sat on the Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee when it did a report on renewables in the late 2000s. We spoke in that report about the lost opportunities for UK plc to capitalise on the expanding renewables markets, and about the dangers of relying on assemblage outside the UK for our renewable technologies. Sadly, some of the Committee’s fears have come to pass, but that is why it is even more important that we take the initiative now that we have the opportunity. Frankly, the Government have delivered enough knocks to renewables initiatives in the past couple of years—first with the problems in trying to decide whether to have nuclear as well as renewables, and then by encouraging subsidies for solar power, knocking them back and dithering over onshore wind. The signals that that approach sends out are not encouraging.

In Blackpool, our own energy college. Blackpool and the Fylde College, is going to look at renewables. When I look out from Blackpool towards Liverpool bay, I have a particular interest in seeing those new renewable energies offshore continuing to flourish. The national college for wind energy in Grimsby that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby has promoted so valiantly today would be an important part of that strategy. We hope the Minister will be able to say some positive things today to get it moving on its course.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I propose to conclude the debate at 5.45 pm. If the Minister could give Melanie Onn a few moments to wind up, that would be helpful.

5.29 pm

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Robert Halfon): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Bailey. I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this debate; she is a brilliant advocate for her constituency. I also pay tribute to my genuine hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and thank him for his remarks.

It is clear from the hon. Lady’s interest in this subject that she rightly wants to ensure that people of all ages in Grimsby have access to high-quality further and higher education to acquire the technical skills that employers are increasingly demanding. The Grimsby Institute is already helping to meet those needs as one of England’s largest providers of higher education, providing a wide range of training at a variety of levels. The hon. Lady spoke movingly about the apprentice she met. She will know that there were 540 apprentices start in her constituency last year, and there were more than 5,210 between 2010 and the end of 2015. I know she would like to see more; hopefully, the impact of our commitment to deliver 3 million apprenticeships by 2020 will be felt in her constituency.

The hon. Lady raised important issues about the skill needs of the energy industry, which is timely because it allows me to set out what the Government are doing to address the skills needs across all sectors of the economy in England. It is a key priority of the Government to ensure that we have the skilled workforce required to support development and growth in all areas of the UK economy. The country has all the ingredients required to compete with other skilled nations, but we have to create an education system that can harness and develop that talent, starting at school and going right through to the highest levels of education and training.

We are making progress. Many more of our young people are now taking up high-quality apprenticeships and training, leading to good jobs and careers in their chosen profession. Our post-16 skills plan will build on that, creating a more streamlined system of high-quality technical education that truly delivers the skills that industry need, but the Government cannot do the job by ourselves. We want to work with employers and colleges to unlock the potential in this country. There are already good examples of colleges and employers working in close partnership to create world-class facilities and teaching, but there is more to do.

I am not afraid to acknowledge that our education system does not always deliver the high-level technical skills in the volumes that our economy demands, especially at levels 4 to 5—the bit between A-level and graduate level. The fact that only 10% of people in England hold higher-level technical qualifications has contributed to
a chronic shortage of highly skilled technicians. The OECD estimates that we will need around 300,000 trained technicians entering the labour market by 2020. Every year, the UK produces only around a third of the number of people trained at technician level that Germany produces. Higher apprenticeships are beginning to address that, but we are growing from a low base. Things are not going to get any better in a system in which only 4% of students are studying further education at level 4. Although there is good higher-level technical provision in some areas, it is spread too thinly across the country overall.

National colleges, which we have heard about this afternoon, will play an important role in helping to meet the gaps, within the context of the wider reforms set out in our 16-plus skills plan, which outlines the most radical shake-up of post-16 education since the introduction of A-levels almost 70 years ago. It will transform technical education for most young people and adults into an education that is world class, with clear pathways to skilled employment. It will build on the success we have already had by investing in apprenticeships, with the aim of creating a skilled workforce that is the envy of every other nation and that meets the needs of our growing and rapidly changing economy.

National colleges will have an important place in the new technical skills landscape, helping to define and deliver the routes required. They provide specialist facilities and training and lead the way in the design and delivery of higher level technical skills in industries or sectors that are critical to economic growth—industries that currently rely heavily on imported skills to meet the skills gaps at higher levels.

Robert Halfon: I would like all people to participate if they need the skills. I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman: our apprenticeships, skills offerings and national colleges are all open to all ages.

The Government are investing £80 million to support the development of five national colleges, and we expect that money to be matched by investment from industry in the respective sectors. The ambition is for the colleges to train up to 20,000 learners by 2020. I recently visited the new Hackney-based National College for Digital Skills. The facilities, the enthusiasm of the staff, the passion of the students and the strong support from employers such as Google will make it the success that I know it will be. Employers in other industries are crying out for higher-level skills, and particularly for technicians who combine deep knowledge of technology with up-to-date experience in industry.

National colleges will be set up only in those sectors where there is a clear gap in skills and where employers have clearly demonstrated their support and willingness to contribute to the operation of the colleges. Those that have been successful so far have had a clearly defined scope and sector focus, with evidence of strong employer support—High Speed 2, nuclear and the creative and digital industries—and wind energy is no exception. An industry-focused skills solution would need to demonstrate strong employer commitment and willingness to contribute capital, equipment, senior management time and access to facilities.

I am encouraged by the considerable work done to date by key partners to develop a proposal that meets the existing and future needs of the energy sector. Officials from my Department have been in discussion with the local enterprise partnership and others to provide advice on what we would want to see from a national college for wind energy. I understand that the LEP and RenewableUK are working with industry to identify skills gaps and to build a case for a viable national college model. The latest proposal has changed, but it is still very much consistent with the original vision of a national college. I am encouraged by the work that is going on, and look forward to further progress on the national college proposal. It will follow, as it must do, the same robust assessment process as for every other national college that has been agreed. Widespread employer buy-in and engagement will be a critical factor.

Melanie Onn: Might this be an opportune moment for the Minister to throw his full and forceful weight behind accelerating the programme as much as possible and encouraging all the agencies in the area to provide a blueprint so that we can all receive some assurance? My original concern was about the problem of the timing, in advance of the autumn statement; perhaps he can comment on that as well.

Robert Halfon: As I have said, as long as the same propositions that others who have set up national colleges are followed—it looks as if a lot of work is being done to do that—I will of course support and work with the relevant bodies, such as the LEP, as well as with the hon. Lady and others. Nevertheless, the detailed plan must be produced, and it has to meet the conditions that the plans for other national colleges had to meet. There is no doubt that, as I have said, this industry is vital to the economy and that, as I have also said, we need a skills training system that can deliver the skills needed to fill these jobs.

During the Commons debate on the Humber energy estuary in February, the Government set out our ambition to have a strong industrialised UK supply chain with the capability and capacity to win even more orders. We are working with developers to see how we can attract further investment and promote rejuvenation in areas such as Hull. We want UK companies to be able to benefit from offshore wind development, by ensuring that they are in the best possible position to compete for business.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Great Grimsby for raising this important issue today and I know that she will work hard to try to help establish the national college in her area.
Melanie Onn: I will take the Minister up on his offer to work together, because the only way that this project can be achieved is through significant political championing. I look forward to many an exchange of correspondence with him; hopefully, he will visit my area, which may assist him in gathering ever-increasing enthusiasm for my vision—not only for the college, but for my constituency.

I thank the hon. Members for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Aberdeen South (Callum McCaig) for their very considered contributions to the debate. Obviously, the local knowledge that the hon. Member for Cleethorpes brings to the discussion highlights how keen local MPs are to see our constituencies benefit from all of the projects available in the local area. I also recognise the contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who are no longer in their places.

Some of the skills that need to be developed go beyond those of a wind turbine technician. Only a finite number of wind turbine technician vacancies will ever be available in this industry, but the skills required in the industry go beyond those of such a technician. There are maritime skills, operational skills, mechanical skills, digital skills and technical skills, as well as the engineering side of things. A vast range of skills is required, all of which need to be taught up to a very significant level.

I recognise the commitment of companies that have based themselves in the Humber area to try to secure as many local people as possible—they are trying to employ the local workforce—and to assist with local training facilities by having a direct input into the development of training, so that they do not have to send their staff to Denmark or Germany to access training when it can be accessed locally. Nevertheless, it would be an enormous boost to our area to have a centre of excellence that everybody in the whole country could be proud of, with high-level provision of skills for a really exciting and fast-moving industry. We are already behind on skills training.

Martin Vickers: Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that, although we have spoken a lot about getting our young people trained up for these industries, there are many people who have past experience in the offshore oil and gas industry and require only modest retraining? If the retraining courses were available, that would open up new opportunities for them.

Melanie Onn: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; in fact, I briefly referred to that issue in my speech and obviously my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), the shadow Minister, has been very keen to focus on adult skills.

However, such training should have been provided when the investment was being made, because we are already playing catch-up. This is advancing technology, so we should be looking at the research and development side of things as well as providing the basic skills, because 15 years ago turbine blades were 16 metres long and now they are over 80 metres long. This industry has developed rapidly in the last 15 years and in my view every delay leaves those of us in the Humber area even further behind in getting the very best out of the offshore wind industry. So I urge the Minister to take a particularly keen interest in this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the National College for Wind Energy.

5.44 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the funding of West Sussex schools.

Good morning, Mr Gray, and thank you very much. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time in Westminster Hall. [Interruption.]

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): Order. Will one of the sound engineers deal with the echo? There is something wrong with the machine.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful to have the opportunity, with my West Sussex colleagues, with whom I have been working for a considerable period of time on this matter, to draw the House’s attention on this occasion, which certainly is not the first, to the question of fair funding for West Sussex schools. I am fortified by the presence and support of my hon. Friends and parliamentary colleagues for West Sussex, who have been campaigning on this matter for a long time now. We have campaigned together and are wholly in agreement. Those of my hon. Friends who are able to be here will speak to explain the case further to my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary. I welcome her to her place and am delighted that she will answer on behalf of the Government.

For the 32 years I have been a Member of Parliament—I am an amateur compared with my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), who has been here much longer than me; he is not the Father of the House but practically the grandfather of the House—the treatment of West Sussex in local government finance terms has been unfair and indeed wholly unsatisfactory. The issue of today’s debate is really the catharsis of 30 years of financial bad treatment for West Sussex. In respect of education, it is now a question of fairness.

The position is surgically plain. West Sussex has per pupil funding of £4,198, which is £438 per pupil below the national average and makes schools and academies in West Sussex the fifth worst-funded nationally. That is not acceptable to the West Sussex Members, it is not acceptable to our county council, and much more importantly it is increasingly unacceptable and causes great anxiety to parents, pupils, headteachers and staff. We look to the Department for Education to fix it.

The current situation puts us below our neighbours in East Sussex and Surrey, and well below the very well funded urban authorities of the city of London, which comes right at the top of the pile with double the funding of West Sussex. Our position in West Sussex is therefore very bad. There is no other way of describing it, not least since we all agree that every child deserves the same chance in life when it comes to state-funded education. Frankly, they are not getting it. The figures graphically show that, in West Sussex, it is emphatically not the case. It is not even as if the results are anywhere near as good as they should be. Indeed, they are disappointing and must improve. Resources are a part but only a part of that equation.

The West Sussex Members of Parliament met Ministers in September last year and again in February this year to press the case. We met the Minister for School Standards 10 days ago for a useful meeting, and we are to meet the Secretary of State this very afternoon. The aim is to try to find a sensible way forward to resolve a crucial and unacceptable situation, and to try to understand the thinking of the Department for Education. It has big reforms to come and will look for our support. We need to fix the grassroots basis of the funding of local education before we move on to some of those more exotic, and indeed welcome reforms. They will require our support, but without this situation being fixed, it is difficult to see how that can occur.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is not only a question of long-term funding. As Conservatives, we were all elected on a manifesto commitment to fix fair funding for the future. I am sure my right hon. Friend agrees that there is a lot of concern about the immediate funding for schools and a requirement for transitional funding. I wonder whether he will come to that in his remarks.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I pay tribute to him for the work he has done in leading our group, and for the enormous amount of work he has done on behalf of headteachers and schools, not only in his constituency but elsewhere. He is quite right, and I hope that by the end of this inadequate speech, he will feel that I have dealt with some of those problems. It is not just the future but the now. We need to resolve the position between the now and the future—we all welcome strongly the introduction of the new funding formula. All the West Sussex Members—I am sure those who speak will make this point—are entirely satisfied that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, the Minister for School Standards, the Under-Secretary who is here today and their officials accept that West Sussex schools are underfunded compared with the national average. As I said, the figures are there in stark reality. What we really need is for them to act now and restore some balance to a situation that is out of kilter.

As I say, we warmly commend the Government for bringing forward the new plan for the national funding formula, which will be introduced from 2018, and the release of a very small sum of additional money already given by the Department surplus. The Minister knows that West Sussex Members of Parliament, supported by headteachers and parents in all our constituencies, have lobbied vigorously for urgent consideration to be given to the adequate provision of transitional funding to help tide over hard-pressed local schools until the new formula can be introduced. West Sussex schools can thus get on an equal footing with those in other counties, which is surely only right and fair.
On 14 September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, when giving evidence to the Select Committee on Education on her roles and responsibilities, confirmed that her Department was approaching this matter in a sensible and rational way and that it was “going to provide interim support.”

That was in her answer to Q221 in evidence to the Select Committee. It is that question on which we will press her this very afternoon, so that we can get to a better school funding system in an orderly and sane manner, based in future on pupil numbers, and less on some extraordinary and archaic formula based on past political considerations, which will recognise that West Sussex has been losing out for years.

As I have said, the present situation is both unacceptable and wrong, and we insist on its being put right. It is not correct or fair that a typical secondary school in the Mid Sussex or Horsham constituencies, for example, will receive more than 15% less than the national median funding for schools.

When on 7 March my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the then excellent Secretary of State for Education, announced in a written statement a consultation on national funding formulae for schools and high needs, she made the point that the transition to the new system should be manageable. It is that question that we look to the Minister of State, the Secretary of State and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary to help us resolve this morning. It is the collective judgment of all the West Sussex Members of Parliament, who have worked closely together and have gone carefully into the matter, that present levels of funding will, without transitional funding, inevitably have a damaging effect on local schools and children’s learning. Each of us must speak for our own constituency—my hon. Friends will do so—but in Mid Sussex, as things stand, good schools are placed in the intolerable position of having to preside over further real cuts to school budgets that are frankly no longer sustainable.

The Government have rightly urged schools to achieve efficiencies, but those have already been adopted by the schools in my constituency and elsewhere, not least to meet the new costs arising from, among other things, increases to teachers’ pension and national insurance contributions for 2016-17. Having listened to the concerns of parents, councillors, headteachers and teachers, and having consulted more widely, we all agree that school budgets are already squeezed to the limit. It is, I am afraid, understandable that headteachers are considering having to preside over further real cuts to school budgets.

The Under-Secretary, and will ask the Secretary of State this afternoon, to allocate transitional funding to support our schools to meet those serious cost pressures until the national funding formula is introduced.

A powerful letter sent to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister by a number of West Sussex headteachers, with the support of a number of my parliamentary colleagues, sets out a request for £20 million of transitional funding. That would represent an increase of approximately £200 per pupil across West Sussex. That sum of money would put our schools back on a more or less even keel against the arrival of the national funding formula.

I want to mention the special concerns of special needs schools in my constituency and West Sussex more generally. They find it very hard going to deliver the education service that I know the Under-Secretary and her ministerial colleagues would insist be delivered to children who have considerable difficulties. They are trying very hard, but in some cases they will simply no longer be able to do it. The situation in West Sussex special needs schools is very serious. Woodlands Meed school in my constituency is a remarkable school, but is in an untenable position. Not only has the county council treated it extraordinarily badly and, in my view, dishonourably, over the question of new building to consolidate schools into one, but its financial situation is extremely serious. It is impossible for the children at the school to be educated properly without the necessary support staff. I make a plea today for children with special needs in West Sussex; they are not getting a fair crack of the whip.

My hon. Friends and I, and the county council, are well aware of the restraint required in public expenditure. However, we believe that the situation in our county is very serious. We all earnestly entreat the Under-Secretary and her ministerial colleagues to consider favourably the coherent, sensible and reasonable requests that we make on behalf of our constituents.

9.45 am

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing the debate and on his excellent framing of the argument.

As we look to our newly defined national future, the challenge of improving our national productivity is real and acute. Only through increased productivity will we deliver the public services and increases in the standard of living that every generation expects. Education and skills are among the most important drivers of that vital transformation in our national productivity. We need to continue the already positive improvement in science, technology, engineering and maths, and to my mind our trading future requires better results in foreign languages. Investment in education, properly targeted, is money well spent.

This is an important issue for the whole country, but the challenge is especially important for those of us who represent West Sussex, which is the worst funded of any county authority with funding of £4,198 per pupil. Under the current funding formula, the county receives £44 million less than the national average and some £200 million less than some London boroughs. I and my colleagues were pleased to stand on a manifesto that pledged a change in the funding structure of our schools, and I am delighted that the Government, having secured an overall majority, are pressing forward with far-reaching and long overdue reform. I await with interest the Government’s response to the first consultation.

A wide range of factors was proposed for possible inclusion in the funding formula. I am sure the new formula will be better than the current system, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State described as arbitrary, unfair and out of date, but while the Government’s aim of maintaining higher funding for schools with issues of deprivation is laudable, I hope they will recognise the need for all school places to have satisfactory and effective funding. I am sure they will.
There are pockets of deprivation in every town and rural area. Every school has problems to confront, and ensuring proper recognition of the basic costs of providing the teaching staff and delivering the curriculum will be key. That is especially difficult in areas within commuting distance—subject to Southern rail and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—of London. The cost of living in my constituency is very high, which makes it harder to recruit and retain the excellent teaching staff that children and parents rightly expect. That is especially true and worrisome in an area in which school infrastructure rarely seems to keep pace with population growth, adding to the strain placed on headteachers and staff. There is a worrying impact on class size, as at Tanbridge House school or Forest school in my constituency—at Forest secondary school, top set classes in core subjects already have 35 or 36 pupils. That obviously has a direct impact on teachers, but it also has practical consequences in classrooms designed for 30 pupils with a number of PCs to match. Schools that provide targeted support for struggling pupils used to do it in sets of 12 or 15, but now find that those sets have grown to 20, which means less effective lessons in which it is harder to focus.

Fair funding—redressing the balance—is critical. I look forward to the second consultation and what I trust will be an appropriate recognition of the high basic cost of education of every child. We are very proud of the good results generated by the schools in my constituency, but no one, least of all the Minister, would take that as a source of complacency. Excellent teaching, committed leadership and supportive parents all still need a solid underpinning of funding. In the immediate term, that foundation of solid funding is a source of real concern for headteachers across the county. Costs have undoubtedly risen in the current year. I have had input from a large number of schools in my constituency; it would be invidious were I to go through every single one of them, but I will focus on one in particular. The Weald school in Billingshurst is an outstanding school. The current head has been in place for eight years. He started with 95 teachers and a senior leadership team of nine, including two deputy heads, and 1,440 pupils. He has managed to maintain 95 teachers, although the senior leadership team has been cut by a quarter, with now only one deputy; but the number of pupils has increased to 1,650—a 14% increase—and there has been a real-terms decrease in the per pupil funding of the school.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex said when proposing the motion, this has been a problem for 30 years. With extra costs in recent years, reserves have been eaten into and in many cases eliminated. As did other schools in my area, The Weald predicted its financing on fair funding being introduced from 2017-18. It and other schools have had to contend with particular issues that will arise in the current year. From April 2016, there was a 1% increase in teachers’ salaries. The sum of those figures amounts to an estimated deficit of £425,000 in the next financial year for The Weald school. That is why there is so much demand in the immediate term for transitional funding to help schools to get over the hump until fair funding is introduced.

To appreciate the gearing effect, my right hon. Friend referred to £20 million raising the West Sussex average per pupil funding from where it is now, at the bottom, to being halfway towards the average. That £20 million would equate to £250,000 flowing through to The Weald school. As the Minister will see, no one would say that is easy living or easy budgeting in the context of a forecast deficit getting on for half a million pounds, but £250,000 would make a real impact on managing the short-term costs until the introduction of the fair funding formula.

As my right hon. Friend said, in trying to work out what to do, headteachers have been setting out alternative options that they could pursue. The one that has generated the most attention has been the threat to modify school opening hours, which I do not believe is appropriate in any circumstances. None of the other options being considered has happy consequences either; they include larger class sizes where practical, curriculum shrinkage and further staff reductions. It would be particularly galling if reducing the syllabus or not replacing staff occurred on a temporary basis, only to be reversed as and when—welcome results come through from the fair funding of the schools.

I congratulate the Department for Education on pursuing fairer funding, which I trust will put appropriate weight on basic per pupil costs. I recognise the fiscal constraints under which the Department is operating, but I hope the particular funding pressures on schools are recognised. When announcing the decision to delay the implementation of fair funding, the Secretary of State for Education said she would take a sensible approach to transitional arrangements for 2017-18. She made similar statements to the Education Select Committee, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex referred. I look forward to the Minister’s response, and I also look forward to seeing the Secretary of State this afternoon. This is an issue that I very much hope we can address.

Mr James Gray (in the Chair): I call the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), even though he was not standing up.

9.55 am

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing the debate on behalf of West Sussex Members, who are concerned about school funding in our county.
I will not repeat the case so ably made by my right hon. Friend and by my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) for redress to the unfair funding for the county over the mid to long term, because it has been perfectly well set out. I have also set it out before, in a debate in this Chamber last November, and I will spare my colleagues from hearing precisely the same remarks again. Another reason I am not going to set it out is because the Government accept that there is unfair funding in West Sussex. In response to the petition that has been organised by schools in West Sussex, the Government said:

“We recognise West Sussex is a relatively low-funded local authority.”

That is objectively the case—it is the third worst funded authority and is pretty much on the bottom as far as shire counties are concerned.

The Government have recognised the need to do something about that, so we do not just have warm words from them; we have a commitment to introduce the national funding formula. It is important that that is recognised and welcomed, because it is a brave step. Future funding should not be allocated to schools on a rather arbitrary and unfair basis but should be based on a proper assessment of need and with a view to ensuring greater fairness. That commitment was in the Conservative manifesto, the policy was announced by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and it has been reiterated by the current Education Secretary. I understand that the introduction of a national funding formula has cross-party agreement; perhaps we will have confirmation of that later.

We are not arguing about the need to move to a fairer system in the mid to long term, or whether that will happen. I should just say that I think it is important that those who are pressing for fairer funding in West Sussex acknowledge the Government’s position on this and the commitment to introduce a national funding formula. It does not help when our county council issues statements on the matter and does not recognise that the national funding formula has been pledged, or when headteachers refuse to acknowledge it. I urge those whom I am supporting to take a little more care in ensuring that the way in which they present their case is balanced and is likely to be well received by those who have made a commitment to move in the right direction.

We are discussing the interim situation before the national funding formula is introduced, and the recognition that that formula has been delayed by one year, to 2018-19 rather than the year before as was originally pledged. On the expectation of fairer funding, it will be hard to introduce a fairer formula and not see some improvement for West Sussex, which is funded on the most palpably unfair basis at the moment, and for the situation to improve—but we should recognise that that improvement might be incremental.

In the meantime, schools in West Sussex face a particular difficulty. The Government have protected school spending overall, in the same way they have protected other key budgets, and that should be recognised. In a difficult fiscal framework, when there is a need to save money and when the country still spends more than it earns, the schools’ budget—a massive budget in the Government’s overall programme—has been protected. Nevertheless, the way in which that has been achieved means there has been flat cash for schools in West Sussex at a time when their costs have increased and costs have been loaded on to them. That was ably set out by my right hon. and hon. Friends.

It might help the Minister if I give a practical example, because I want to persuade her that the impact on these schools is real. In my constituency, we have a very good school, Steyning grammar school, which is in fact a comprehensive, not a grammar school. The excellent headteacher, who is presiding over an increase in standards year on year, has supplied me with figures, which I am happy to send to the Minister. The school has seen a real-terms cut in funding of around 10% since 2010 as a consequence of the increased costs it is having to meet and reductions in certain grants. As a consequence, the percentage of the school’s budget that is accounted for by staff costs is increasing from around 80%, where it should be, to 84%. Teaching full-time equivalents have fallen from 132 in 2010 to 118 in 2016-17.

In budgetary terms, this meant that in 2015 the school’s budget was just at break-even. In this financial year, 2016-17, the school has set a deficit budget of £600,000, which it will cover from reserves, but for 2017 it forecasts a deficit growing to £850,000 a year, which it will not have the reserves to cover. That will require the school to take action and to reduce its staff levels, which are at the national average in terms of ratios. Unlike schools in other parts of the country that are much better funded and have more generous staff-to-pupil ratios, that school does not have room to make those reductions without there being an impact on the delivery of education and, it fears, on standards.

I strongly urge the Minister to look at the funding and the impact on school budgets in counties such as West Sussex that are facing real-terms funding reductions because of these cost pressures. She must look at the impact on those schools’ budgets on the ground, to recognise that they are not engaged in a game of playing bleeding stumps but face particular difficulty.

Jeremy Quin: Constituents of mine attend Steyning grammar school, which is an excellent school. With a deficit of £850,000 and staffing at 84%, 85% or 86% of the total budget, if there are forced changes in staff numbers, it would be particularly galling to go through the cost and the pain of reducing staff numbers by whatever means, only to be required as a result of fair funding coming through to then source and recruit new teachers to resurrect those posts and start delivering again for pupils.

Nick Herbert: I agree with my hon. Friend. He is much better at maths than I am and is able to point such things out. That is what underlines the whole case for transitional funding. I do not necessarily argue that there is a link between performance in the public sector and funding. We should never assume there is an automatic link between the two, such that any reduction in funding is unmanageable or will have an automatic effect on performance. It is incumbent on any public sector institution to run efficiently and to make savings, but by any objective measure the funding of schools in West Sussex is already among the lowest in the country, so there is no fat to cut without there being an impact.
If we still have to make national savings and the schools budget is to be included within that, that should be achieved on a fair basis, but at the moment, the situation is in terrible disparity on school that are poorly funded. That is unfair. I was Police Minister when we cut the policing budget by 20% in real terms, but the impact was felt across all police forces. Although there was some difference in how forces were funded, we did not have a situation where some forces faced no cuts at all and others faced reductions and therefore felt they were being treated entirely unfairly.

It is important to recognise the particular situation of these authorities. That lends weight to the case for some kind of transitional help. Again, the Government recognised that, because in announcing the national funding formula they announced a £390 million uplift nationally in school funding, which was then put in the baseline. That has been applied year on year and is a large sum of money nationally. I recognise that, but if we look at the practical effect, the uplift amounted to less than £1 million for West Sussex’s budget, which meant the actual increase was something like £10 per pupil. The impact on schools’ budgets was therefore relatively low.

Because it was very broad, the distribution of that sum in the transitional uplift did not give sufficient help to the areas of the country that most needed it and was not sufficient to cushion them against the increased cost pressures they are facing. To bring West Sussex up to the average level of county councils—never mind the average national level—would require an uplift of £15 million a year, and it has had less than £1 million. That is why the schools are in this position. To bring funding up to the national average, as my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham said, would require a much greater uplift of £40 million a year.

Because of the cost pressures, the reduction in funding and its effect on schools in the county, and because the national funding formula will not be introduced for two years, there is a strong case for interim funding for the worst funded areas, despite the Government’s overall protection of the budget nationally. That would require taking decisions ahead of the introduction of the formula, which I appreciate would be difficult. It would require finding a basis on which to fund only those schools right at the bottom of the pile, rather than too broadly, which is what happened before. Again, that would be difficult, but it is necessary and right, or else schools in West Sussex will cut their budgets in a way that will see staff numbers fall. That is why I urge the Minister to look at this carefully and to recognise that a very fair and reasonable case is being made by schools in the county and that this deserves special attention.

10.8 am

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is very gracious of you to call me to speak, Mr Gray. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing this important debate. I echo his tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), who has led the very united charge by all West Sussex MPs. Of course, two of our number are slightly compromised in their support, one being the Minister for Schools and the other, my hon. Friend the Member for Crawley (Henry Smith), being a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department for Education. I am sure that their supportive sentiments are with us in spirit.

Those West Sussex Members are united with the county council, with every headteacher in every school in every constituency in West Sussex, and with the many thousands of parents who have written to us, signed petitions, joined us in presenting a petition to Downing Street just a couple of weeks ago and supported the “Worth Less?” campaign, which flags up the significant differences in the way pupils are funded and therefore treated and viewed in West Sussex, compared with so many other parts of the country. We are also united with all the local media, which is supportive.

This is a huge issue for all our constituents across the county. It comes on top of other huge issues such as the abject failure of our local rail service to deliver our constituents to their places of work and education remotely on time or reliably. The other huge issue is the work on the A27 in our constituencies. So this is a busy time for us, the issue is taking up a lot of time and resources and we need something to be done about it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham rightly praised the Government’s efforts to reform education over the past six years, dragging this country’s educational standards into the 21st century, but as it stands the way we fund our schools in West Sussex remains resolutely in the 20th century.

We all welcomed the Government’s manifesto commitment, and their honouring in principle that commitment, to review the funding formula to ensure that we have a fairer funding formula to benefit counties such as West Sussex. Therefore, the Government’s announcement last year was widely welcomed in our constituencies, where things have been very tight for some time, but, frankly, time is running out to come to the rescue. The news earlier this year that the review is being delayed by another year is a potentially fatal body blow. We do not know what fairer funding will look like, how fair it will be in cash terms to counties such as West Sussex, or how long it will take to phase it in. It is unlikely to happen overnight. It is not an easy exercise and there will be winners and losers in other parts of the country. Therefore, there is still a lot of uncertainty.

The then Chief Secretary to the Treasury said in a letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham that the “Government wants to see every child achieve to the best of his or her ability regardless of their background or where they live.” That is something of a grammatical car crash, but it is a sentiment with which we wholeheartedly agree. He went on: “At the March Budget, the Chancellor announced that the Government will accelerate the move to the... national funding formula. “Subject to consultation, the aim is for 90% of the schools who will gain funding to receive the full amount they are due by 2020.” We do not know what the full amount they are due equates to and we are now talking about 2020 at the earliest before that transition works its way in. That is almost another four years of pain, tightening budgets and difficult choices, to which my hon. Friends have alluded.

We have heard the figures and I will not go through them again, but it cannot be right that there is such a substantial anomaly between child funding of £4,196 per annum in West Sussex and, the most extreme example, child funding in Tower Hamlets of £7,014 per annum.
In our neighbouring county of East Sussex, funding is substantially more, at £4,450 a year. The difference just to bring us up to the average funding is £41 million a year.

The Chief Secretary mentioned in his letter an additional £500 million of core funding to schools over the course of the spending review. That is welcome, but £41 million just to get us to the average represents 8% of that £500 million, which is being spread among the whole country. For us, that £41 million would represent 1,518 additional teachers in our schools, which are losing places, having to make redundancies and are not filling vacancies. The result is that subjects are being dropped and class sizes are becoming larger. That is the realistic outcome of the present situation and it can only get worse until it is resolved.

Hon. Members have lobbied hard. We have met Secretaries of State and Ministers, and we have further meetings later today. We have met many teachers and have been lobbied by many teachers and many parents.

I will read out some letters from schools. One school in Worthing wrote to parents: “School leaders have made every conceivable cut to our provision and now we are faced with reducing basic services still further, all to the disadvantage of your child. Our finances are so bad that we are all having to consider the following types of action: modifying school opening hours, increasing teacher-to-pupil ratios again, reducing basic services such as cleaning and site and premises work, stopping any investment in books and IT equipment, designing curriculum offers that fulfil only basic requirements, not replacing staff who leave. As you can imagine, such radical considerations are the very last thing that any school wishes to do but we are being given no option. We do not understand why children in our school are worth less than others around the country. Even when a national funding formula is introduced, it will take at least three years to have a really significant effect on our budgets. We cannot wait that long.” That is a common cry across all our schools.

An excellent school in Worthing, Thomas A Becket junior school, is the largest primary school in Worthing; indeed it is one of the largest primary schools in south-east England. The head has written to me saying that its “funding has been severely reduced by the reorganisation due to the Worthing Age of Transfer process.”

That happened recently and was very successful. The head continued:

“However, the main point I would like to draw to your attention is that if Thomas A Becket Junior was located in a London borough the school would receive, on average, an additional £1.8 million in its annual budget, enough to employ an additional 65 teachers. I have no doubt that with this extra budget share my school could improve at the rate of London schools over the past few years...The facts are well known to you; schools are facing an 8% decrease in real terms funding due to unfunded NI and pension contributions over which we have no control.”

Academies are also suffering. Shoreham academy in my constituency is rated outstanding. The head wrote to me:

“The huge difference in funding levels across the country mean that West Sussex schools are now at breaking point as a consequence and students are being treated unfairly and unjustly in terms of educational funding.”

This is not just vague bleating. Outstanding headteachers are really concerned and worried about the future prospects for their schools and their children. We share those concerns. These schools have dipped into their reserves in recent years because they have faced years of accumulated deficit because of the way the funding formula is fashioned, and in many of our schools there is nothing left in the tank.

As I said, we have the support of the county council. Louise Goldsmith, leader of West Sussex County Council, wrote to the former Chancellor, saying that the teaching “profession has undoubtedly become less attractive in recent years and whilst we realise that there are a lot of new initiatives being promoted by the government to attract new teachers, and we welcome these, in the short term we need to be able to attract high calibre staff to West Sussex now. Unfortunately, due to the current low level of funding, the schools are having difficulty doing this, especially as they are unable to offer any enhanced salaries.”

The government has stated that school funding is being protected in 2016/17. Whilst we obviously welcome that fact, in real terms the funding is in effect being eroded by unfunded cost pressures, such as the increase in employer’s pensions contributions and national insurance contributions, pay awards, the national living wage, as well as any ‘in-year’ growth in pupil numbers.”

The county council has had to top up a lot of money from its reserves and other areas, in a county where we are under severe pressure because of the high elderly population and the huge impact on the social care budget competing for increasingly scarce resources. In addition, as we have heard, West Sussex County Council has always generously recognised and endeavoured to fund the high special educational needs we have across the county, We have had shortfalls in the capital costs of new schools. We have an increasing population. There is the knock-on effect of Brighton: people moving out of Brighton into West Sussex because of cheaper property is raising costs in our county. There has been the cost of the recent age of transfer exercise that I mentioned, and there is the cost of living in West Sussex. It is one of the most expensive places to live in the whole country, yet our funding formula does not acknowledge that we have different cost pressures from other parts of the country.

We have support from the local media. All the local media have written editorials on the issue. For example, the Worthing Herald has written:

“The low funding, together with rising National Insurance and pension costs and the government’s decision to cut £600 million from education grants, has left schools at breaking point.

This is no exaggeration—our headteachers, who have been called upon to absorb further cuts while already struggling to make ends meet, fear schools may have to consider not opening five days a week if the funding crisis is not addressed by the government.”

It exhorts its readers to write to MPs and others. I exhort readers to write to the Secretary of State for Education and particularly to make submissions to the formal consultation on a fair funding formula that is being undertaken at the moment. We need examples of the real hardship that is happening here and now and can only get worse until this issue is resolved. We need those on the Secretary of State’s desk.

There have been disappointing explanations of the situation from Ministers. A previous Education Minister, who is now the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah),
wrote back to the then cabinet member in West Sussex in slightly less than satisfactory terms. He wrote that the councillor

“mentions that schools in West Sussex are experiencing cost pressures as a result of increased pension and National Insurance contributions. It may be helpful if I explain the rationale behind our changes. We are asking schools, like other employers across the public sector, to contribute more towards their employees’ pensions to ensure that the costs of public sector pension schemes do not fall unfairly on taxpayers.”

Well, they are falling unfairly on taxpayers. Taxpayers in West Sussex are having to forgo other things from the county council because it is having to make up that money. The pension impact is considerable. Pension rates have gone up from 14.4% to 16.8%. That is an extra 2.4 percentage points added to the bill, and no extra money has been given to our schools to cover it. That is on top of the pay rise, which is only 1% but still adds £500 to the salary bill for the average teacher, and the increase in national insurance costs of some 2.3%, again for the average teacher.

The former Education Minister, in his helpful advice as to how we can do things to get round the funding shortfalls, goes on to talk about headteacher recruitment. He says that

“whilst the national headteacher vacancy rate remains fairly low at 0.2%, I do recognise that some schools are facing headteacher recruitment challenges. This was one of the reasons why we reformed leadership pay so that schools could pay more to attract the best headteachers. The government funds a number of targeted programmes that aim to address leadership supply, particularly within challenging schools. For example, Future Leaders aims to develop the skills of high-potential aspiring headteachers who want to work in some of the most challenging schools in the country. The Teaching Leaders programme develops middle leaders in primary and secondary schools in challenging contexts, putting them through a rigorous two-year training programme. A number of these middle leaders will go on to be the headteachers of tomorrow.”

We do not need the new, targeted teachers and headteachers of tomorrow; we need the basic subject teachers of today, and we are losing them. There are massive gaps in terms of teachers offering foreign languages, for example, across many of our schools. Those subjects are disappearing from the curriculum. The curriculum choice being offered to our pupils is shrinking simply because we do not have the teachers because we do not have the funding to attract them to one of the most expensive counties in the country.

There is no fat left. There is no money left in the reserves. There is virtually no leeway left for our headteachers somehow to juggle these finances. There is an urgent and critical need for the formula change, but also an urgent and critical need to recognise that we have a funding shortfall now and we have to have some help in the form of transitional funding to address that urgent situation now.

As I said, there is a shortfall of £41 million a year. The additional money that we have had in the past amounts to £930,000—a fraction of the reality of our funding shortfall. Yet again, West Sussex loses out. We lose out on central Government spend for the infrastructure in the county, yet our county is a large payer of taxes to central revenue. It is just not fair that our schoolchildren should lose out now and their whole future be compromised because we have an unfair funding formula that will still take several years to resolve and in the meantime is inflicting potentially huge damage on the life chances of our young people.

I hope that the Government will look again at the possibility of funding the shortfall with a transitional relief package. It is very hard for us as constituency MPs to support the Government’s programme on things such as grammar schools, with which in principle I certainly have a deal of sympathy but which will divert funds when we need those funds now in order to plug gaps in all the schools, of whatever type, across our county. We need the Minister and the Secretary of State to look more sympathetically on a dire situation that will only get worse over the next few years.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will have in front of her, either now or shortly, “Annex C: local authority schools block units of funding 2015 to 2016”, which is part of the guidance entitled “Fairer schools funding: arrangements for 2015 to 2016”. It lists every education authority in the country, and at the bottom, by £90, is West Sussex. In some charts, we are fifth lowest. Some say we are third lowest. This annexe C, issued by the Department, spells out that we are £90 lower than the next lowest, so I say to the Minister that in the transitional funding that is needed, she should ensure that that £90 at least is made up. When we start looking at the allocation of the £390 million to 69 unfairly funded authorities, we would expect that the lowest-funded authority would get slightly more than 0.2% of that £390 million. Bromley went up by 11%. Shropshire, the county of my birth, went up by about 7%. Why did West Sussex get not the 0.9% given to the Isle of Wight, which is funded more fairly than West Sussex, but less than one quarter of that? Those are the challenges.

Sir Nicholas Soames: My hon. Friend has done our area a great service by raising the issue in this way, but he is such an old silverback—in a gorilla colony, as he knows, the silverbacks are the ones to whom everyone listens—that he remembers the long-gone days when these formulae were fixed in the most abstruse and archaic manner. Does he agree that it is preposterous that, as our hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned, we are being funded in a positively 18th century manner to equip our children to do work for modern times? It is not on.

Sir Peter Bottomley: I agree with my right hon. Friend. I seldom correct him, but he may have said that I was the Father of the House. If I get re-elected next time and three of the five other people who were first elected before me do not, I might then have that role, but until then I shall look on myself as—

Sir Nicholas Soames: You are still a silverback. [Laughter.]

Sir Peter Bottomley: I will not regard that as unparliamentary.

We have heard mention of special needs, and in my constituency Palatine school and Oak Grove college do really well with their pupils. Both heads have written to me, and I have passed that on to the Department.
I bring up Palatine school because its aim is that every pupil should be empowered. How can the dedicated teachers empower their pupils, with special needs or not, if they do not have the funding? The message that we will take up with the Secretary of State, and will take up now with her colleague the Minister, is this: get on with some transitional relief, which will make a significant difference to the heads’ burdens.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) talked about Steyning grammar school, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about schools in his constituency. In our part of West Sussex, people go to schools outside of their constituencies, so we are in this together. I hope the Minister comes down to meet some of the heads and the pupils, who behaved impeccably at that petition event at Downing Street. I hope they can be as proud of her as she would be of them. However, it does need money.

The issue is the historic negative. All funding up to now has been based on what happened before, and it gets worse and worse. I ask the Minister and her advisers, especially the statisticians, not to treble count deprivation. Everyone knows that high needs have to be met and that pupil premiums are justified, but if they affect so much of the grant for schools, we get a distortion. When we move past the transitional stage to the next fairer funding national scheme, no other education authority or school within an area—there is a possible exception of one outlier at the top and one at the bottom because there is always some exception—can be more than 35% from the highest or lowest. There has to be a narrower range than at present. The £8,000 per pupil in Westminster may be the exception because there are very few schools in Westminster, and we may find something at the other end that needs the least funding, but beyond those, we cannot allow a gap of 100% or 50% and must bring it down to about 35%. That can become one of the rules within which the exemplifications are worked out. I know perfectly well how local authority funding has been run and how health service funding has been run: exemplifications come in, Ministers arrange things and there are some anomalies that cannot be dealt with. However, they can be dealt with, and West Sussex is one of them.

I have said to you privately, Mr Gray, and I say to the Labour party spokesman, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)—I am sure there is not a Liberal here for this important debate, but I am sure they would agree with us—that I cannot stay for the Minister’s winding-up speech because I have a short remarks, especially the point about annexe C, which spells out that West Sussex is at the bottom, shows what the Minister needs to change.

10.32 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I will just point out the political geography of the room. I do not want to do the other wave, but Merseyside MPs, and the Minister for School Standards was on his own on the Government side. Being a Greater Manchester MP, I thought I was probably more isolated from my colleagues in that debate than I am today, but I will not go into those traditional rivalries when we are talking about West Sussex.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) on securing this debate and on standing up, so eloquently and effectively, for the schools in his constituency and county. From my brief time in this place over the past two years, I know that politics can be like herding cats. To have so many—five—Members from the county pressing the Department and the Under-Secretary today is good to see. I would like to have seen the Minister for School Standards but if, as Woody Allen said, 80% of success is showing up, I am glad he is representing the other 20% today.

I want to make some remarks about the campaign and congratulate the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), who has clearly put in a shift, on organising it. Headteachers from 250 schools in the county have said that they need the transitional funding—the campaign has brought all of them together. The campaign has delivered a letter and petition with the names of 100,000 parents on to the Prime Minister—that is an incredible feat, so very well done. Headteachers are saying that they need the additional funding and cannot replace staff, which was alluded to by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who talked about retention and selection. They have campaigned very effectively and today we have heard the statistics about the differential levels of funding. Members have spoken with passion about individual schools in their constituencies.

The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex made two incredible points. One was that it is a fundamental basic in policy to fix schools funding—we have huge differentials across the nation. He also spoke with passion about special educational needs, which we do not do often enough. I hope, unfortunately, to find an ally with the education for all Bill, because clearly this issue is not mentioned at all. Any education Bill coming through Parliament should have special educational needs at its heart. I hope we can turn that around collectively.

Last week the Government U-turned in abandoning some of the education for all Bill, which would have included the fair funding formula. We now know, as has been alluded to by Ministers, that it is going to be kicked into the long grass for quite some time, which has created uncertainty. Back in July, the Secretary of State said that she would bring forward the next stage of the consultation.


That was on 21 July and, to the best of my knowledge, we still have not had that statement. It would be good if the Minister could say today when we will be hearing that because Members on both sides of the House want to know.

At the moment, a confused and chaotic narrative is coming out of the Education team on a number of issues. Labour Members support the fair funding formula, but as the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the Government have been really good in the past few years with subsidiarity in decision-making—the funding formulae for skills and apprenticeships are a completely devolved function to Greater Manchester. The hon. Member for Horsham
alluded to the fact that education and skills are vital to our national productivity. Traditionally, the precept has been set where local authorities could always top up the education resource that they were given from Government, which some counties and metropolitan authorities have done well. However, in the past few years, particularly with the London Challenge, they have had an enormous amount of resource, although I do not deny that that has come with an enormous amount of success.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham rightly talked about the Thomas A Becket junior school and the comparative differential. We probably know that the Thomas A Becket junior school has come from a lot further down in terms of its results and attainment, but the differential is still too large to be fair. We believe that, as with the London Challenge, we should invest in all our schools rather than take money from some to give to others—that is taking from Peter to pay Paul—which is what we do not want when the fair funding formula is introduced.

I disagree slightly with the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs about protected budgets. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that school budgets will have fallen by 8% over the course of this Parliament—the budget was protected only in cash terms rather than in real terms, meaning that the schools budget is at the mercy of rising pressures, pupil numbers and the impact of inflation on the true value. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham alluded to those pressures in his excellent speech. There are pressures on recruitment, selection and retention of teachers, particularly in areas such as his, which has rising house prices and a heated economy, with people having to travel to London to work.

With inflation rising to a two-year high and many predicting it will rise again in the light of Brexit—if we have a chaotic Brexit, the situation could be worse—it looks as though schools funding will face even higher real-terms cuts. The IFS has said that, over the course of this Parliament, funding will fall for the first time since the mid-1990s, making it harder for us to secure funding for schools. It estimated in April 2016 that there would be a 7% real-terms reduction in per pupil spending between 2015-16 and 2019-20. In that context, how will the Minister secure fairer funding for schools? Will it come at the expense of schools in the most disadvantaged areas?

In conclusion, I pay tribute not only to all the Members who have stood up so effectively for schools, but to the schools in West Sussex and to West Sussex County Council, which is doing its best in difficult circumstances. We have a chaotic school funding system and the Government are dragging their feet on getting to grips with it. I hope the Minister enlightens us today about the way forward.

10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) are a veritable tag team to be reckoned with. I know that when they go and speak to the Secretary of State this afternoon, they will make their case powerfully and persuasively, as they have done today. I know we all share the same ambition: to see a country that works for everyone, where schools improve and where every child, no matter which county, constituency or part of the country they live in, has the opportunity to go to a good school, to get a great education and to fulfil their potential.

Let me start with the fundamental reason we are here today: to make sure that our children benefit from an outstanding education. We need good schools in every area of the country. Investing in education is truly an investment in the future of our nation as a whole. That is why we are committed to providing equal opportunity for all children to succeed, irrespective of where they come from in the country and where they happen to grow up. A fair funding formula is a fantastic way of achieving that and providing a crucial underpinning for the education system to act as a motor for social mobility and social justice, as we all desire.

As many of my hon. Friends have said today, the Government are prioritising investment in education. As pupil numbers increase, so will the amount of money for schools. This year the core school budget will be more than £40 billion—the highest on record—which includes £2.5 billion for our most disadvantaged children through the pupil premium. That funding is also protected for the rest of this Parliament. The current funding system is holding us back, though. I do not think anyone in this Chamber disagrees with that. It is preventing us from getting the record amount of money that we are investing to the parts of the country where it is most needed.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I am grateful for the constructive and helpful way in which the Minister is winding up the debate. To pick up her point about the welcome increase in education expenditure and the number of new pupils coming into schools, the excellent St Paul’s Catholic college in Burgess Hill—a really good school in my constituency—has had a 31% increase in pupils, but there is so little money and room to manoeuvre in its staff budget that it does not have enough staff to cope with that 31%. It makes do, but it does not have adequate staff, which is one of the problems of the existing baseline and why the school needs the transitional funding to get through to the national funding formula being introduced.

Caroline Dinenage: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will talk shortly about the transitional funding, which I know he and his colleagues from West Sussex are all very keen on.

We are clear that without reform the funding system will not deliver the outcomes we want for our children. As many Members have said today, it is outdated, inefficient and unfair. There are two reasons for that: first, the amount of money that local authorities receive is based on data that have not been updated for more
that consultation later this year and make final decisions in the new year. The new system will be in place from April 2018.

In the meantime, we have confirmed arrangements for funding in 2017-18 so that local authorities and schools have the information and certainty they need to plan their budgets for the coming year. That is so important, because a key message coming out of the first round of the consultation is about the ability to plan ahead and certainty about the future. Schools need to know where they stand.

Areas such as West Sussex, which benefited from the £390 million that we added to the schools budget in the previous Parliament, will have that extra funding protected in their baseline 2017-18, as they did in 2016-17, but I take on board the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West, who said that West Sussex received a disproportionately low amount. We will look into that.

The next stage of our consultation, which is coming out shortly, will set out the detailed proposals for the national funding formula and show how the formula will make a difference to every school and local authority budget in the country. We will explain how quickly we expect budgets to change. We have been clear that we want schools to see the benefits of fairer funding as quickly as possible, but the pace of change must be manageable for them. The strong message is certainty and the need to be able to plan ahead. We fully take on board the real-term impact on budgets of the recent changes to pensions and national insurance contributions that my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs mentioned.

All local Members have spoken about the transitional arrangements. I hear them and I know that they will make a powerful case to the Secretary of State this afternoon when they see her. The Minister for School Standards has been working hard on the arrangements. As usual, we will finalise school funding allocations for the coming financial year in December, taking into account the latest pupil numbers from the October census.

Reforming the funding system to ensure that areas such as West Sussex are fairly funded is only half the story. As hon. Members have pointed out, as with all public services, it is vital that schools spend the money that they receive as efficiently as possible. The most effective schools collaborate through academy trusts and federations, or as part of teaching school networks or clusters. They share knowledge, skills, experiences and resources to drive the important changes that support their school’s education or vision. Schools are best placed to decide how to spend their budgets and achieve the best possible outcomes for their students. Lots of schools in West Sussex are already doing that, despite having very low funding compared with other parts of the country. We recognise that the Government have a role to play in ensuring that schools are supported to make every single penny of their funding count. That is why we launched a package of support for schools in January that includes new guidance and tools to help them make the most of the funding they receive, and we will continue to update and improve that offer to schools.

I am enormously grateful for the support that my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex and the other West Sussex Members have given to the agenda.
They have all raised important issues. I hope that they are reassured, more than anything, about the Government’s long-term commitment to reform school funding so that there is a fairer system for children in West Sussex and across the country—a system where funding reflects the real level of need, so that pupils are able to access the same educational opportunities wherever they happen to live.

A fair national funding formula underpins our ambition for social mobility and social justice, and will mean that every pupil is supported to achieve the very best of their potential, wherever they happen to live. Although we should recognise that there are challenges currently, and that challenges will lie ahead, I hope all hon. Members give support to and work with the Government to achieve that vital aim.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered the funding of West Sussex schools.

10.53 am

Sitting suspended.

Small Shops Regulation

11 am

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered small shops regulation.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. This is not a great new philosophical argument or something from Shakespeare, but it is far easier to regulate than to deregulate. Whether the regulation starts via EU institutions or is domestically derived, one need only look at the daily Order Paper of this place to see the direction of travel. For every perceived problem, the first call is for more government. This debate is perhaps a little unusual. It is an appeal for less government in order to free up our small businesses, which are so often at the heart of our communities, so that they can do what they are good at: serving the public, making a profit, operating efficiently, employing staff and, yes, paying taxes.

I refer to the 2016 “Local Shop Report” by the Association of Convenience Stores, which represents just a small part of the entire small shops sector. There are more than 50,000 convenience stores across the UK, with Scotland strangely having the highest density, with one shop per 995 people. Some 74% of these shops are owner-managed, and they have taken up many services that have been abandoned by state agencies or the more traditional post office, including mobile phone top-ups and bill payment services, such as PayPoint, that accept payments for a wide range of services that are important to Government, including council tax; they even accept payment of court fines and utility bills. Other valuable services are provided, such as sales of lottery tickets, newspapers, stationery, stamps, tobacco and alcohol, snacks and sandwiches and, of course, more traditional groceries.

More than half of customers walk to their local shop, with one in five visiting every day. Twenty-two per cent. of shop owners take no holiday at all, and 24% work more than 70 hours a week. Fully 70% of these shops open for more than 85 hours a week. The total value of sales is £38 billion a year, representing a fifth of the total grocery market, and the sector accounts for 390,000 jobs.

More than that, small shops are the heart of their community. Some 84% of these independent retailers take part in community activity every single year. By way of context, I am working with local traders and boat owners in Ramsgate in my constituency of South Thanet to make the Christmas lighting in and around Ramsgate’s royal harbour even bigger this year than last year. There are no prizes for guessing who are offering the prizes for the best-dressed shops and boats. Yes, it is the local shops. Whether the local hair salon, the coffee shops or the restaurants, small shops are very much at the heart of every single community in this country.

Small shops are often the birthplace of enterprise, where entrepreneurs’ dreams can become a reality. I come from a small shop background. My father had a small chain of greengrocers in north Kent from the 1950s until the 1990s. The rise of supermarkets caused a degree of suffering for such small shops, but who looks out for the elderly customer who comes in every day but
has not been seen for a few days? It is often the independent retailer. Such retailers now face new competition from the new giants of online sales such as Amazon.

Unfortunately, many of the regulatory hindrances are driven by increasing compliance demand, often from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the ever-changing tax code. Currently at 22,000 pages, the tax code is simply out of control. Just one part of the tax code, the annual investment allowance, started in 2008 at £50,000 a year before going up to £100,000 a year from April 2010; it then dropped to £50,000 a year from 6 April 2012; from January 2013, it went up to £250,000 a year, and then up to £500,000; and now, since 1 January 2016, it is back down to £200,000. How can a small shopkeeper or a small business keep track of that background of uncertainty when trying to make long-term investment decisions?

VAT thresholds have very hard edges, which can be a disincentive to grow lest the business gain a new administrative burden and, depending on the type of trade, face the potential loss of margin and profitability. I hope that Brexit will allow us to rethink the structure of VAT, with simplification at its heart.

Craig Mackinlay: There is a ratchet effect. One at a time does not seem too bad, and individually these regulations are often imposed for good reasons, but when they are put together as a framework for how small businesses and retailers have to operate, they become a true minefield of problems.

Adding to that minefield, small retailers face the new burden of pension auto-enrolment for their staff. I have no criticism of the Government’s great ambition: auto-enrolment is essential so that people can build their own retirement funds in excess of the state pension. The roll-out thus far for larger business has been successful—I am a member of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which has looked at that—but for the smaller employer, and notably the smaller retailer, I have asked for a free software tool that overlays the freely available real-time information software for payroll management, and HMRC has steadfastly refused.

It is good to note that the latest figures, published just last week, show the greatest ever increase in the salaries of the lowest paid due to the rise in the minimum wage. However, for smaller shops there are concerns that as hourly rates increase ahead of inflation in the years to come, the owners of these businesses might earn less than the staff they employ.

Of all tax and regulatory reforms, business rates relief has been the most welcome among smaller businesses. There has been small business rate relief, charitable rate relief, rural rate relief and enterprise zone relief. However, because of the high value of business premises in London and the south-east, new valuation assessments are in some cases creating huge increases to the business rates of businesses that are already paying higher salaries.

A real problem on the horizon that is causing much concern to the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, the Chartered Institute of Taxation—I am a member of both—and, I am sure, the other accountancy institutes is the proposed roll-out of Making Tax Digital. If the underlying desire is to advance tax cash flows to quarterly, the Government should simply say so. People go into small business to run a business and earn a profit. They do so for aspiration and lifestyle reasons, not to spend time complying with additional administrative burdens. The Making Tax Digital programme should simply be scrapped until HMRC can prove itself capable of dealing with existing workloads to an acceptable standard. It should at least start with bigger businesses—those above the VAT threshold—that are more able to cope.

Adding together the last few years of real-time information, in which businesses have to provide monthly returns for payroll, and the software costs of auto-enrolment, and now Making Tax Digital, the Federation of Small Businesses estimates the compliance cost in software and professional support to be £3,600 per business per year. That is some way in excess of the well received employment allowance of £3,000 a year that every business can claim against its national insurance contributions.

Finance raising continues to cause difficulties. We have seen the welcome expansion of new forms of lending driven by the internet, such as peer-to-peer, but banks remain cautious, requiring guarantees and often over-zealous security coverage requirements. The reality is that family and friends are still often the primary source of seed funding. In February I obtained a written answer from the then Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), about the take-up of the seed enterprise investment scheme. I learned that the amounts raised nationwide were extremely and worryingly low: just £168 million for 2013-14. I will not go into the flaws in the seed EIS application process or HMRC’s labyrinthine rules on getting such applications approved, but it is clear to me as a chartered accountant and chartered tax adviser that we need a lighter-touch regime to encourage more of the “friends and family” type of investment.

For many of our shops, which are often located in historic town centres, planning regulations can prove a barrier to sensible growth and plans for the future. We have the rather daft situation in which a conservation officer in one local authority will have an entirely different view from a conservation officer in the authority next door. That adds to uncertainty and costs.

Government Departments and local authorities have large procurement budgets, but bureaucratic rules still exist, particularly on contracts over a certain size and when EU procurement rules come into play. Those rules make it close to impossible for smaller retailers and businesses to even consider facing the cost and complexity of applying for lucrative bids.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) mentioned cigarettes. I have been working closely with the Tobacco Retailers Alliance and the National Federation of Retail Newsagents on the issue
of illicit tobacco. For many shops, tobacco sales drive footfall and lead to other sales, but the Tobacco Manufacturers Association suggests that because of the increasingly draconian rules on tobacco sales, plain packaging, hidden counters and the tobacco taxation escalator, 30% of UK smokers now buy from illicit sources. That is hardly surprising when a packet of cigarettes costs 50p in the Ukraine and still hovers around the £2.50 mark in much of eastern Europe. Local retailers are losing not only turnover from tobacco sales, despite the low margins, but other turnover through lost footfall.

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. I agree with the thrust of his argument and with his specific point on illicit tobacco sales. Is he aware that his debate is well timed because it coincides with the excellent “Freedom from Fear” campaign by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which is aimed at protecting shop workers from abuse and assault? Does he agree that small shopkeepers and their staff are all too often in the frontline of such attacks and that stronger deterrent sentences are needed to protect them?

Craig Mackinlay: Just last week in Ramsgate, I invited the Kent police and crime commissioner to a retail crime forum to address that very point. It was quite worrying how many small shopkeepers in the room had suffered attacks in the last year or burglaries of what is often very high-value stock. Consideration could be given to tax incentives to encourage small shopkeepers to beef up their security, not only for themselves but for their stock. The right hon. Gentleman’s point is very well made.

A Ramsgate newsagent who came to my crime forum last week estimated that his turnover is down £150,000 per year because of illicit tobacco sales. That is happening on every shop on every high street. It means less taxation on what is an entirely legally derived profit, and it means a vast cash windfall for illicit tobacco traders. HMRC estimates that the loss to the Exchequer is £1.8 billion per year; the TMA estimates that it is closer to £2.4 billion. We need a grown-up debate about the taxation of tobacco, because we have reached a tipping point that is promoting unregulated, potentially dangerous purchases of unknown tobacco products. That completely flies in the face of what are sensible anti-smoking public health measures.

I will finish a little off-key, on the issue of insolvency, on which I have listened to many smaller businesses, including retailers. Hon. Members may have to listen carefully, because the chain is quite complex. When a primary contractor in a supply chain fails, having not been paid by the head client, the insolvency practitioner who is appointed will seek to recover the contract value from the head client, but that usually comes with a negotiated settlement of contracted amounts. That leaves the smaller participants down the supply chain unpaid, and we often see a domino effect of failure and insolvency through that supply chain.

There is a sizeable business in Broadstairs called Blaze Signs. Members can guess what it makes: yes, signs. It is a substantial local employer with a substantial local workforce. It makes 20-foot high signs for Marks and Spencer, Sainsbury’s and McDonald’s—huge signs that can be seen from a few hundred yards away. On the failure of the primary contractor in the chain, Blaze Signs has been left completely unpaid, despite its signs having being delivered and erected, because the insolvency practitioner has sought payment from Sainsbury’s, M&S or whichever company is at the top of the chain.

We need to give some consideration to a technical change to Insolvency Act 1986 rules. In the instance of unpaid bills at the top of a supply chain, where there are identifiable elements further down the supply chain supplied by participants who have been part of that final unpaid contract, the rules should be changed so that the payment bypasses the failed company in the chain and the smaller participants receive their money for goods properly supplied. That would almost be akin to putting a Romalpa-type clause on a statutory footing.

I am confident that the Government fully understand the challenges that smaller retailers and businesses face. I seek the Minister’s reassurance that the commitment to deregulation will continue and that the old mantra of “one in, two out” is realised. I will be pleased to hear from her how we can improve the business environment in this country still further.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) on securing this debate on small shops regulation. He has brought his detailed knowledge of and passion for retailers in his constituency to the attention of the House, and they are fortunate to have such a champion.

As someone with a business background, I am acutely aware of the impact of regulation, which not only imposes costs on businesses but often diverts resources from more productive activity. As we heard from my hon. Friend, small shops play a unique role in the fabric of British social and economic life; he cited several statistics from the “Local Shop Report” organised by the Association of Convenience Stores that really explain the benefit shops bring to our high streets. Small shops are the lifeblood of any community.

I agree with my hon. Friend that it is easier to regulate than to deregulate. I am finding that in my new role, and I might add that I am constantly vigilant against that instinct. We are recognised as a world leader in deregulation. Over the last Parliament we delivered savings to business worth more than £10 billion through what was then the one in, two out initiative. That made a real practical difference for small shopkeepers through, for example, reduced audit requirements and the simplification of health and safety requirements.

We are committed to delivering a further £10 billion of savings in this Parliament through deregulation. For the first time, that target will include changes in national regulators’ policies, as well as laws. For instance, we are working with the Financial Conduct Authority to review the way we combat money laundering. I hope that that will deliver more effective controls on criminals and simpler financial services for small businesses, including retailers. We are making good progress against our new target, and have made almost £900 million-worth of net savings through the measures already implemented since the last election.
Deregulation is of course only one part of easing the burden on shopkeepers. We are trying to create one of the most internationally competitive tax systems, which is why we have complemented the national living wage with radical tax reforms to boost the take-home pay of the lowest-income workers. But, of course, we need to help employers to put all this into action, so we are cutting taxes and employer national insurance by increasing the employment allowance and reducing corporation tax. The increase in the employer allowance from £2,000 to £3,000 will benefit up to half a million employers and mean that a business, such as a small retailer, will be able to employ up to four people full time on the new national living wage without paying national insurance contributions.

As well as earning a proper wage now, it is vital that people save for their retirement. My hon. Friend mentioned the issues relating to auto-enrolment. So far, more than 6.7 million people have been automatically enrolled into a workplace pension by more than 250,000 employers. We understand that small employers may find complying with automatic enrolment challenging, which is why the Department for Work and Pensions and the Pensions Regulator are working to make automatic enrolment as straightforward as possible for them. For example, as part of that work, the Pensions Regulator has launched an interactive step by step guide on its website—I think my hon. Friend mentioned it.

Mr Andrew Smith: Will the Minister respond to the very sensible proposal made by the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) about software that will help small shops to cope with auto-enrolment?

Margot James: I thought that was a good idea. I am obviously not a DWP Minister, but I shall write to the Minister responsible, mentioning the idea proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet. It seems like one of those simple steps that the Government could take to facilitate an improvement.

My hon. Friend spoke about insolvency. Of course, sometimes, no matter how hard people try, businesses unfortunately fail. That can be very difficult to live with, particularly when a small business fails as a result of the ripple effect from an insolvency further up the supply chain. The law already allows for retention clauses to be enforced in the event that a customer to whom goods have been supplied fails and those goods can be recovered. My hon. Friend suggested that any money subsequently recovered from the “head client” by an insolvency practitioner should be shared down the supply chain to particular suppliers. It is, though, a basic principle of insolvency law that unsecured creditors should be treated equally.

There is a narrow range of exceptions to that principle, but any extension to those exceptions could prejudice the interests of other creditors in an insolvency, who may also be small businesses. The regime has to balance the interests of many different stakeholders, including lenders, employees and suppliers. Returns to creditors can be improved by ensuring that the insolvency process is as efficient and cost-effective as possible. To that end, I am pleased to say that a new set of insolvency rules for England and Wales will come into force next April, which will further reduce the costs of insolvency by removing some of the unnecessary regulations and driving the increased use of technology.

On the business environment and tax, I reassure my hon. Friend that the Government are committed to creating one of the most internationally competitive tax systems for small businesses. Earlier this year, Her Majesty’s Treasury made the Office of Tax Simplification permanent. The OTS will advise the Treasury on how to further simplify the tax system. This year has seen the biggest ever cut in business rates in England, worth £6.7 billion. Some 600,000 of the smallest businesses, many of which are retailers, will not have to pay business rates again. Although there have been fluctuations in the annual investment allowance, it is now at its highest ever permanent level. We have announced that we will cut the rate of corporation tax to 17% by the end of the Parliament.

My hon. Friend said that there was a great deal of disquiet among small retailers in his constituency about the programme to make tax digital. I have heard such disquiet in my meetings with the Federation of Small Businesses and discussed it with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. There are some signs of progress. There is no chance of the programme being rowed back or changed radically, but the Treasury is consulting on changing the threshold and removing unincorporated businesses entirely. It is also consulting on delaying its introduction for one year for businesses of a certain size, and there is even the possibility of some financial support for very small businesses. So the Treasury is listening. I think the consultation deadline is fast approaching, so I urge my hon. Friend to make haste in contributing his views on behalf of his local retailers.1

As we have heard, the trade in illicit tobacco robs small shops of the income they deserve, in addition to causing a tax loss for Government. In 2015-16 we lost £2.4 billion-worth of revenue because of that illicit trade, so I thank my hon. Friend for his work to counter it. In March last year, the Government published a refreshed strategy called “Tackling illicit tobacco: From leaf to light”, which outlines how we will continue to target, catch and punish those involved in the illicit tobacco trade. By joining up all interested parties throughout the Government and leading the way in the international fight against illicit tobacco, more than 3.5 billion illicit cigarettes and more than 599 tonnes of hand-rolling tobacco have been seized in the past two years alone.

In conclusion, I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members present for their excellent contributions to the debate. Small shops remain a crucial part of our local and regional economies, creating jobs and injecting billions of pounds into our economy. I am passionate about supporting the sector—indeed, I am chairing a round-table of retailers this afternoon—and want to see it flourish. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet again for securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Good Parliament Report

[Mrs Madeleine Moon in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Good Parliament report.

“The Good Parliament” report was published in July and during my speech I will quote a couple of sections from it. The first is this:

“Parliamentary reform is too often the result of individual MPs expending significant time and political capital.”

For me, that is the key reason why this report is important.

The intention behind the report was to try to ensure that Parliament is a more representative place, so that it is more representative of society, has a better division between the genders, has a better representation across classes, so that it is not quite so middle class, male and of a certain age, and so that it has greater diversity.

Another line from the report is this:

“2018 is a timely reminder of the promise of equality in parliamentary participation and representation in the UK.”

The report comes in the run-up to 2018 and hopes to make changes in advance of both 2018 and the 2020 election. This is absolutely the perfect time for it to come out. I recognise the incredibly hard work that Professor Sarah Childs, who is in the Public Gallery today, put into it, and the good intentions that the House and Mr Speaker in particular had in commissioning it, which are hugely appreciated.

Before I talk about the report’s recommendations, I will talk a bit about who I am, why my circumstances matter and why the report is so relevant to me and people like me in Parliament. I am not from a wealthy background. Nobody in my family has a degree. I am absolutely not from that kind of traditional privileged background that people imagine politicians come from. I am not saying at all that I grew up on the breadline, but my family were certainly not affluent in any way.

I am also an MP from quite far away. My constituency is 500 miles away from here, so I am tackling geographical issues. I am not unique in that. My Scottish National party colleagues are similarly from far away places. We tackle geographical issues that London MPs, for example, cannot even imagine. It is really quite difficult to tackle them.

I am also a female MP. Women are still very much in the minority in the House of Commons and we still face—I do not want to say “discrimination”—barriers because of our gender.

I am also a relatively young MP. I was 29 when I was elected, which in House of Commons terms—we could include the House of Lords in that—is incredibly young. In House of Commons terms, 29 is still pretty young to be elected.

I am also a parent of young children. I have a three-year-old and a five-year-old. When I was elected, they were obviously even younger than that. It is unusual, particularly for female MPs, to be parents of pre-school children, because it is incredibly hard to do this job if you have them, particularly when tackling all the other issues that people like me face. I am so far from home. I also suddenly have to finance this role. Obviously we get paid, but coming into this House without having a salary beforehand and having to pay back all of the money spent during election campaigns is hard to begin with. It is not easy. I feel that there are a lot of barriers in my way. I am from the SNP. I am no big fan of Westminster. I am not about this place being wonderful, but even if Scotland gets its independence, or when Scotland gets its independence, future generations of parliamentarians should not have to face the barriers that I have had to face in becoming an MP and in being an MP.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is very kind to give way so early on. I commend her for what she is saying and I agree with everything she has said so far. Does she agree that one way to address one of those barriers is to consider the possibility of MPs job sharing? The report does not consider it, but a future one might. One way to keep one foot solidly in our constituency, perhaps to provide the kind of family care that she is talking about, and represent people here is job sharing.

Kirsty Blackman: I will come to that. First, I am going to talk about some of the recommendations in the report and the reasons why they are so good. I will also talk about a few things that are not in the recommendations but that I feel would have benefits—job sharing is one of those.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): I, too, commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate and for what she has said about the report. On the point she so strongly made about her being a young person in Parliament, a mother of young children and a woman living miles away from her constituency, does she agree that essentially what is important is that people such as herself can be in Parliament to make it more representative and fundamentally do the job that it is supposed to do? We therefore need her and others to get over those barriers so that Parliament can be the sort of institution that it needs to be for this country.

Kirsty Blackman: I absolutely agree and will say why Parliament being representative is so important. Part of it is so that we can inspire people, so that young people who look at Parliament are not as disengaged as some currently are. A lot of young people look at Parliament and think, “There’s nobody there who’s like me”, or, “There are not enough people there who are like me. I can never achieve that.” If young people do not see people like themselves in Parliament, why would they bother to become engaged? Why would they think, “I can become an MP”, if we are not living that and showing that, and if we are not destroying the barriers I have mentioned, so that they can become Members of this Parliament or of others?

The other reason why it is really important that this place is representative is the role that we have as Westminster parliamentarians in a world-leading Parliament. We have not done very well recently at being a world-leading Parliament. I am quite embarrassed to go into Commonwealth Parliamentary Association meetings or Inter-Parliamentary Union meetings to talk to groups of parliamentarians from other countries and tell them about how wonderfully democratic Westminster is, because it is not. There are too many issues with this place,
so that I find it really hard to say to people from other Parliaments, “You should follow our rules”, because our rules are not great.

If we were genuinely reforming this place and if we were genuinely a 21st century Parliament, it would be much easier for us to work with other Parliaments, help other Parliaments and trailblaze. If we were such a Parliament, that would be a better place for us to be.

I will go through some of the report’s recommendations and say why they are important. One of the first recommendations is about standards of behaviour. That recommendation is really important, not only because of the farce that is Prime Minister’s questions but because of some of the quieter things that people do not hear so much about. Some of my colleagues have had their outfits commented on by male MPs. That is not appropriate. People should not be making odd comments about outfits. That behaviour is not tackled enough in the House of Commons and there is not enough of an argument made when people face that kind of behaviour. Not enough people are standing up about it.

The next recommendation I will discuss is collecting statistics by gender and other characteristics. Basically, the intention behind that recommendation is that the Speaker should keep account of how many people are speaking, what percentage of women are speaking, what percentage of women are asking questions in debates and what percentage of people from working-class backgrounds are asking questions in debates. It is all well and good to get us elected to Parliament but if we are encountering barriers, or if our Whips Office does not let us talk often enough, for example, or if we are not managing to catch the Speaker’s eye, or if any of those types of things happen, they are issues. If we examine the statistics and try to work out what barriers are in place, we can work out how to overcome those barriers. Such statistics would be really useful information for us to have in the future as a House, so that we can consider tackling those issues.

The biggest section in the report is on procedural and timing changes, which would make the biggest difference. There are a huge number of recommendations. One of them is that the Government should announce recess dates at least one Session in advance, which is about making business in the House of Commons a bit more predictable. We had the ridiculous situation this year when the Whitsun recess in May was not announced until February or March. We did not know when the summer recess would be. People in the House of Lords could not tell their staff when their summer holiday would be.

In some ways, it is all well and good for MPs—we signed up to this—but for the staff, it is not fair and there is no good reason behind it. The only reason it happens is that the Government do not want to cede power. I am not blaming this Government any more than previous Governments. All Governments have been in control of the recess dates. It would be easy for them to announce the recess dates a bit further in advance than they currently do. Even if they said we will definitely be off for the whole of August and then tinkered with the dates a bit later, that would be helpful. A move towards explaining the recess dates further in advance would be better for everyone.

I have already said my constituency is 500 miles away. I have to fly to get here. I cannot get the train. Some of my colleagues from Glasgow and Edinburgh occasionally get the train, but I am three hours past them. My constituency is really far away. The lack of business predictability means that my flights are more expensive. I am costing the taxpayer more money because I do not know when the Government will have votes far enough in advance to book anything. If I had more predictability—if the Government parted with that information a little further in advance—that would be cheaper for the taxpayer, which surely would be a good thing.

The thing about business predictability is that the Government do not have to go the whole way. They do not have to say, for example, “We will definitely be having Third Reading of the housing Bill on 15 November.” What they could say is, “That day will definitely be Government business, and that day will definitely be Back-Bench business.” That much they could tell us a good month in advance, and it would help with the cost and constituency engagements. If there is a vote on a Wednesday night, I cannot get home, and my constituents lose out on my presence. If I had a better understanding, because the Government told me further in advance, it would be better for my constituents and for taxpayers’ money.

One of the other recommendations is to abolish the party conference recess and sitting Fridays. We have been over the issues with private Members’ Bills in the past few weeks. There has been uproar about the way they work. I understand that some Members are particularly positive about the way private Members’ Bills work because they relish the opportunity to talk them out, but for me, being so far away from London, sitting Fridays mean I have to commit too much of my week to being here. I cannot just pop home of an evening to a constituency engagement. I already have problems representing my constituents as well as I would like, and committing to sitting Fridays makes things even more difficult. It is not just me. I am speaking from my point of view, but many colleagues are affected, whether they are in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. For anywhere without very easy access, sitting Fridays are hard.

There are a couple of other things in the report about procedure and timing changes. It suggests that when the restoration work goes ahead, a couple of things should be trialled. One is remote voting, so that Members on the Parliamentary Estate can vote remotely. I am from Aberdeen. The previous Member for Aberdeen South was Anne Begg, who uses a wheelchair, and she missed a vote because the lift did not come. How was it fair for her constituents that she could not physically be there because the lift was not working? She should not have been in that position, and the ridiculous voting system we have continues to make the situation worse. Remote voting on the Parliamentary Estate would be an interesting thing to trial. I am not sure exactly how it would work, but we should look at trialling it.

Another trial suggested in the report is a new format for PMQs. There is a lot of agreement in all parts of the House that PMQs is not the best way to showcase our Parliament. I do not know how we could do it better—less belligerent, less vacuous and more collegiate manner—while still holding the Government to account, but I am pretty sure that the current system does not work very well.
The last thing on procedure and timing changes is dress codes. We have some bizarre rules about dress codes in “Erskine May”. Women are allowed to wear hats and men have to wear jackets and ties unless the Speaker tells them that they can take them off. In the midst of summer, the Speaker rarely tells Members that they are allowed to take their jackets off. That does not seem all that fair.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Speaker has never allowed that.

Kirsty Blackman: I did not want to say “never” because I was not sure whether there was a precedent. The report suggests that the dress codes should be changed to business dress or national dress. That is much clearer for people than the current oddities in “Erskine May”, which allows me to wear a hat, but not my hon. Friend. Friends who are male. If we could improve that, things would be better.

The next section of the report is about gender quotas, and it puts responsibility for that on a number of people. It is not just about political parties needing to have gender quotas. It talks about a number of different areas where there are issues with the under-representation of women. We do not have enough women giving evidence as Select Committee witnesses. We do not have enough women standing for Parliament for political parties. We have so few women among the lobby journalists. The report makes a call for that to change.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On gender quotas, does the hon. Lady agree that it might be a good idea to look at best practice across the United Kingdom? For example, in Northern Ireland, in a short timeframe and against a backdrop that is, for a variety of reasons, difficult in terms of female representation, our only MEP is female, our First Minister is female and almost 50% of all our Ministers and Statutory Committee Chairs are female. I am not saying that is unique, because Scotland and Wales have made similar advances, but does the hon. Lady agree that replicating best practice should be looked at before we move to quotas, which I and my party would not be in favour of?

Kirsty Blackman: There are ways that different parties have done it without quotas, but the party that seemed to be most successful in making the biggest change here in Westminster was the Labour party, which had women-only shortlists. I have an automatic dislike of women-only shortlists. I do not like the idea. I just have an issue with it, but it is one of the few things that has been proven to work really well. Despite that gut reaction, if I think about it with my head, I realise that there are positive benefits. Looking at best practice across the UK and the world is an interesting and sensible way to go. Political parties will approach the issue in their own way, and it would be sensible for them to be allowed the leeway to do that. As the hon. Gentleman suggested, in Scotland we have made great changes. We have a gender-balanced Cabinet in the Scottish Parliament, and that is a positive step forward.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this fantastic debate. The points she has made are so relevant. On the matter of gender—she will correct me if I am wrong—is it not still the case that there are more men in Parliament today than there have ever been women since they were allowed to become MPs? As Rabbie Burns said:

“O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see ourselves as ithers see us!”

People look at this Parliament and do not see society reflected back. We need a multi-pronged attack. Making some of the changes that Sarah Childs suggests in her report will encourage women, but we have to look at the issue across the board.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. It is pretty dire that the number of women ever elected is less than the number of current male MPs. It does not make sense. Although we have made positive changes, it is not enough. We need to go further. I do not think that is entirely within the gift of political parties; everybody needs to take responsibility. That is one of the really good things about the report: it gives the whole House the responsibility for a lot of its recommendations. Some specific responsibility is given to two political parties, and they will interpret that in their own ways, but the whole House needs to take ownership.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. I also thank Professor Childs for her work, and the Speaker for his long-standing commitment to these issues and on moving the debate forward.

The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the flexibility that political parties should have to take their own measures. I was not elected on an all-women shortlist, but I am a massive advocate for them and the change that they have brought about. I also believe that were they to be removed, we would see a roll backwards. It is very important to find ways to put stakes in the ground so that we do not see a rolling back on the progress that we have achieved. I also support the hon. Lady’s point that we need to see a shift in representation of MPs and elected politicians and around the culture of politics, which includes representation in the staff of the House as well as in the media.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. The report recommends looking at the gender balance of the House of Commons Commission, as well as in Select Committees and other Committees across the House, but this is not just about gender. We still do not have enough people from working-class backgrounds, from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, or from minority religions or non-Christian religions in the House of Commons. Political parties can achieve some change in all of those areas, but changing the culture of the House and the barriers to becoming an MP could support change.

The report makes suggestions for changes to the buildings. If the renovation work is going to go ahead, there is a real opportunity to make real changes. One suggestion is that we have more toilets, which seems eminently sensible. I do not think anybody would disagree with that and I am hoping that the Minister will stand up and say, “Yes, we’ll accept that one.” That would be great. There is a recommendation on artwork, which suggests that more women are depicted in the artwork hanging around the House of Commons, and that there is more work from women artists. That would be hugely positive.
Hannah Bardell: On the matter of artwork, I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. She will be aware of the work that I and other colleagues have done on this issue. Walking around the palace, it is full of mainly dead men of a different era, not even of today. The famous cupboard that Emily Wilding Davison hid in is hidden away from the public. There is no public representation of it. My hon. Friend makes a valid point about women being properly represented in all parts of Parliament.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. There are only two statues of females that I can remember seeing around here—one of Queen Victoria and one of Margaret Thatcher. If that is it, we are not doing a very good job.

Chris Bryant: There are more.

Kirsty Blackman: Even if there are, they are not in very prominent positions. It would be nice to have more female artwork.

Members probably expect me to talk about the report’s recommendation to look into a crèche. The fact that I took my children to a Select Committee meeting was fairly publicly discussed. There is a real issue with the lack of flexible childcare here. I phoned the House of Commons nursery and asked them if they could take my children for the afternoon, and they said, “We can take your children for six weeks of afternoons.” I said, “Well, they live in Aberdeen. What use is that?” There is a real problem with childcare provision.

There is such a contrast with the Scottish Parliament. Someone who is giving evidence to a Committee of the Scottish Parliament or who has come to see their MSP can leave their children in the Scottish Parliament crèche while they have that difficult conversation for an hour with the MSP, perhaps about problems they are experiencing with housing—conversations that they might not want to have in front of their children. Members of the public can use the crèche for free, and MSPs and passholders pay for its use. That is a really good system and one that we should consider adopting if we are going forward with renovations in the building as it is. I get that the nursery was a massive step forward and everybody was hugely supportive, or was convinced to be supportive, of the nursery taking over a bar, and I understand that a nursery was a massive step forward and everybody was hugely supportive, or was convinced to be supportive, of the nursery taking over a bar, and I understand that a nursery was a massive step forward and everybody was hugely supportive, or was convinced to be supportive, of the nursery taking over a bar, but that is only a step on the way forward; it is not the flexible childcare that those of us from further away and those of us who choose not to base our children in London require.

My last point about the recommendations is about the promotion of the role of an MP. I have been really clear that I am not a fan of Westminster, but I think it is incumbent on me and people like me, who are not from that traditional male group of politicians, to say to young people, “You can do this. You can get involved in this place. You can get involved in politics. You can get involved in making a difference in your country.” A number of my colleagues and I have tried to be really honest about what our job involves. It is not just about sitting in PMQs and people shouting at each other and then being on BBC News or wherever. It is not just about those things. It is about all of the casework that we do. It is about all of the everyday things such as about doing five minutes on a bike for the Poppy Appeal and getting comprehensively beaten—I will do better next year. It is about all of those things that we do that are not mentioned in the media, but that are fabulous experiences for someone coming into this who has never experienced anything like it before.

The number of things that we are privileged enough to do is absolutely unbelievable, as is the number of amazing things that we get to do and the amount of change that we get to achieve for people in their everyday lives. If we are better able to promote that, and to explain to people how being an MP actually works, people would be more likely to come into this role with a better attitude and intentions.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about understanding the reality of our lives as Members of Parliament. I have six years’ experience since I set up the Fabian Women’s Network mentoring scheme, which does a lot of political education and mentoring for those who might seek to come forward in political life. Does the hon. Lady think that there might be an opportunity for Members of Parliament to be engaged slightly more formally in ways to promote and help people understand the role of parliamentarians?

Kirsty Blackman: Yes, absolutely. One of the report’s recommendations uses the phrase “a diversity of people are, and can be, MPs” and recommends having case studies on the House of Commons website about a range of different people and the backgrounds that we come from, so that young people in particular can understand what it is that we do. There is also a suggestion of a residential course, which would be a really good idea because it would give people hands-on experience.

I am going to the Patchwork Foundation awards tonight. The Patchwork Foundation tries to get under-represented groups more involved in politics. It does absolutely fabulous work—again, not in formal structures but more informally, through mentoring and similar things. It is quite difficult for me to get involved in some of those programmes from Aberdeen. I cannot take patchworkers out and about in my constituency, because they are not going to come 500 miles to do that, so there are some issues. It might be better if there were more formal structures.

There are some other points not mentioned in the report that are worth considering. I mentioned the financial barriers to becoming an MP. It is expensive to stand for election and it is difficult to make the change after being elected. As a newly elected MP, it was difficult for me to suddenly be able to finance the five extra dresses that I needed and to pay for things out of my own pocket before being set up properly with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. It is hard to come up against those barriers and to begin that life.

I took a £50,000 pay rise when I became an MP; I had never earned more than £26,000 a year and I had debts to pay off when I was first elected. It was very difficult in that initial period. There is not enough recognition of the circumstances that people find themselves in. I am not saying that MPs’ salaries should be increased—I definitely do not think they should be—but the institutional barriers for people from less affluent backgrounds should be considered more carefully in the future.
I do not think geography is given enough consideration, even though there are quite a few of us from far away—perhaps we just have not shouted loudly enough about it. Five hundred miles is a very long way and I cannot just drop everything to come here for a vote. It is even worse for my colleagues from the Highlands who have to get two aeroplanes or drive for four hours and then get an aeroplane down, when there are only two a day. There are something like five or six aeroplanes a day from Aberdeen, so it is not as bad for me as it is for some of my colleagues. Because of the way the business of the House works, there is a lack of understanding about and recognition of the geographical challenges for MPs from further away. The boundary review will compound that, because MPs from the furthest away constituencies will be representing a wider geographical area. In addition to doing a large amount of travelling, they will have to represent a constituency that takes six hours to drive across, or even longer in some cases, so the boundary changes will create some real issues.

Job sharing, which the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) mentioned, and maternity leave go hand in hand. The Green party has talked about job sharing for MPs, which is a really interesting concept. I do not think it would be possible for a single parent of young children to do this job. I cannot imagine a way in which they could do it, but a job share that enabled two MPs to be elected on half the salary and staff costs, with one office that they run together—the MPs would actually end up working for more than their allotted hours—would make the job more flexible and accessible for single parents and people from caring backgrounds. I do not see how somebody with caring responsibilities for, say, an elderly relative or a disabled family member could be an MP at the same time, but a job-sharing option would make that much more possible.

We do not have maternity leave. I was a local councillor when I had both my children. I had the first one, Harris, at the end of April. I was back in the office within four weeks and I took a promotion in the local authority in June. What was I supposed to do? There was not another option. My constituents would not have been represented if I had not been there. It is not fair for constituents to be disadvantaged because their MP happens to have a baby. If I had a baby right now—it is not going to happen today, obviously, and hopefully not any time soon—I would not have been able to fly for four weeks before having it, and I would not be able to fly for two weeks afterwards because I would have to have a caesarean section. Why would it be fair for my constituents not to have somebody to vote for them when it is not their fault that I had a baby? We need to think better and smarter about this. It could be easily overcome with a bit of sense. I do not think it is fair for constituents to have that issue. I think changes should be made to voting in particular when Members have children.

The attitudes, the misogyny and the abuse that some people from non-traditional backgrounds face are a real barrier. I have spoken to people who have said, “I could never be an MP because you get so much abuse.” I know that those things are an issue for people from all backgrounds—they are an issue for 45-year-old males from a privileged background—but I think they are more of an issue for those of us from less traditional backgrounds. Adopting the recommendations in “The Good Parliament” report would inspire the cultural change that would make the difference. It would make the House of Commons a more positive place to work, with fewer barriers. It would make this a more representative Parliament.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Because of the length of the introductory speech, I am afraid I am going to have to introduce a time limit of five minutes, which may reduce depending on the length of interventions.

3.4 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman). We may not agree on much, but she has made a strong start to her time in Parliament and should be proud of that. She is a very good role model for other people—women, young people and whoever else—who want to enter Parliament, and she is doing an excellent job in representing her constituency, for which I have a great affinity. I think Dyce is in her constituency.

Kirsty Blackman: It is further north.

Philip Davies: Is it a bit further north? I used to spend a lot of time in Dyce when I worked for Asda. I am sorry it is not in the hon. Lady’s constituency, because it is a fine place.

When I first saw that this debate was taking place, my first question was, what is “The Good Parliament” report? After reading it, I rather wish I had not asked. It could be referred to as the “less accountable Parliament report” or the “dumbed-down Parliament report”, and it would certainly be better titled the “politically correct Parliament report”. There is not time to go into all the things that are wrong in the report, but I will pick out a few points in the limited time that I have.

The hon. Lady made the point that it is absolutely terrible that she cannot get up to her constituency on a Wednesday evening, and said that everything should be changed to allow her to do so. I checked, and in the 2015-16 Session of Parliament this House sat for 158 days out of 365. When people complain to me about Parliament, they say that none of us seems to be here when debates are taking place. I have never heard the complaint from the public that we are spending too much time here or that there are too many of us here during debates. I suggest to the hon. Lady that having 158 days to represent her constituency in Parliament is not too much to expect.

I am completely opposed to all-women shortlists and quotas. I could not care less if every single MP were a woman, if every position in Parliament were held by a woman or if everybody in the Cabinet were a woman. It is of no interest to me. As far as I am concerned, as long as they are there on merit, their gender is irrelevant. We should be gender-blind. I really think that the true sexist are the people who see everything in terms of gender. We should judge people not on the basis of their gender, but on the basis of their ability.

One thing I very much agree with the hon. Lady about is that we need more people from a working-class background in Parliament. One of the points I always...
made to the Conservative party when we were looking at things such as all-women shortlists—fortunately, we did not go down that route—was that replacing Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with Jemima from Kensington and Chelsea does not do an awful lot for diversity in the House of Commons. Replacing Rupert from Kensington and Chelsea with Jim from Newcastle would do an awful lot more for diversity in the House of Commons than a tokenistic approach to diversity that sees things only in terms of simplistic diversity—gender or race.

**Hannah Bardell:** On the issue of gender quotas, we sometimes need to intervene to change things for the next generation. Would the hon. Gentleman concede that, as a short-term measure, in some cases gender quotas are useful?

**Philip Davies:** No, I certainly would not concede that point.

In the Conservative party, we had a female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, decades ago. She managed to get to the very top and stay there for an awful long time, and as far as I am concerned she was the best Prime Minister this country has ever had. I suspect that most people in this Chamber hate the fact that Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. When a woman actually got to be Prime Minister, they all hated it. Today, we have another female Prime Minister on the Conservative Benches without all this tokenistic claptrap, and she is also doing a fantastic job. It is rather patronising to say that women need all these extra things to help them get to the top; they do not. We do not need to be patronising to women. They are more than capable of rising to the top.

I find the idea that people can represent only people who are the same as them completely alien. There will be many women in my constituency who think I do a great job representing them in Parliament, and many women who think I do a terrible job. There will be many men who think I do a good job and many men who think I do a terrible job. What most people are concerned about is their representative’s views on issues: what their opinions are and the things they stand up for.

I can honestly say that, when I have been out canvassing during all my years in politics, people may have argued, agreed or disagreed with me about particular issues, but I have never yet had a person say to me that they would vote for me if I were a woman and that they would not vote for me because I am a man. Gender is irrelevant to the general public. They want their parliamentarians to stand up for the things that matter to them.

Being in Parliament is not a nine to five job. We pass laws that affect the country and we hold the Government to account. If we had nine to five days in Parliament, we would not be able to attend Select Committees if at the same time we wanted to be in the Chamber to attend debates or questions. There is lots to do as a Member of Parliament. It is very responsible work. The report is patronising and mostly full of claptrap. I want to make it clear that there is at least one dissenting voice. One day people might look back at this report and laugh, but for many of us at the moment it is not a laughing matter.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for calling it. I welcome the work of Professor Childs and everyone else who participated in “The Good Parliament” report. I wish to touch on a few recommendations around the way the House operates and the impact that that has on democracy more widely. I want to stress that the report is not about us as MPs, but about democracy and giving people access to Parliament. It is about Parliament showing leadership and about demonstrating that, by deeds not words, we are as representative as we possibly can be.

It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friends that, as chair of the all-party group on infant feeding and inequalities, I want first to mention the issue of breastfeeding. It is a vital public health issue that, despite the efforts of many committed people, does not get the prominence that it should. In the UK, we have the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. This is not about the choices of individual mothers, but about society’s attitudes. I would talk at length on the matter if I were not short of time, but I recommend people read Dr Amy Brown’s book, “Breastfeeding Uncovered”, which highlights a lot of the issues.

There has been a lot of talk about breastfeeding in the response to “The Good Parliament” report, but it is a tiny aspect of the report. It is clear that even in the House there are various opinions on breastfeeding in Parliament. The hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) called it exhibitionism; certain journalists were surprised when I tweeted a picture of myself breastfeeding; and some people said that if women could not breastfeed while driving a tank, they should not be allowed to do it in Parliament. Those are ridiculous arguments. “The Good Parliament” report recognises that “permitting entry to infants would have symbolic benefits—showcasing the Commons as a role-model parent-friendly institution.”

That is where we wish to be as a Parliament. I think we could all agree on that. In showing that leadership, it would also encourage businesses across the country to consider their own practices.

Yesterday, a friend who works at SNP headquarters in Edinburgh posted a photo of the breast pumps belonging to her and her colleague, both of whom have been supported by the SNP to express milk at work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North said, we both breastfed our babies in council meetings. Councillor Fay Sinclair is doing so in Fife. It is happening in Australia, Iceland and Scotland, and in the European Parliament. There is no reason why we in the mother of Parliaments should not embrace it, too.

I mentioned at the start that “The Good Parliament” report is not just about us, but about how Parliament does its business. The way we do our business excludes women from the life of this building, and that has a negative impact on our decision making. I attended an interesting event yesterday that was organised by Sense About Science. It was called “Evidence matters”, which of course it does, but which evidence and are we getting it from the right source? I am deeply concerned that the evidence we receive as a Parliament is not good enough because it excludes the views and experiences of women.
Dr Marc Geddes has produced interesting research on witnesses at Select Committees, from which it is clear that they are very much male, pale and stale. Out of the 3,228 witnesses who gave evidence to the 1,241 Select Committee sessions in Session 2013-14, only 792 were women. That is just shy of 25%. No Committee came close to calling an equal number of women and men to give evidence, and for some Committees—Defence, Energy and Climate Change, and Communities and Local Government—more than 80% of witnesses called were men. For the Treasury Committee, it was more than 90%.

I do not believe that there are only men with expertise in these areas, and we need to understand why this imbalance exists. Dr Geddes’ research also highlighted that 67% of witnesses are coming from London and the south of England, even when Government witnesses are excluded. “The Good Parliament” report suggests we consider gender thresholds, but I believe Select Committees must also look at when they meet so that people can get to them. We should look at building into the parliamentary timetable a more considered way for when Committees meet. Committees need to recognise it is difficult for people to get here, as my hon. Friend for Aberdeen North mentioned. Friend the Member for Manchester Local Government Committee was when we took public evidence on devolution in Manchester and actually we had heard evidence first hand. We should look at building into the parliamentary timetable a more considered way for when Committees meet. Committees need to recognise it is difficult for people to get here, as my hon. Friend for Aberdeen North mentioned. Friend the Member for Manchester Local Government Committee was when we took public evidence on devolution in Manchester and actually we had heard evidence first hand.

A 10 am meeting means an early flight or train or an overnight stay, rearranging the school run and making arrangements for childcare. Late-night meetings might end up the same way. We should consider building a system that takes into account the needs of people, rather than the needs of London-based Committees. I would encourage Select Committees to get out and travel outside London. The best meeting of the Communities and Local Government Committee was when we took public evidence on devolution in Manchester and actually heard from people in Manchester. It was useful to be able to hold to account other witnesses who came late in the day because we had heard evidence first hand.

I want to briefly mention the créche issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North mentioned. Joeli Brearley from Pregnant Then Screwed came to listen to a debate in this room and had to sit at the back juggling a wee one and popping in and out because there was no créche provision for her.

Kirsty Blackman: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alison Thewliss: Of course.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Justin Madders.

3.16 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on her superb introduction to this debate. She set out the huge range of issues that we have to consider and will, I hope, act upon. I very much welcome the recommendations in the report. I hope that they are given the opportunity to be implemented faster than we have seen female representation grow in this place.

Having been elected only last year, I still look at some of the goings-on here with a mixture of wonder, bemusement and sadness. My job before I was elected enabled me to peer into many other workplaces and their cultures. I am sorry to say that, if the culture we have here were replicated in an ordinary workplace, the company could expect to be involved in many employment tribunals every year. It would also find it difficult to recruit good people and would have an even harder job retaining good staff.

Although it is a huge privilege to work here, we should not be afraid to challenge archaic practices and cultures where we find them. At how many workplaces does someone’s finish time vary and change at incredibly short notice? How is that in any way family friendly? In which workplaces is it acceptable for colleagues to stop speaking to you because they disapprove of something you have or have not done? Would we expect to start a new job without any feedback or appraisal of progress, but still be promoted or demoted on a set of opaque criteria we are not privy to? In which jobs would it be considered normal to engage in arguments on Twitter with work colleagues? And I am talking about people from the same party; they sometimes come with insults and abuse that would break any dignity at work policy.

I am chair of the all-party group on social mobility. We are currently conducting an inquiry into access to the professions, which includes law, finance, the arts, media, medicine, the civil service and politics. In terms of Parliament, as we have heard, the stark fact remains that there have been fewer female MPs elected than there are male MPs currently sitting in the House of Commons, and less than 30% of MPs are female. Although the report looks mainly at gender issues, we cannot isolate that from other factors that influence representation here. According to the Sutton Trust, 32% of MPs were privately educated compared with 7% of the general population. Of those, the research shows, almost one in 10 went to Eton. Nearly 10% of all MPs attended the same school: a school that of course nearly one in 10 went to Eton. Nearly 10% of all MPs attended the same school: a school that of course only boys can attend.

The recommendations on sitting days are welcome. Why, for heaven’s sake, do we have a half-term recess that starts on a Wednesday? No schools are off then and I am not aware of any school breaks that start on a Wednesday. I certainly welcome the recommendations on producing a statement on maternity, paternity, adoption and caring leave. We would not expect our constituents to forgo those hard-won rights, so I do not think we should, either. Recommendation 43 places the onus on political parties to increase the diversity of parliamentary candidates. My party has been at the forefront of this, and with the creation of the Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme, I am confident we will continue to be so. The reality is that it is up to the political parties to seriously look at the way they select candidates if we really want to change things.

My party has made great strides towards gender equality. I have a great amount of respect and admiration for my Labour colleagues, but it is still very much the case that someone has to have connections with the centre, the kind of informal networks that we see in all professions, if they want to succeed in politics. We have to recognise that, to be selected as a candidate for a major political party in an unamendable seat, someone must first of all win an election that in all likelihood will be just as challenging as the real one, but without the party’s resources, or the finance. They may not have the...
time to get the nomination, particularly if they are in a full-time job outside politics, or have caring responsibilities, or both. The reality is that, if they are working at the local Tesco, and have three kids under 11, they will struggle to find the time to run a successful election campaign. Some unions are getting better at recognising those challenges, and we need to go further and support them.

There is a huge London focus in most professions, but arguably it is most acute in politics. The Speaker’s parliamentary scheme is helping to open up opportunity, but a number of people do not apply to it at all because the cost of living in London is so high. Those who are on the scheme can struggle because the cost of living is so high, even on the London living wage. That is why people with supportive and well-resourced families have an advantage. We must therefore stress the importance of open and funded internships and placements, which do not rely on self-finance. We hope to present the result of the all-party group’s inquiry next month. It is pretty clear that it will show patterns that restrict opportunity, repeated throughout the various professions—with politics no exception. There are pockets of good practice in all professions, but they are just that—pockets. In Parliament we have a unique role and an opportunity to lead by example, to show that in this country, whatever a person’s background, they will have the same opportunities as everyone else.

3.21 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I am delighted to take part in the debate and to support the recommendations in Professor Childs’ report calling on Parliament and the parties to do more to improve the diversity of Parliament and the political system.

When I entered the House of Commons as a new MP last year, one of my first impressions of Westminster was that a large majority of MPs—outwith the SNP, obviously—were white, middle-aged, men. They all looked like slightly older versions of me. I am 36—not quite middle aged. Despite some minor progress on the issue of increased diversity, it is clear—and now confirmed in “The Good Parliament” report—that the UK Parliament remains “disproportionately white, male and elite.”

Some progress has been made on increasing the level of female representation in Parliament, but it has been slow, and little has been done to try to remove the barriers that prevent so many talented women from pursuing a career in politics. Twenty-nine per cent. of current MPs are female, and that percentage has increased by only 10% in 10 years. Based on that, we shall have to wait another 20 years to have a Parliament with equal representation.

In attempting to address the issue, we should not limit ourselves to Professor Childs’ report, excellent though it is. We should learn from the experiences of other countries to increase diversity. On a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association trip to Canada during the conference recess, I was fortunate enough to have great companions, including the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and to meet with the Federal Parliament’s standing committee on the status of women, Quebec’s circle of women parliamentarians, the women’s group for policy and democracy, and Equal Voice. They told me that, despite the 2015 election, which represented the most diverse group of parliamentarians that Canada has ever had, Canada still lags behind the UK; only 26% of MPs are women. The experience of that election tells us that it is not just about the number or percentage of women candidates standing; it is about the winnability of the seats. For each party, the Liberals, Conservatives, the New Democratic party and Bloc Québécois, the number of females elected as a percentage of their group was less than the percentage of female candidates on the ballot.

Each group that we spoke to is determined to do something about that. They were all heartened to hear of Scotland’s experience, but in particular I want to mention a new national initiative being launched by Equal Voice. Daughters of the Vote will recognise a significant event in Canadian history: the 100th anniversary of the first voting rights granted to a select number of Canadian women in 1916. Equal Voice is inviting young women aged between 18 and 23 to participate in a national initiative in which 338 women—one from each constituency—will be selected to take their seat in Parliament. The women will meet and hear from outstanding women leaders from every sector. Daughters of the Vote is an initiative to identify and to encourage young women who can lead the country to a fairer and brighter future. That is something that we could and should do here.

Back on this side of the pond, it is clear from “The Good Parliament” report that, if we are serious about tackling the barriers that prevent women, disabled people, people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex, and others from pursuing a career in politics, we must have leadership on the issue. We must commit to making a concerted effort to removing barriers, and win over colleagues who adopt the “If you’re good enough, you will be elected” mindset. I welcome statements by the Speaker that he intends to lead on the recommendations from Professor Childs’ report, and I hope that he is supported in his efforts by all our party leaders.

I welcome what the report says about a gender-neutral approach to family life. I have a young family, and I have difficulty in balancing the promises that I made to the electorate and to my family. Anything that Parliament can do, no matter how small, to achieve that balance, is to be welcomed. Pursuing inclusivity is not about ticking boxes or being politically correct. The issue is not just about making the political system fairer, more inclusive and accessible. It is also about creating one that is more effective, which draws on the talents, skills and experience of all citizens. I support “The Good Parliament” report and the Speaker’s efforts to act on it. I may be white, male and in my mid-30s, but I am also an ally who will support any attempt to create a Parliament that is truly representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective in all its functions.

3.25 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Mrs Moon, I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship—chairwomanship, I should say. It is the first time I have ever done that, and you know how much I love you.
When I saw that the report is called “The Good Parliament” I thought it was a reference to the 1376 Parliament, which was when we first had a Speaker at all, and when we impeached nearly all the Government’s Ministers and imposed a new set of Ministers of our own—maybe we will do that later today. The history of our Parliament has not been very good in relation to women. Sometimes we boast about “the mother of Parliaments”—a terrible phrase, but I will not bore people with how inaccurately it is regularly used. More important, for a long time women were not even allowed to attend the debates of the House of Commons other than by sitting in the room above the Chamber that had been built in the kind of false ceiling above the ventilator. When they were finally allowed in the Gallery, they had to have a grille so that they could not be seen, in case that somehow disturbed the male MPs.

When I arrived at theological college, when I was training to be a priest at Cuddesdon, it was the first year there was more than one woman training there. I know that that was difficult, both for many of the men—including the gay men, bizarrely—but also for many of the women, because for the first time women could not be treated as how they think we are only just beginning to get to the point in parliamentary terms where we no longer treat women as honorary chaps in the way we do business. That is one of the things that must change.

I warmly commend the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for bringing forward the debate. We probably will have to have a debate in the main Chamber at some point and I hope that the Government will enable that to happen, because I think that—notwithstanding the views of the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), who is a splendid chap but just wrong about everything—we should air the issues.

There are some things that it may be difficult to change. There might be unintended consequences of changes to where and how we vote that make things even more difficult for people post-maternity and pregnancy; but there are things we can do. On the question of all-women shortlists, I would point out to the hon. Gentleman that before the 2001 general election in Wales, 10 Labour MPs retired, and the Labour party, which prides itself on being a party of equality, selected 10 candidates every one of whom was a man, because we did not have all-women shortlists then. I benefited from that, in one sense, as did the people of Rhondda, no doubt—[ Interruption. ] Or maybe not. The point is that surely every party needs to find its own mechanism to try to make Parliament more representative, both in this House and, I would argue, in an elected House of Lords.

**Philip Davies**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Bryant**: I am not going to, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind, because we do not have long.

There is a real difficulty for parents. It is shocking how few mums—mothers of young, or actually of adult, children—we have in Parliament. There must be reasons for that, and we need to explore them. As the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) has just pointed out, it is very difficult for dads of young children as well. They must decide where their kids will be educated, and it may well end up being in London, because that is the only way they will be able to see them for most of the week. That then poses questions for them in their constituency, if that is some way away. I do not think that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is anywhere near helpful enough about that. I can feel hon. Members agreeing with me—I may even have the hon. Member for Shipley with me on that.

I simply think that IPSA’s role is confused: on the one hand, it is a regulator; and on the other hand, it is meant to be a support mechanism, and those two roles conflict. In this area, it is making things increasingly difficult for people with families to think of becoming Members of Parliament, in particular if they are from ordinary working-class backgrounds. I think that that means IPSA is failing, and we need to address it.

There are more pictures and statues of women around Parliament than one might think, but they are not part of the standard tour, which is all about white dead men. It would not be a bad idea—I would be happy to organise this—to create a tour of women in Parliament, which could easily be done around the building.

Another point was made about restoration and renewal. We have got to get that right—the disability access in the building is shocking. Take eyesight, for example, and being able to see in debates: this Chamber is quite good, but other rooms are shockingly bad. We need to transform that.

Finally, we can see the sexism in politics in how Hillary Clinton is treated. Let us hope she wins.

3.30 pm

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mrs Moon, and to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for securing the debate, and I welcome the report, which is an important addition to an ongoing debate about the representation of women in politics.

Many of us female parliamentarians—including all the women on the SNP Benches in this Chamber today—are new, serving our constituents in Parliament after being elected for the first time in 2015. A number of shocking experiences, some of which were reflected in the report—comments about how we speak, dress and so on—and all of which were entirely unwelcome, made the difficult situation of entering Parliament as a new MP even more difficult to deal with. The report highlights a number of issues. The question for us is: are we prepared to accept that this is the way it is? That is what we were told when we entered Parliament: this is the way of Westminster. Well, we are not prepared to accept that. We have an opportunity to change and we have to seize that opportunity with both hands.

Women have been fighting for a long time. Mention has been made of women who have achieved great things in Parliament, and yes, they have, but let us never forget that every opportunity that has come to women in every walk of life has come not by accident, but after having had to fight for every single opportunity. We have to continue that fight, and the fight is clearly continuing today in this debate.

Why is it important that Parliament should reflect society? Because we are making decisions about all the people in society every single day of our working lives, whether the members of society are men, women,
LGBTI—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex—black, Asian, from a minority ethnic community, or disabled. That is important, and no one knows better about how to make decisions than those people themselves. That is why we have to work hard to increase their representation.

We do so in the knowledge of what we are encouraging people to come into, which is not good enough. We know that we need to make a difference. With the help of colleagues on the SNP Benches, in the Scottish Parliament and in the wider SNP, I am pleased with what we have done to encourage women to come into politics. We have a women’s academy in the SNP; we have worked to give training or opportunities to practise debating skills, or have just encouraged women to come forward. For almost every woman who has come forward in any political party, someone has asked her whether she has ever considered standing for election. It is never something we put ourselves forward for; it is always something that is suggested to us.

As we hold debates in this Chamber or the main House of Commons Chamber, we should remember that people are looking in at us—at how we conduct ourselves, how our colleagues of the opposite sex reflect what Parliament is like, and how they demonstrate respect for us or otherwise, as is sometimes the case. That should always be at the forefront of what we do.

In the short time I have remaining, I will address the issue of quotas, which raises its head so often. If we had a level playing field, we would have a Parliament that represented society. It is a matter of fact that we do not have a level playing field—or is anyone here today brave enough to stand up to intervene on me and say that women are not as good as men in any of the jobs we do throughout Parliament? That is of course not the case—

Gavin Newlands: Will my hon. Friend give way?

[Laughter.]

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Absolutely, I will give way.

Gavin Newlands: I appreciate what my hon. Friend is saying—I am not intervening to make that point. The SNP introduced our national quota system at the spring 2013 conference. At the start of that conference, I was completely against a quota system, not unlike the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), but a debate on the day changed my mind. I am now a big advocate of quotas.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. [Interruption] Other comments have been made from a sedentary position, but I am happy to accept interventions on that point or any other. It is worthy of note, however, that many men in this Parliament and beyond very much support the work being done on equal representation. That is something that should be commended, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work.

I mentioned the elections and our representation in Parliament. The SNP has gone from having one female Member of Parliament to having 20. At the 2016 Scottish parliamentary elections we increased women’s representation in the SNP group at Holyrood from the 25% of 2011 to 43% by adopting positive mechanisms to ensure that women are properly reflected in Parliament, which is the right thing to do.

It is also worthy of note that it is a matter of political will. In any political party, candidates go through a vetting process, and men and women all go through the same process, and at the end of the day it is up to the political party to decide whether it wants representation to be equal, because people have already passed the test—the bar of being effective and capable. I accept no argument that selection is on merit, because if it were we would see more women in Parliament than we have today. Indeed—I am sure many will agree—we women also set ourselves a very high bar to begin with, before we even enter any race or competition, so quality is guaranteed and is never an issue.

We have a lot of work to do, and the fight continues. We all know that nothing will come to us because people gift it to us. Before us, however, is a set of recommendations and, to replicate some of the positive change discussed and certainly seen in my political party—we have also heard from the Labour party over a number of years—we must commit ourselves to implementing them, and now.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Before we move to the Front-Benchers, given the time constraints I suggest that the Scottish National party has five minutes, the Labour party seven minutes and the Minister 10 minutes. With some generosity on everyone’s part, I hope that that leaves us with a minute or two for the formal wind-up from Kirsty Blackman.

3.37 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): With you in the Chair today, Mrs Moon, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) stated, the report, which we are grateful to Professor Sarah Childs for and to Mr Speaker for commissioning, outlines some clearly much-needed change in this place.

I stress at this point that my hon. Friends the Members for Aberdeen North and for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and I were each elected as councillors—young, female councillors, and some of the youngest female councillors in Scotland. There is no shortage of talent in our local authorities, and the job does not end here in this Parliament, because we must continue it in local authorities too.

I was probably the most unlikely candidate ever to find myself in this esteemed institution. I had no desire to be here for a great many years, and in fact it will come as no surprise to Members that I actively campaigned against this institution. None the less, we are here and we are part of the UK for now, so it is worth saying that as a young LGBT woman who was a young carer, getting into an institution such as a university even to get into the door of this place was one of the biggest challenges that I faced. I faced those challenges, so I know that young men and women up and down this country face the same challenges every day. For so many people even to get into this place is inconceivable and unimaginable.

I stress that I am proud to be a member of the Select Committee, the first ever Women and Equalities Committee. It is long overdue for this Parliament to have a discussion about equalities—not only for women, but for every single protected characteristic under the Equalities Act 2010.
I want to take this opportunity to summarise the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North, because there is no better way to make them. Sadly, this place is still full of middle-class white men, 10% of whom are Etonites. That is apparently a good place to go to school. However, there are many children up and down this country who did not have the benefit of such privilege and such an esteemed education and will never enter this place. This is their Parliament, and they deserve to have their voices heard.

It is worth also saying that this place’s job is to be representative. It is hard to believe that when we witness middle-aged white men waste time by filibustering their way through debates in the Chamber. I distinctly remember that happening during a debate on marriage. That sends a message to young people at home that this place is out of touch and has no grip on reality. [Interruption.] The summary of the report sets out standards of behaviour; the Government Members who are clustering from a sedentary position could learn some decorum. Clearly, whether we deal with standards of behaviour or gather data, we should ensure that new parliamentarians get more than one minute to sum up in a debate after the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) has waxed lyrical in his ever-entertaining way about how much he adores a former Prime Minister. Trust me—we know that.

The report has some practical implications. Gathering data to ensure that this place is representative is a start. We must consider how we measure the success of the work that we do. The proposed procedural requirements and changes would be helpful. Remote voting would make a great difference to those who have just had a child and simply cannot make the journey—and why should they? We should modernise the dress code. It’s 2016. Hello—no one wears top hats anymore. There is no cost to enhancing the creche facility and allowing people to access this institution. This is their Parliament and they should be able to access it. It is not for the privileged few, and it is not only for Etonites.

I am conscious that I am running out of time, so let me say honourably that my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central has been an absolute champion on issues such as breastfeeding, the tampon tax and the rape clause. To me, she is an award-winning MP. My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) is also a role model and champion for gender equality. He is the father of two daughters, and I would welcome the opportunity to have him as a champion for gender equality. He is the father of two children.

North (Gavin Newlands) is also a role model and champion for gender equality. He is the father of two children and would welcome the opportunity to have him as a champion for gender equality. He is the father of two children.

In the longer term, we have to change behaviour in society, from schools to the workplace and civil society, through education and legislation. When I first came here in 2010, there had been a huge change in the number of Members, and we had an induction day. I suggest that at such induction days, needs assessments should be done of all the MPs—male and female—with families, and then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, IPSA should be asked to ensure that there is enough childcare provision for those Members.

I agree that women should be allowed to breastfeed anywhere, but I am not sure that I would have liked to do it in the Chamber. Children need routine. As a lawyer, I am not sure that I would ever have done it if I went to court. There is a time and a place for it, although it is for an individual to choose. I agree with the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) to say that I am not good enough.

On recommendation 25, we have a fantastic Secretary of State for Education, but, as usual, the woman has to do two jobs—she is also the Minister for Women. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, whose job it is to try to prevent discrimination in society, faces huge cuts. Will the Minister look at reversing those cuts if possible? The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) is right that we need a level playing field. Women make up 51% of the population, and we therefore need to be represented.

On recommendation 12 goes to parties’ commitments. It is about paternity, maternity, parental, adoption and caring leave, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) made clear. I am not sure that we are going to have a great repeal Bill, can the Minister say whether all those rights that were won in Europe and that our party played a part in securing will be secured?

Recommendation 29 is about language. I understand that we are in a situation where the Clerks will decide what can and cannot be said in the Chamber. I am not
It contains 43 recommendations to a variety of stakeholders, more representative and inclusive House of Commons. Parliament” report.

important time for Parliament as an institution as it with great interest and I assure them that the Government

Ellis):

3.49 pm

I thank Professor Sarah Childs and hope she understands people that they, too, can become Members. Once again, if we look at changing the hours of the House, we had a Gantt chart? It is important that we do not lose sight of whether one main body, perhaps in the Cabinet Office, could track those recommendations, perhaps using a Commons reference group on representation and inclusion. The report needs to be looked at carefully, not dismissed or put on the shelf. If the Minister looks at page 2, he will see that a lot of different groups will have to respond to the recommendations. Will he comment on whether one main body, perhaps in the Cabinet Office, could track those recommendations, perhaps using a Gantt chart? It is important that we do not lose sight of them, since they are all very good.

Finally, we should consult Members. Things are sometimes done in committees for which Members feel that they do not have responsibility, but when my right hon. Friend the former Member for Lewisham, Deptford looked at changing the hours of the House, we had a consultation. Members were involved and different motions were tabled. The Youth Parliament will sit next week, which will give us an opportunity to show our young people that they, too, can become Members. Once again, I thank Professor Sarah Childs and hope she understands that we appreciate the hard work that has gone into the report.

3.49 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mrs Moon. I very much congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) on securing this important debate. If I may say so, I would like to see more Members like her. She can be proud to be here and we are proud to have her. I thank Professor Sarah Childs for her report. This is a recent report and a significant work. The work she continues to do on the subject of gender and politics is important.

I have listened to the contributions of hon. Members with great interest and I assure them that the Government take this subject seriously. The debate comes at an important time for Parliament as an institution as it considers the recommendations made in “The Good Parliament” report.

In the report, which was published a few months ago in July 2016, Professor Childs outlines a blueprint for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons. It contains 43 recommendations to a variety of stakeholders, including the Government but not just the Government. Also included are the Speaker of the House, the House of Commons Commission and a number of Select Committees in the House among others. The report also recommends the establishment of a Commons reference group on representation and inclusion.

Mention has been made of the Women and Equalities Committee, an important Committee of the House, which is undertaking an inquiry into women in the House of Commons after 2020. It is examining both the impact of the proposed boundary changes and the recommendations made in Professor Childs’ report. The Government have submitted written evidence to the inquiry and very much look forward to reading the Committee’s report.

All sides should acknowledge that progress is being made. This is the most gender-diverse Parliament in British history and we should celebrate our many talented parliamentary colleagues. We have our second female Prime Minister, and women now make up an unprecedented third of the House and a third of our Cabinet. Therefore, the House as an institution has made great strides since 2010. The House of Commons nursery opened on 1 September 2010 to support Members and others with childcare responsibilities. The nursery now provides a post-6 pm service, and of course the children of Members have unrestricted access to the Estate when they are accompanied by a parent.

The House of Commons monitors and reports on the diversity of its staff. The Commons has goals to increase the diversity of its staff and monitors the position carefully and actively. Outreach has greatly improved and grown, including the annual Parliament week, and civil marriage, for example, can now be conducted on the Estate. Improvements have been made and changes have taken place, but there is still a long way to go to reach a representative and inclusive House. That is not just about finding diverse talent. This should be a place where all people want to work. The Government are carefully considering the recommendations contained in Professor Childs’ report and look forward to working with the Commons reference group on representation and inclusion, which is considering the recommendations.

A lot of progress could be made if the main parties worked together to build a more consistent voluntary approach to growing diverse talent. I am glad that only a week or two ago the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from all the main parties about this important issue. That hearing received media attention, which reflects the good work that the Committee is doing. Indeed, “The Good Parliament” report specifically called on the Leader of the House of Commons to support the permanent establishment of that Select Committee. It is clear that the Committee has a key role in driving forward this agenda, so I am pleased to say that the Government are indeed able to offer that support.

Professor Childs also recommended setting the recess dates for each parliamentary session at least one session in advance. Members and staff of the House, together with their families, want to know that information as far in advance as possible. That is perfectly understandable, so we make every effort, as previous Governments no doubt did, to announce recess dates as soon as is reasonably practicable. However, the setting of recess dates is complex and depends on many varying factors, not least the progress of legislation through this House and the other House. It is difficult to settle a whole session forward this agenda, so I am pleased to say that the Government are indeed able to offer that support.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but this is nonsense. It is perfectly easy to work out when the recess dates will be next year—I can give the Minister a draft later this
evening if he wants. At this stage last year I predicted exactly what the recess dates would be this year, and that was what the Minister ended up announcing. Frankly, I do not know why he cannot get on with doing it for next year now.

Michael Ellis: Of course, if it were as easy as that, no doubt the Labour Government would have done it between 1997 and 2010. With regards to the recommendation relating to the conference recess, it is important to note that any decision would have to be made some years in advance because things are booked years in advance—large-scale plans are made for conferences by all the parties—and it would require cross-party agreement. As always, such issues are subject to discussions between parties, which should continue to be the case. Only if agreement were reached on that change would it be possible to consider that proposal and the one to abolish sitting Fridays.

On that subject, Members will know that the Procedure Committee has looked in detail at that. Abolishing sitting Fridays, as referred to in Professor Childs’ report, has not formed part of the package of recommendations in the Committee’s latest report on private Members’ Bills. Should the Committee be minded to resume the line of inquiry, the Government would consider the proposals in detail and respond in the appropriate manner.

With regards to political parties providing data relating to parliamentary candidates, also referred to in Professor Childs’ report, there are no plans to introduce legislation at present. Once again, we believe we can make progress if the parties build a more consistent voluntary approach to growing diverse talent. I am glad that the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from all the parties about that.

One other specific proposal I want to talk about is the aim to increase the voice of disabled people in this place, which is also under consideration. The three-year pilot of the access to elected office fund, which aims to support people with disabilities to stand for election as local councillors or Members of Parliament, is being reviewed. The views of disabled candidates, all political parties and disability charities have been sought as part of this inclusive process. An announcement about the future of the fund will be made in due course.

To conclude, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate and who continue to contribute to this area of work. We thank Professor Childs for her work and, for that matter, Mr Speaker for his leadership.

Kirsty Blackman: I very much appreciate the Front Benchers giving me a little bit of time at the end. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. I will not name them all because of time constraints, but I thank them for coming along and, in the main, supporting the recommendations in “The Good Parliament” report, or at least the direction of travel in the report.

I want to mention briefly the Procedure Committee, because a number of its members said they were sad that they could not come today because a Committee meeting clashed with the debate. I am sure they would have been keen to see some of the changes to procedures that have been suggested. I am looking forward to the Commons reference group on representation and inclusion, which I understand is due to meet for the first time this month. That is a great thing, and I am really pleased that it is getting off the ground.

I am keen that all the recommendations in the report are considered. As individuals, we might dislike certain recommendations, but the House as a whole and those people who are tasked with taking them on need to consider all of them seriously, and look at evidence for and against adopting each of them.

More widely than that, all of the under-represented groups need to have more of a voice in this place, whether it is people who support gender equality, on which the report mainly focuses, or people who support disabled candidates such as Jamie Szymkowiak in the SNP. The SNP is the gayest parliamentary group, and changes such as that are being made in positive, more inclusive political parties. I have an internship scheme specifically aimed at people from poorer backgrounds who would struggle to come to parliamentary offices in the main. Any such changes are to be welcomed. We need to work together to make them.

On what the Minister talked about, I do not think we can say, “Look at the wonderful things we have done.” We should have been doing all of that before. We cannot in any way rest on our laurels until we have genuine 50:50 representation and remove those barriers to under-represented groups coming into this place. We cannot rest. We need to keep working until we make this place better.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Good Parliament report.

4 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.
Housing in Kent

[SIR ALAN MEALE in the Chair]

4.15 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered housing in Kent.

I recognise that more new homes need to be built in the United Kingdom, and I acknowledge that the Government are taking steps to encourage the building of those homes. However, I feel that Kent is being asked to take more than its fair share of the new house building, particularly since we have already seen in recent years unprecedented housing growth that has led to great pressure on our local infrastructure and services.

Gordon Henderson: I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend. Friend on securing this important debate. He will be aware of the housing and infrastructure problems in Dartford that cause terrible congestion at the Dartford crossing. Does he agree that more housing in the area simply adds to the number of people, the number of vehicles and the congestion? It is therefore vital we have the infrastructure to go with those new housing plans.

Gordon Henderson: I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend, because he is perfectly right. The pressure we have been facing will only increase unless action is taken to stem the tide of development.

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gordon Henderson: I am delighted to give way to my neighbouring MP.

Mrs Grant: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an essential debate. A nonsensical 18,560 new homes are planned for the Maidstone area, notwithstanding the already serious and chronic traffic congestion around the town. Does he agree that local authorities must be much bolder and more robust in using the legitimate constraints provided for in the national planning policy framework to set more sensible and sustainable housing need figures in their draft local plans?

Gordon Henderson: As the MP for the neighbouring constituency, I share those exact concerns, but our local authorities are put in an invidious position by the Government, and I will raise that concern. In order to meet Government targets, local councils in Kent are planning for 155,000 homes to be built by 2031.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gordon Henderson: I am happy to give way to my other neighbouring MP.

Rehman Chishti: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for all the brilliant work he has done on this issue. He talks about pressure on local authorities. One of the biggest pressures is where developers that have been given permission to build do not build, and instead sit on the land waiting for another day when things are good for them. That pushes pressure on to others and the local authority. That is completely wrong. Does he agree that the Government need to ensure there are severe penalties for developers that sit on the land where they have been given permission to build? That is completely wrong and undermines the whole objective of creating more housing in the area.

Gordon Henderson: I am more than happy to agree, and I will raise that issue later in my speech.

I mentioned that Kent is having to plan for 155,000 homes by 2031. However, in the same period, the number of jobs likely to be created in Kent has been estimated to be only 121,000. In essence, Kent local authorities are being expected to plan for 34,000 homes for people who work outside the county. In contrast, Cornwall—which I know is on the other side of the country but is still part of the United Kingdom—is only being expected to plan for 47,500 homes to be built in the county. That is less than one third of the target being imposed on Kent. Continued housing growth in Kent at the current level is simply unsustainable. It will lead to the loss of more and more green fields and inflict immeasurable harm on our beautiful county, which, after all, is the garden of England. Those additional homes will lead to thousands of extra cars on our roads, thousands more children in our schools and thousands more people using our health system, all of which are already stretched to the limit.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. In Medway alone, we are facing an arbitrary demand for an extra 30,000 houses. Does he agree that the high housing targets we are seeing across Kent are undeliverable and will do nothing to benefit or improve the lives of the people who already live in our communities, unless there is acceptance of the burden being placed on Kent, backed up with proper investment in infrastructure and services? He has outlined some of the pressures.

Gordon Henderson: I do agree. I was born and raised in Medway and am a proud man of Kent. I believe we have taken more than our fair share. Unfortunately, the problem is not new for Kent. Our local authorities have consistently had high housing targets imposed on them. The need for such high targets comes from migration, with the Government consistently imposing high housing targets on Kent. Continued housing growth in Kent at the current level is simply unsustainable. It will lead to the loss of more and more green fields and inflict immeasurable harm on our beautiful county, which, after all, is the garden of England. Those additional homes will lead to thousands of extra cars on our roads, thousands more children in our schools and thousands more people using our health system, all of which are already stretched to the limit.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In Thanet, we are supposed to be taking grade one agricultural land—the finest agricultural land in the country, bar none, with wonderful alluvial soil—for houses when we have brownfield sites available.
Another threat is at Manston airport, which some people want to smother in houses simply to take overspill from London, which has nothing to do with Kent and nothing to do with Thanet.

**Gordon Henderson:** I am delighted my hon. Friend has raised that issue. Another example is Isle of Sheppey in my constituency. In Queenborough and Rushenden, the Homes and Community Agency owns a large brownfield site, which has good access to road, rail and local amenities, but has remained undeveloped for years. Two miles away, in Minster on Sea, thousands of homes have been built on green fields as part of the Thistle Hill development. The main roads on Sheppey are now some of the most congested in Kent.

In Sittingbourne, too, there are plenty of brownfield sites on which to build, yet Swale Borough Council is being forced to allocate additional green land in its local plan for housing, although it is not needed at present. When that land is included in the local plan, developers are effectively given the green light to build on it straightaway, instead of developing the brownfield sites that already have planning permission. That is nonsense and affects many small communities, such as the village of Borden, where a planned development of 665 houses will change that rural community out of all recognition.

This is not the first time that has happened in my constituency. The village of Iwade, at the time of the 2001 census, consisted of just over 400 dwellings with a population of 1,142. In just 15 years, Iwade has grown and now consists of 1,690 dwellings with a population of 3,087. It is no longer a village; it is a small town. It is not the only area of rapid growth in the past decade. Eden village, Kemsley, Milton Regis, Minster on Sea and The Meads have also seen major housing developments. My constituents in Sittingbourne and Sheppey have seen their area change beyond recognition in the past 25 years. All those developments have reduced our green open spaces, destroyed good agricultural land and affected the lives of whole communities.

My constituency has made more than enough sacrifices to help solve the housing crisis, and enough is enough. We do not want the character of our area to change any more. My constituency is not unique in Kent. As my hon. Friends have said, many areas are facing similar problems.

**Gareth Johnson:** Does my hon. Friend agree that to facilitate more houses in Kent we need another Thames crossing? It must be built in a way that gives motorists choice to ensure that we have resilience in Kent. The only way to achieve that is to build another lower Thames crossing east of Gravesend, which is option C.

**Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair):** Order. This debate is a short one—only 30 minutes. The mover of the debate has so far been very understanding in giving way and I have been kind in allowing that, but perhaps we could allow him to make his speech and, if there is time left before the Minister speaks, I will be willing to allow other contributions. Perhaps hon. Members could be more understanding.

**Gordon Henderson:** Thank you, Sir Alan. I am more than happy to take that into account. I will be summing up fairly shortly.

I agree that we need a lower Thames crossing, but we need it for existing residents and communities, not to encourage more housing. The Government should spread responsibility for providing new housing land to other areas of the country. As more people move to Kent, particularly from London, the county is finding it increasingly difficult to cope with a rapidly growing population. Other parts of the country are not taking their fair share of the housing needed to help to overcome a national problem.

Government statistics for house building in the June quarter of 2016 show that there has been an unequal amount of house building between north and south. In the south-east, 3,180 dwellings were started, compared with just 960 in Liverpool city and 1,090 in Greater Manchester. How is that proportionate? We have a national housing crisis, yet certain areas are taking the brunt of the new building.

I understand there are different needs in different areas, but these statistics show the south-east is taking responsibility for five times more new homes than if it were divided up equally between regions. That is unfair and Kent is a real victim of that unfairness. It is time for the Government to act and to reduce the number of homes for which they expect local authorities in Kent to plan. Ministers can do that by making it clear to local authorities that no further green fields have to be allocated for housing until all the current brownfield sites in their area have been developed.

4.28 pm

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I am in a slightly difficult position because some of my colleagues, whose support I value highly, have spoken passionately about their concerns. I entirely understand those concerns and some legitimate points were made, but I must set out some points of difference and I hope they will bear with me while I do so. I will come to their legitimate points, with which I am in complete agreement.

The first thing to say at the outset is that the Government do not set housing targets for local authorities. We have a local plan-led system in this country. The Government require local councils to carry out a robust assessment of housing need in their area and then, subject to whatever land constraints they face, to meet that housing need. That is incredibly important.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) said something my constituents often say to me that it is worth exploring. There is a feeling that more and more homes just lead to more and more people living in the area. Actually, there is pretty compelling evidence that if we do not build the additional homes that an area needs, the people still come, but rather than living in their own homes, they just live in more overcrowded conditions. We have only to look at what is happening now in some parts of our capital city, where people live in sheds at the bottom of gardens and in other completely unacceptable conditions. If people want to live in an area but we do not provide enough housing to allow them to live in decent conditions, they still come.

**Gordon Henderson:** I will take my hon. Friend the Minister up on one thing. He said that the Government do not set targets for local authorities. My authority,
Swale Borough Council, put in a target for housing that was then rejected by the Government and it is now having to increase that target. It is wrong to say that they do not set targets.

Gavin Barwell: Just to be clear on that point, what will have happened is that Swale Council’s plan will have been examined by an independent inspector, appointed by the Planning Inspectorate. The inspector’s job is to test that the assessment of housing need in that area is realistic. If it was rejected, that would be because compelling evidence was presented that the assessment was not realistic.

I have taken the time to look at the data for each of the local authorities—I apologise if I miss anyone out—that hon. Members in the Chamber represent. I will start with my hon. Friend. His council is in the best position. The annual household growth projections, which are not Government figures but independent Office for National Statistics figures, show projected housing growth in Swale of 540 households a year, and Swale Council delivered 540 net additions to the housing stock in 2014-15. In Dartford, the projections show 603 extra households a year. The council is currently delivering 570. In Maidstone, the projections show nearly 900 extra households a year, but the council is currently delivering only 580. In Thanet, the projections show 600 extra households a year, but the council is delivering only 380. In Medway, the projections show nearly 1,350 extra households a year, but the council is delivering 480.

I say to my colleagues that if, as a country, we do not build the number of homes necessary to accommodate our population growth, we will continue to see what we have seen for the last 30 or 40 years, which is housing in this country becoming increasingly unaffordable for people to buy or to rent, with all the consequences that that has for inequality, both geographically and between generations. I will leave colleagues with just one statistic—that has for inequality, both geographically and between generations. I will leave colleagues with just one statistic—it is a national rather than a Kent statistic. Of people who are my age, 45, 50% owned their own home when they were 30 years old. For people who are 20 years younger, who are 25 today, the projection is that in five years’ time just one quarter of them will own their own home. That is the consequence of years and years of failing to provide enough housing.

My hon. Friend made this point very powerfully, and my hon. Friend the Prime Minister has given me is to ensure that as a country we start building the number of homes that we need to build. I now come to the points that my hon. Friends made with which I have complete sympathy and which we will seek to address in the White Paper that we will publish later this year.

My hon. Friend made this point very powerfully, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford reinforced it in his intervention. One of the main things that my constituents say to me—in Croydon, we have all the same pressures to which all my colleagues have referred—is that in recent years, the infrastructure has not been put in to support the additional housing. The consequence of that is that people say, “I understand why more housing is needed in this area, but it is making it harder for me to get my children into the local school. It is making it harder for me to get an appointment at my local GP practice. It means that my train, when I go to work in the morning, is more overcrowded.” Hon. Members are therefore absolutely right to press the case for investment in infrastructure that ensures that local communities—not just the people who are lucky enough to get the new houses, but the local communities in which that housing is placed—benefit from the new housing. My hon. Friend the Member for Dartford has been a doughty champion of the need for an additional, third crossing of the Thames, and my brother is a constituent of his, so he can rest assured that I hear about the misery that is inflicted on him whenever there is a problem with the existing crossing.

Rehman Chishti: I pay tribute to the excellent work that my hon. Friend the Minister is doing. I completely agree with him about infrastructure, but linked to that is the issue of developers who sit on land or landbank.

What are the Government doing about that? They can do something about it by ensuring that there is a severe penalty. That would ensure that those who get planning permission develop in good time. If they do not do that, they should lose the planning consent and be penalised in order to make the system much fairer.

Gavin Barwell: I had noted my hon. Friend’s very good point even before that intervention—I had noted it from his previous one—and I was just coming to it.

My diagnosis is that we have basically three problems—three reasons that lead to us not building enough homes as a country. The first is that, in some places, we are not releasing enough land. Those tend to be in the parts of the country where demand is at its most acute.
The second reason is that there is a growing gap between the planning permissions that we are granting and the homes that are actually being built. Hon. Members may be interested to know that at the end of June, the planning system in England granted a record number of planning permissions—277,000 homes were consented in those 12 months—but people cannot live in a planning permission. We must do a better job of turning planning permissions into actual starts.

There is a range of reasons why that does not happen. My hon. Friend puts his finger on one problem—developers landbanking and taking too long to build out—but there are others. Often, the utility companies are too slow to put in infrastructure. Councils sometimes rely too much on pre-commencement planning conditions that delay schemes starting. There is a range of factors. If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I cannot set out today what will be in the White Paper, but I can give him a categorical assurance that the White Paper will include measures to try to deal with the problem that he talks about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) spoke powerfully on the third issue that I want to address. I had the privilege last week of visiting his constituency and seeing some of the area for myself. He spoke about the importance that people attach to green fields. My constituency has a significant amount of green belt land, so I know perfectly well the importance that my constituents attach to that, but in other parts of the country, where there is no green belt, people feel equally passionate about green spaces. Therefore it is absolutely the priority of this Government to try to ensure that development is concentrated on brownfield land. We have already made a number of interventions to try to make that more likely. I do not have time to go through them all, but will reference a few.

Perhaps my hon. Friend and I can talk in more detail separately, but one thing that I would point out to him and his council is brownfield registers, which were legislated for in the Housing and Planning Act 2016. A number of local authorities are already trialling them, but the idea is that local authorities draw up a register of brownfield land. They could possibly link that with the planning permission in principle reform in the Act, so that developers can see where there are sites that are suitable for housing development and have permission in principle. In that way, they will have clear planning certainty that those sites can be progressed. The Government have a clear manifesto target to get 90% of brownfield sites developed by the end of this Parliament. I reassure him that the Secretary of State and I are passionately committed to ensuring that local councils have local plans in place. The result is that the presumption in favour of development applies and we get speculative applications where, essentially, developers are picking the sites they want to see developed rather than local communities saying, “If we need 800 homes in this area, we will decide where the right sites are for them to go.”

The combination of ensuring that local councils have local plans in place, and ensuring that individual communities below that have neighbourhood plans that set out in more detail exactly where the right sites for housing are within that neighbourhood, gives people control over the planning system.

One thing I want to achieve is minimising the number of cases that end up on my desk because a council has turned down a speculative application. A colleague or another Member of the House will be furious and will ask the Secretary of State to call the application in. Not only is that incredibly divisive, but it wastes a huge amount of time and money. What we want in England is a plan-led planning system in which communities decide where the appropriate places are to build the housing that we need.

I will make only two final points—I am conscious of the time. Density is one of the other things that we want to look at in the White Paper, which might reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey. It is particularly relevant in London. How can London accommodate more of its own growth? If we want to protect our precious greenbelt, we need to look at whether we could have more intense development on the sites that we have already developed. In my constituency, when faced with the choice between building on our precious greenbelt and metropolitan open land or having a number of very tall buildings in the centre of Croydon, people much preferred the latter. There is huge potential in major centres and around public transport hubs to have denser development. That does not have to mean unattractive tower blocks. Actually, the most densely developed borough in London is the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where there is some excellent architecture. We can get high-quality, dense development that provides more homes on a given plot of land.

I hope my hon. Friends are reassured by my response. It is my job to make the moral case for building the homes that our country needs, so that we have a country that works for everyone and so that young people who work hard and do the right thing have the opportunity to get on the housing ladder. I am also very cognisant of the concerns that have been expressed in the debate by hon. Members who are passionate about protecting the character of their local areas. I firmly believe that, with the right policies, it is possible to strike the right balance between those two very important objectives.

4.44 pm

Gordon Henderson: First, the notion that the Planning Inspectorate is not accountable to Government is quite bizarre, because the Secretary of State can call in any plans that he wants. To say that it is independent is disingenuous. The projected targets that are being placed by the inspectorate on local authorities are taking into account the notion of migration into the areas that need those houses. The houses that are being built are not
actually solving the problem of homelessness in our boroughs. We still have homelessness. We still have people that need homes and are not getting them because, as the estates are being built up, they are sucking in more people. I will leave the Minister with that thought.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health

4.45 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of social media on the mental health of young people.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I called this debate because I have become increasingly concerned about the mental health problems afflicting our young people and about the role of social media in adding to the strain that they are under. I should perhaps declare an interest: as the father of two young children, I look with an increased sense of foreboding to the day when they acquire their first smartphone.

From the reaction I have received to this debate within Parliament and beyond, I sense that there are many parents and carers up and down the country who are concerned about this issue. The problem is that parents today can feel particularly helpless. Unlike in the past, when parents could draw from their own experience to help navigate their children through the minefield of adolescence, the extraordinary pace of change means that many parents simply cannot do that now. They are not digital natives, so it is hard for them to prepare their children for the digital deluge to come.

Let me start with the background. It is not an exaggeration to say that it sometimes feels as though this generation of young people is one of the most unhappy since the second world war. No MP can fail to be aware of the pressures on young people’s mental health. As the MP for Cheltenham, I see it in the brave young people from local schools who come to my surgery to talk about in-patient care and waiting times for talking therapies. I see it in the growing workload for staff at the excellent Brownhills eating disorder clinic at St Paul’s Medical Centre. I see it in the statistics provided by Teens in Crisis, which provides counselling services across Gloucestershire for young people: in 2013, it was receiving 20 to 30 self-referrals per calendar month; in 2016, the figure was around 70.

This debate is not principally about how we, as a society, pick up the pieces. It is not about NHS resources, or about what more we need to do to bring parity of esteem. Both of those issues are very important and were extensively debated last week in an excellent debate arising out of the publication of the Youth Select Committee report on young people’s mental health. Instead, this debate is about what we can do to address problems upstream, before they have caused damage. My view is clear: we need to be as focused on preventing these problems as we are on curing them, and that means focusing on causes.

Today, my focus is on what an increasing number of studies suggest is playing a very significant part in this precipitate decline in young people’s mental health: social media. Social media are, of course, utterly pervasive among young people. They are totally immersed in a virtual world. That world can be very positive but it can also be harmful, to both the way they perceive the world around them and the way they perceive themselves. Increasingly, young people seem to be finding it hard to distinguish between the real and virtual worlds.
Let me make it clear that this is an emerging topic in academic research. Association and correlation are not the same as causal link, but it is becoming tolerably plain that social media can have a damaging impact. Turning to some of the studies, the Office for National Statistics’ 2015 publication, “Measuring National Well-being: Insights into children’s mental health and well-being”, found that there is a “clear association” between longer time spent on social media and mental health problems. While 12% of children who spend no time on social networking websites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27% for those who are glued to the sites for three or more hours a day. That is particularly worrying for girls, because research shows that girls are far more likely to spend excessive amounts of time on social sites than boys. One in 10 girls was found to be in the top category for time spent on the websites, compared to just one in 20 boys.

How can social media have this negative impact? Embryonic research suggests that there are three principal routes: first, online bullying; secondly, the phenomenon of what I call “compare and despair”; and thirdly, sleep deprivation.

Taking bullying first, a study in 2014 by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children found that bullying or trolling was by far the single largest category of upsetting experience encountered online. MentalHelp.net found that 95% of teenagers who use social media have witnessed cyber-bullying and 33% have been victims themselves. Bullying is as old as the hills—there is nothing particularly new about it, unpleasant as it may be—but the power of social media to amplify its impact is so transformational and can be so damaging. Social media provide new and inventive ways to be cruel, such as body shaming and hurtful posts, excluding children from online games, setting up hate sites, creating fake accounts and hijacking online identities, and they have the power to scale up that bullying by using the technology to spread its impact widely through a school community or even beyond.

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this incredibly useful and important debate. Does he agree that in the past children who were bullied at school would be able to escape that by going home, but now with social media, bullying is constant and people are looking at the success of others and feel they have to aspire to it. As my hon. Friend said, they look at other people who seem to have a perfect body and so on, and that seems to be a growing problem in teenage mental health.

Alex Chalk: I am sure the hon. Gentleman must have had a copy of my speech; the next paragraph says precisely that.

Whereas in the past, children could physically escape their tormentors, nowadays social media make that impossible. The way I put it is that platforms such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram bring bullies into the bedroom, so children’s homes are no longer the sanctuaries that they once were.

Alex Chalk: That is absolutely right. At the end of my hon. Friend’s intervention, he hit on a particularly important point in mentioning the growing problem. Let us be clear: negative body image has long been with us. When I was growing up, the finger was pointed at hard-copy magazine publishers and the size zero models that were in those magazines, but once again social media have the power to magnify the impact.

Interestingly, a study compared the impact on women of Facebook images against those on a fashion website. It found that the former led to a greater desire among girls to change aspects of their appearance. One can speculate about the reasons for that: is it because people think, “Well, I recognise that in a fashion magazine things may be airbrushed and stylised, but I do not expect that on a Facebook post,” so it is somehow more damaging? I offer that as a possibility but there may be plenty of others.

As well as body image concerns, there are issues about popularity and feeling inadequate. Anecdotally, it is clear that teenagers make a habit of comparing their own posts’ popularity with those of other people. We increasingly get the sense that young people fear that their existence compares unfavourably with others. Much—probably too much—gets read into the absence of “likes” or “views”.

Finally, there is the effect that social media have on sleep patterns. That might sound rather prosaic, but it is important. A study presented by the British Psychological Society in September last year in Manchester found perpetrator. Does my hon. Friend believe, as I do, that the platforms need to do a lot more by way of regulation to try to minimise that?

Alex Chalk: I absolutely agree and will be developing those points in due course, because it seems to me that social media providers have to do more. It is no good simply to give us these vague blandishments, saying, “Oh well, you can click to get some advice.” They have to become far more robust about it. The anonymity also creates an element of menace about the whole thing and simply adds to the level of bullying.

The second route is the phenomenon of “compare and despair”. What do I mean by that? I am referring to the fact that young people observe imagery online that can inspire profound feelings of inadequacy. In many cases, they are not yet mature enough to realise that everyone has apparently become their own PR agent: people are increasingly projecting an online image of their lives that is beautiful and perfect in every way, and even though that may be misleading in reality, it may not feel that way to a 12, 13 or 14-year-old.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on delivering a very eloquent speech. He is coming to a point I want to raise about teenagers in particular who have eating disorders. I have found that to be quite a prevalent problem, often involving people who feel under pressure. That pressure can come from social media because people are looking at the success of others and feel they have to aspire to it. As my hon. Friend said, they look at other people who seem to have a perfect body and so on, and that seems to be a growing problem in teenage mental health.

Alex Chalk: That is absolutely right. At the end of my hon. Friend’s intervention, he hit on a particularly important point in mentioning the growing problem. Let us be clear: negative body image has long been with us. When I was growing up, the finger was pointed at hard-copy magazine publishers and the size zero models that were in those magazines, but once again social media have the power to magnify the impact.

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As well as body image concerns, there are issues about popularity and feeling inadequate. Anecdotally, it is clear that teenagers make a habit of comparing their own posts’ popularity with those of other people. We increasingly get the sense that young people fear that their existence compares unfavourably with others. Much—probably too much—gets read into the absence of “likes” or “views”.

Finally, there is the effect that social media have on sleep patterns. That might sound rather prosaic, but it is important. A study presented by the British Psychological Society in September last year in Manchester found
that the need to be constantly available and responding 24/7 on social media accounts is linked to poor sleep quality. Research from the Headmasters’ and Headmistresses’ Conference that was tweeted to me this morning suggests that almost half—45%—of students admit that they check their mobile device after going to bed, and that a staggering 23% check it more than 10 times a night. The concern is not just that they turn up to school exhausted but that sleep deprivation is well known to be a trigger for depression.

I know that the Government are very mindful of that issue and that a lot of excellent work is being done to support parents and schools to help children to use social media safely. The Department for Education funded MindEd to set up a new site, MindEd for Families, which was launched earlier this year and which I have looked at. It provides free online advice on a range of mental health issues affecting children and young people; it includes, of course, a section on social media. This morning I read the Department’s advice sheet entitled “Advice for parents and carers on cyberbullying”. It is really helpful and very good. I also pay tribute to the fact that the Government are continuing to provide funding to the YoungMinds parents helpline, which is a national service providing free and confidential online and telephone support, information and advice.

That is all hugely welcome—there is great deal more as well, and I look forward to hearing about that from the Minister—but the fact remains that young people’s mental health does not appear to be moving in the right direction. Against that context, I will make two points. First, if we are going to maximise the effectiveness of our response, I believe we need a more thorough and scientific investigation of the causes, because although strong emerging evidence shows a correlation between social media use and declining mental health, the time has come to bottom it out with something more robust.

Back in February 2014, the House of Commons Health Committee launched an inquiry into child and adolescent mental health services. A subject it took evidence on has come to bottom it out with something more robust. Scientific investigation of the causes, because although strong emerging evidence shows a correlation between social media use and declining mental health, the time has come to bottom it out with something more robust.

In conclusion, social media are the phenomenon of our times. They have the ability to take all the ordinary experiences of growing up—the triumphs and disasters—and magnify them beyond anything we could ever have imagined a generation ago. They can create heroes in seconds, but they can crush people too. Their capacity to intensify bullying, enhance body anxiety and exaggerate exclusion is becoming increasingly clear. If we want a society that truly tackles those problems upstream, builds resilience in our young people and prevents as well as cures, the time has come to ramp up our response.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): This is only a 60-minute debate and seven Members of Parliament have written in to take part, if they can. As is laid down by the Chairman of Ways and Means, I have to provide the Front Benchers in to take part, if they can. As is laid down by the Chairman of Ways and Means, I have to provide the Front Benchers in to take part, if they can. As is laid down by the Chairman of Ways and Means, I have to provide the Front Benchers in to take part, if they can. As is laid down by the Chairman of Ways and Means, I have to provide the Front Benchers in to take part, if they can.

My next point echoes one that was made earlier: social media platforms need to face up to their responsibilities. We rightly hold headteachers accountable for bullying and abuse that takes place on their premises. Social media platforms also need to take their fair share of responsibility for what takes place on their own digital premises. Creating safety guides is not enough. Suspending people from Facebook or even expelling them is perfectly sensible in theory, but does it happen in practice?

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), in an excellent debate last week, said about social media companies:

“They are huge companies employing many thousands of people, yet the numbers in their scrutiny and enforcement departments are woefully low.”—[Official Report, 27 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 481.]

I am not here to beat up the social media companies. I think they do some important work and what happens is a fact of life, but I think they need to step up and face up to their responsibilities, because they have to recognise that they can be a force for good but that they can also be a force for something far less welcome.

In conclusion, social media are the phenomenon of our times. They have the ability to take all the ordinary experiences of growing up—the triumphs and disasters—and magnify them beyond anything we could ever have imagined a generation ago. They can create heroes in seconds, but they can crush people too. Their capacity to intensify bullying, enhance body anxiety and exaggerate exclusion is becoming increasingly clear. If we want a society that truly tackles those problems upstream, builds resilience in our young people and prevents as well as cures, the time has come to ramp up our response.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) on securing this important debate.

Perfection: the state or quality of being perfect; a state completely free of faults or defects. Perfection is popular. People are attracted it. People are attracted to you. In 2016 perfection is everything, or rather, to young people it is. Among young people, there is a pressure to be perfect, to act in a perfect way, to look perfect, to have a perfect body, to get a perfect number of Instagram likes, and to be in a perfect friendship group. If young people do not meet those high standards, the self-loathing begins and the feeling of worthlessness sets in, sometimes with fatal consequences.

While preparing for this debate, I have spoken to lots of young people. One explained how he felt about social media, saying:

“Young people are made to feel like they live an unfulfilled life, because theirs doesn’t live up to the seemingly perfect lives they see on social media”.

My next point echoes one that was made earlier: social media platforms need to face up to their responsibilities. We rightly hold headteachers accountable for bullying and abuse that takes place on their premises. Social media platforms also need to take their fair share of responsibility for what takes place on their own digital premises. Creating safety guides is not enough. Suspending people from Facebook or even expelling them is perfectly sensible in theory, but does it happen in practice?
And that is just the way it is. With technology and social media sites making it so easy to edit and amend—or rather, correct—photographs, it is easier than ever before to manipulate the truth, allowing us to present ourselves in our own filtered sense of reality, showing only what we want to show. That can result in people critically comparing their lives with the lives of others, and using others’ posts as a measure of success or failure in their own life. That cannot be right. We must teach young people to aspire not to unattainable perfection, but to personal satisfaction, and to love themselves for who they are.

For young people today, the pressure to succeed is all around them, so much so that the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reports a 200% increase in recent years in the number of young people seeking counselling over exam stress alone. For others, the coping method is more worrying: the Mental Health Foundation estimates that between one in 12 and one in 15 people self-harm, with some research suggesting that the UK has the highest rate of self-harm in Europe. We may be shocked by those figures, but many young people who self-harm do not harm themselves in a way that requires medical attention, so those numbers only show part of the picture. Social media do not always help with that. One person told me about a problem relating to the website Tumblr, saying:

“Young people are able to type any mental illness into the search bar and there are ineffective controls to dissuade people from seeing...harmful content. When I self-harmed, I would find Tumblr was my place to go to see material by other users that would encourage me to hurt myself.”

That illustrates that social media can not only cause mental illness in young people, but perpetuate the problem.

Social media are vital tools for young people today and we must not seek to interfere with the good they do. Another young person I spoke to explained that they suffer from chronic depression and acknowledged that occasionally social media worsen their mental health, but when they are feeling low and cannot leave the house, social media mean that they are not alone; contacting friends is instantaneous, wherever they are. It is important not to forget the benefits of social media, which can do a lot of good.

There are many lessons for us to take from the debate. Young people must know that they are valued for who they are, no matter what their Facebook timeline, Twitter or Instagram followers say. Young people are perfect for being who they are.

Declan was bullied throughout primary school and high school, starting off from the fact that, since birth, he has had a tracheostomy because of a collapsed windpipe. When he was in high school, he came out as gay at a very young age—something that I certainly would not have had the bravery to do when I was in high school. The bullies used social media, in addition to face-to-face bullying, which we would understand to be traditional bullying.

People made up fake profiles in Declan’s name using his photographs and said that he was doing all sorts of vulgar things that were completely false and untrue. They also set up petitions and shared them on Facebook, Twitter and all the rest of it, encouraging people to—to quote from one post—“run him out” of Castlemilk. There was even a concerted effort to get people to turn up to school one day with things such as tomatoes and eggs, and to run him out of school. All of that was organised on Facebook. Declan sent me some screen grabs of some of the stuff from the time, and people even complained that their posts had been deleted. His life was made a complete misery.

The Castlemilk Youth Complex told me about a phenomenon that is happening at the minute: there seems to be a website that is being used by people to create what is made to look like a genuine news article. People can type in anyone’s name, use any photograph they wish and claim that they have done anything, and it is then spread all around Facebook and Twitter. The youth complex has cases of particularly vulnerable individuals being targeted by these rancid people in the most vulgar fashion.

Alex Chalk: A lot of people hearing this horrific story, which the hon. Gentleman is articulating powerfully, will want to know what the social media platforms did to clamp down on those who were posting and perpetrating such vile abuse.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: That is a fine point, on which I will aim to end. Social media platforms need to do more but, in addition, teachers need to be better empowered. Although I respect that that specific matter is for our Government in Scotland, I think that the social media platforms need to engage better with educators to combat bullying in their schools.

Declan has since left high school. He is now studying social care at college and doing very well. The last time I met him, he was a happy young man at the gay pride event in Glasgow. Castlemilk Youth Complex will go on to support other young people who are being targeted in such a way. I hope that all of us here, other Members of Parliament, local councillors and teachers will work better with and get on to the social media companies, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham suggested, to ensure that all those other people like young Declan out there in our constituencies get better support, which they so badly need.

5.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) on securing it and on setting the scene so well, and I congratulate the other Members who have spoken or who will speak.
This is a pertinent issue. Social media can be a wonderful tool for arranging get-togethers to catch up with old friends and for enjoying updates on the lives of people who live far away. I have seen social media wonderfully used to promote family events, to ask people to pray for a specific need or to provide help through churches and church groups. Social media can do good things.

I saw the part that social media played in spreading information on the dangers of legal highs. I met a young man who organised a peaceful protest outside somewhere that sold legal highs, as they were then known. The protest was well organised, respectful and well attended due to the proper use of social media, and it highlighted the dangers to those using such drugs. Social media brought good from a terrible situation, so they can do good.

I have enjoyed photographs, witty remarks and jokes that have been shared by others, and I can see the benefits of social media when they are used appropriately. However, as the hon. Gentleman said, this debate is sadly not about the good that social media can bring; it is about the bad that social media do to some people’s lives when they are misused. They can become a mistake that will always be there for all to see. They can be a weapon for people to be bullied or mocked in perpetuity. They can be a tool for people to be socially excluded, and they can be the harshest judge and critic that a person will ever have.

How can we protect our children from that? The obvious answer is that we should not allow our children to use social media, which is unrealistic. There is an age limit on most social media sites, but that is not enough. We must step in. We have all seen figures showing that children who spend more than three hours each school day on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are more than twice as likely to suffer poor mental health. Whereas 12% of children who spend no time on social networking sites have symptoms of mental ill health, the figure rises to 27% for those who spend three hours or more a day on such websites, so there are health issues. That is not the Minister’s direct responsibility—I am pleased to see her in her place—but we need answers.

How can parents protect their children and how can the Government help that protection? The limitations in place are not working. Enough is Enough, an organisation for internet safety, conducted a survey that found that 95% of teenagers who use social media have witnessed cyber-bullying and 33% have been victims themselves. Too many children are seeing and being part of something that we seek to protect them from.

A study exploring the relationship between teenagers, social media and drug use found that 70% of teenagers aged 12 to 17 use social media and that those who interact with social media on a daily basis are five times more likely to use tobacco, three times more likely to use alcohol and twice as likely to use marijuana. The figures clearly show that there are health problems related to too much use of social media. In addition, 40% admitted that they had been exposed to pictures of people under the influence via social media, which suggests a correlation between the two factors.

Although all that might not be substantive enough for a court of law, it is jarring enough that the House must consider how we can better regulate things to protect young people. Can we legislate for protection? Can we allocate funding to train schools in dealing with problems caused by social media? Can we ensure that no one can set up profiles until they get older? All those things need to be worked through with healthcare professionals and those who know about social media. The Government, and the Minister in her response, must decide to take action to protect our children. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham said, we are all here to protect children. Action must be taken now.

5.13 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this debate, which is a reflection of how fundamentally our society has changed. Technology is a huge part of that. Young people today are growing up in a world that is markedly different from any experience we had of growing up, with the possible exception of my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson).

As we have heard today, social media are a double-edged sword. Social media can be an important social outlet and an extraordinary source of information and education, and they enable people to connect with each other over vast distances. The benefits that social media offer to both young and old are plainly obvious but they can also be a dangerous, insidious tool. Social media are a stick with which too many of our young people can be beaten. They can be a yoke of oppression around their necks as they are pressured to conform, to be governed and even to be alienated by the false reality that is too often projected to and targeted at our young people.

It is alarming that research has associated online social networking with severe psychiatric disorders, including depressive symptoms, anxiety and low self-esteem, as well as poor sleeping patterns—sleeping patterns are so important to physical and mental wellbeing. The conclusion has been reached that young people’s immersion in social media should be considered a serious public health concern.

We all know that people fill their Facebook pages with pictures of their apparently perfect lives, which pressures others to portray and edit their lives in the same way for Facebook. It is thought that that is why young women are now three times more likely than young men to exhibit common mental health symptoms. That statistic has risen alongside the growth of social media, so we need to pay attention to it.

Barnardo’s has carried out important work on the effects of social media on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. It has concluded that access to online pornography and other harmful online content can distort not only young people’s body image but their view of healthy relationships. It can even lead to harmful sexual behaviour, often due to distorted ideas of consent and what a healthy relationship actually looks like.

Of course, as we have heard, social media can also be an insidious tool for those who use them as a vehicle for bullying. Social media can be extremely intimidating for victims, who can find them very difficult to escape because of their sheer prevalence in young people’s lives.

I am delighted that the Scottish Government’s “Respect Me” campaign recognises the importance of this issue and the essentialness of addressing it and taking it extremely seriously. Young people inhabit a different
world from us as they develop, grow and find themselves, which makes them vulnerable and poses all sorts of challenges. It is our job to do all we can to protect them, and I am interested to hear how the Minister will proceed.

5.16 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. The development of social media and the role they play in each of our lives is significant, yet there is limited focus on their impact, so I sincerely thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for securing this debate. Social media are neither inherently good nor inherently bad, but there is no doubt that they can have a negative impact on the mental health of young people. I take this opportunity to draw attention to a few adverse effects of social media and how they can affect the mental health of children, teenagers and young people.

One of the most notable consequences of social media use is that it can create an unhealthy need for constant approval. When a young person uploads a new photo of themselves, the number of likes can act as a barometer of their perceived popularity that they can instantly compare with their peers. In the past, being at the receiving end of a compliment or even a smile may have been enough for a teenager to feel good, but now they will often need dozens of likes on their profile picture or dozens of retweets to feel the same sense of acceptance. It can be incredibly important for a young person to feel as if they fit in, but with social media creating such an obvious scale of approval it can be painfully difficult for a teenager to think they are popular.

Aside from that, social media can be damaging because they can create unrealistic expectations. Young people naturally compare their appearance with that of their peers, but when the photos they see of their friends have had filters and effects applied, they are applying themselves to unrealistic standards. When people use social media to post about their lives and how they spend their weekends and holidays, teenagers will compare their lives, too. Inevitably some will see themselves as having less interesting or less exciting lives than their peers, which can be damaging to their self-esteem. Of course it is not only friends and family with whom young people compare themselves. Social media give opportunities to follow celebrities, which gives way to even more distant and unrealistic standards to which to aspire.

We should be cautious not to overplay the dangers of social media. It is important to recognise that all technological developments of this scale can have positives. History should serve as a reminder that we often get ahead of ourselves when a new technology plays a role in our lives. Social media are having an adverse effect on the mental health of young people, but they are not inherently bad. Indeed, in moderation, social media can serve as a great alternative education tool and a way for young people to express themselves, but we should be cautious of them and recognise the negative effect they often have on the mental health of young people. It is vital that social media companies do more not only to manage the content of their pages and sites but to take responsibility for their impact on young people and their mental health.

It is great to see attention and parliamentary time given to debate mental health issues again, and I am particularly pleased that we are debating the roots they can have in social media. I hope we can all learn from this discussion and that concerns raised today will be taken on board by the Minister and eventually translated into Government policy.

Stuart Blair Donaldson rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Stuart Blair Donaldson, let me just tell you why you are being called last; because you intervened earlier and took some time. Do not think that your being new to the House goes against you in any way. You now have your four minutes.

5.20 pm

Stuart Blair Donaldson (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alan. As has been mentioned today, I speak as the youngest male MP and as someone who has grown up with social media—a digital native. I also speak as a vice-chair of the all-party group on body image and as someone with my own hashtag on Instagram—#instaMP, if anyone is interested.

I thank everyone who got in touch with me to share their stories and experiences of mental health and social media, particularly Vicky Kerr, who shared her dissertation on the subject. Social media can be a great tool in many ways, but platforms such as Instagram often portray a rose-tinted picture of a person’s life and can promote the idea of self-worth based on how many “likes” a picture gets.

The fact that young people can readily access at any time of the day pictures of famous people sharing their seemingly perfect lives can make them question their own self-worth. Additionally, the predominance of photos of those beautiful people present young people, mainly young girls, with a skewed vision of how they should look. The people they look at often look that way because of their job—they can dedicate time to it and dare say the odd bit of Photoshop. Most young people do not have access to such facilities, and famous people often do not acknowledge that they use them.

Constant exposure to those images and basing a positive self-image on likes can lead to significant deterioration in a young person’s mental health. In extreme cases, that can lead to the development of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa or bulimia. That might be an over-simplification of a complex and serious illness, but the idealised body images so often portrayed in both conventional and social media have an effect on people at risk of suffering from it.

Unfortunately, social media often hinder rather than help people who suffer from significant mental health issues. Young people can often get caught up in eating disorder promotion on social media. Hashtags such as #thinspiration and #skipinnerwakeupthinner allow people to connect and share tips on how to lose weight, purge and starve themselves. That makes the problems more
severe and can have severe and tragic consequences. I have witnessed the devastating effects that losing a daughter to an eating disorder can have on a family, which is why I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate and raise awareness—I wish I had more time to speak.

As a society, we could do a lot more to promote healthy body image and to talk about and be more open about our mental health, whatever age we are. I will leave Members with a quotation:

“The quickest way to get a bikini body is to put a bikini on”.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Mr Donaldson, everybody gets worried and wants more time. Don’t worry about it.

Dr Cameron rose—

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Dr Cameron, you have five minutes.

5.24 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Thank you once again, Sir Alan, for your excellent chairmanship today. I thank the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for bringing this crucial debate to Westminster Hall and for providing such a comprehensive review of the field. He highlighted the extraordinary pressures on the mental health of our young people today and the importance of prevention, research and specific interventions.

I begin by declaring an interest: I have worked in mental health as a psychologist and continue to maintain my skills and engagement in line with my professional registration requirements. In the short time I have today, I will cover the positives and negatives of social media, sum up the thoughtful contributions from Members and make recommendations to the Minister.

We have heard that there are many aspects to the new world of social media. Indeed, as a candidate I had never before tweeted but was told that it was crucial to the campaign and that I needed to develop a social media profile. Social media are coming to everyone of us. We know from psychological research that, for introverted young people today, the fear of missing out. There is increasing pressure on young people to be part of the group and to be included in online activity constantly, so they become agitated, anxious and find it difficult to switch off and resume everyday activities. It almost becomes an obsession.

Cyber-bullying was raised by the hon. Member for Cheltenham eloquently about the fear of missing out. There is increasing pressure on young people to be part of the group and to be included in online activity constantly, so they become agitated, anxious and find it difficult to switch off and resume everyday activities. It almost becomes an obsession.

On the sensitive issue of sexting, it appears, worryingly, to be much more common. Sexting affects a considerable proportion of young people, who may feel pressure to sext their naked body parts to third parties. Those photographs can then find their way online, to mentally scar those young people and leave them literally exposed to the world in perpetuity.

It is clear that society has moved online, and our responses need to take account of that. I ask that the Government look at standardised online materials for children and adolescents to help them to prevent harm caused by social media use and to take precautions for themselves. I also ask that police service resourcing be supported to take action against sites that specifically focus on young people and aim to undermine their mental wellbeing. As always, we must target the online predators who may target young people. Safeguards for online sites must be introduced. Children and young people need education on safe online usage, as do their parents. As the hon. Member for Cheltenham eloquently said, we need to develop research and treatment to help people who have had their mental health damaged online. There is a lot to take forward, but we must do so with care, together.

5.30 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cheltenham.
(Alex Chalk) on securing this important debate. I draw attention to the contributions made by my hon. Friends the Members for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Ogmore (Chris Elmore). There is not enough time for me to mention everybody who spoke because, as usual at the end of these short debates, we are tight for time, but I particularly thank the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Stuart Blair Donaldson). He spoke of a painful experience, which is always so difficult to do.

Young people are growing up in an age in which online culture and social media are so central to everyday life. That is particularly true of social networking sites, to which more than 85% of children now belong. We have heard some interesting statistics relating to that throughout the debate. Commenting on social media and mental health, the Children’s Commissioner said:

“Excessive use of social media has been linked to poor mental health...When combined with bullying it can have a terrible effect.”

Consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Sebastian Kraemer gave evidence to the Health Committee as part of the inquiry into young people’s mental health mentioned by the hon. Member for Cheltenham. On the impact that digital culture can have, he said:

“It makes intimidation more alarming and more chronic. You can be teased in the playground and it has gone with the wind, but if you have got your photograph on Facebook then it stays there forever...The medium is not the cause, but it certainly facilitates different ways of harming each other, of abusing each other, and that is what young children do.”

Parents are seeing the link. In a survey of more than 1,000 parents with children under 18, four fifths blamed social media for making their children more vulnerable to mental health problems. It seems that the excessive use of social media can be linked to depression and can play a role in heightening underlying anxieties and lowering self-esteem—we have heard about some interesting cases.

These days, there is much concern about body image and appearance, which is another potential cause of anxiety and low self-esteem. It is clear that social media can intensify such feelings. A small study in the United States found that teenagers were affected by the “like” culture, with photos with more likes being more attractive to them. This like culture was found to affect self-esteem, as the hon. Member for Cheltenham and my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore both said.

The damaging impact of social media has been seen as one of the causes leading to the increase in the number of children and young people self-harming in the past 10 years. ChildLine has seen a 35% increase in the number of contacts from young people with anxiety. That increase has been linked to the rise of social media, which has increased the pressure to attain a so-called perfect life. With increasing numbers of young people self-harming or being diagnosed with depression or anxiety, will the Minister tell us what action is being taken to understand the possible links between social media and depression, anxiety and other mental health issues? I agree with the hon. Member for Cheltenham that we need a robust strategy and some research that proves the links.

We have heard much about cyber-bullying, which is a growing problem, with more than one in 10 young people admitting they have been affected by it. We heard about Declan; I am very glad to hear that he has moved past the bullying phase that was so affecting him. Bullying UK found that 43% of young people aged between 11 and 16 had been bullied via social networks. Bullying has been found to be a factor of suicide with children’s mental health issues. One study reported by the Office for National Statistics found that children who had been bullied at 13 were more than twice as likely to have depression at age 18.

Stress and anxiety have also been linked to cyber-bullying. Will the Minister outline what action the Government are taking to tackle cyber-bullying and what measures will be put in place to help young people who are affected? Following the debate on young people’s mental health in the main Chamber last week, my concern is that help is not getting through to children before mental health problems escalate. Indeed, in 2015 the Children’s Commissioner found that one in four young people experiencing serious emotional or psychological problems were being turned away from specialist mental health treatment.

Early intervention can help. Lorraine Khan of the Centre for Mental Health said:

“There is good evidence for a range of interventions to boost children’s mental health, and the sooner effective help is offered the more likely it is to work.”

However, Government cuts to local authority budgets have meant the loss of services for children and young people. Cuts have been made to the numbers of social work staff and educational psychologists, and to mental health services in schools, leading to a reduction in care and support for young people. In the face of such cuts to early intervention and prevention services, will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to develop better early intervention?

From pressures about body image to cyber-bullying and the pressures caused by social networking sites, it is clear that we need to do more research on the impact that social media are having on young people’s mental health. Although Ministers have pledged extra funding for mental health services, we know it is not reaching the front-line services that children and young people need. Schools and colleges must be supported to help their students to cope with the challenges of online culture that we have heard about in this debate. The internet and social media are clearly here to stay, so it is vital that the Government ensure that young people receive the help, support and guidance that they need in this digital age.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): Before you begin, Minister, may I ask you to be so kind as to consider leaving up to a minute at the end of your speech for Mr Chalk to sum up?

5.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): I shall do my utmost, Sir Alan. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) on securing this very important debate. Contributions have at times been distressing, but they have been hugely important. He is right to raise awareness about the impact of social media on young people’s mental health. I thank all constituents and colleagues who have bravely allowed their stories to be shared today; it does have an impact and it is important.
As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, in recognising the harms that are occurring on social media, we must not reject the positive role that social media can play. Instead, we have to put social media in their place and know that, like any tool, their impact is dependent on how they are used. How we use social media depends on our intentions, for good or ill, and on our skills.

For the disfranchised and those without a voice, social media have provided a powerful medium for advocacy and outreach, and at times messages that would not otherwise have been heard have found a global reach. Even for the most vulnerable groups, the evidence shows that by no means all influences on social media are negative, and that only a minority of people will use social media to exploit and harm others.

The Samaritans undertook a consultation as part of its Digital Futures project, which looked at how people use online sources in relation to suicidal and self-harm content. The study found that, as well as negative experiences, those who took part in the research also highlighted using the sites to build peer networks. Three quarters of those who took part said that they looked for support online.

If we can harness the power of online platforms, we can use them to deliver the effective prevention interventions that many Members have called for, to raise mental health awareness, and to provide advice and support. Indeed, many of the support organisations that help our young people and adults who experience emotional challenges and issues of poor mental health have a presence on social media. As the Minister with responsibility for public health and innovation, that is something I must encourage.

As constituency MPs and Members of this House, we can all cite examples of social media platforms being used to inflict harm, whether through grooming or cyber-bullying, or of the anxiety and low self-esteem caused through hyper-use, which some Members have described. The Government reject the laissez-faire attitude that says this is all just an inevitable by-product of our connected world and shrugs its shoulders. No child should be groomed, bullied or harassed online, or simply left without the skills they need to critically and sensibly engage with social media.

That is why we are working in partnership with industry, the community and schools to address the challenges. New technology and social media continue to be misused to exploit and target the vulnerable. We have been clear that we expect social media companies to respond quickly to incidents of abusive behaviour on their networks. We have robust legislation in place to deal with internet trolls, cyberstalking and harassment, and perpetrators of grossly offensive, obscene or menacing behaviour. We are absolutely clear that these are crimes, and will be treated as such.

The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre has available various resources, which can be accessed via its website. The “Thinkuknow” programme has web resources to educate and empower young people at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation. I hope that some of them may access that if they are watching the debate. We know that the worst cases of bullying, including cyber-bullying, can lead to serious depression and even thoughts of suicide. A recent study by the national inquiry into homicide and suicide found that bullying—the sense of there being “no escape” was articulated by many colleagues—was a factor in the suicide of children and young people. I particularly thank Declan, the constituent of the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart McDonald), for allowing his story to be told and may I say how sorry I am that he had to go through that experience. We know that we must do better.

That is why all schools are required by law to have a behaviour policy and measures to tackle bullying in all forms among their pupils. Schools are free to develop their strategies, but they are clearly held to account by Ofsted. That is also why the Government Equalities Office announced £4.4 million of extra money to tackle bullying, and why over the next two years four anti-bullying organisations will go in to support schools to tackle bullying and to improve the support that is available. In particular, the GEO has invested £500,000 in the UK Safer Internet Centre to provide advice to schools and professionals on how to keep children safe, and a further £75,000 in CEOP to support a national roll-out of Parent Info, which is delivered through schools, to stop parents feeling helpless because they are not digital natives. It is a free service and helps parents to show their children how to use the internet and mobile devices appropriately.

We are also working with the UK Council for Child Internet Safety, which brings together 200 organisations to form the digital resilience working group to take forward work to equip children and young people to identify and respond to risks online, including cyber-bullying and negative influences.

We know, as colleagues have said, that young people, as well as their parents and carers, continue to feel the impact of unrealistic representations of body image, which have a pervasive impact on social media. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Jim Shannon) may be aware that the Government launched a body confidence campaign in 2010, which publishes a regular progress report on how we are addressing negative body images to tackle the very “compare and despair” trap that he so rightly highlighted. I agree with him about the importance of prevention and resilience building. A great deal of work is under way to try to target the sources of online abuse and harmful content upstream, at source.

Central to tackling the challenges posed by online bullying, exploitation and self-image will be supporting young people, as well as those who care for them, to build resilience. This year, Public Health England’s £337,000 Rise Above campaign is intended to do just that, building the resilience of young people by providing online information and tackling issues that include body image and online stress.

Alongside supporting young people in developing resilience, we know that parents and schools have a role to play in preventing mental ill-health, and we will continue to work with the Department for Education to improve mental wellbeing in schools, and to support children and teachers in addressing mental health issues through educational resources and by providing single points of contacts for mental health in schools.

My hon. Friend rightly highlighted the good work of the DFE in developing the MindEd web-based tools for children and parents. We are looking for ways in which those tools can be developed further to support local areas and to improve online contact.
Underpinning all of that is the need to tackle the stigma around mental health in all areas of society. That is why we have increased funding for Time to Change, which is our national anti-stigma campaign, to ensure that young people are confident in coming forward to get the help that they need. Underpinning all of that is our programme to reform and improve mental health support for young people. That is why we have increased investment in mental health to £11.7 billion, and local clinical commissioning groups are required to increase spending on mental health each year. That is part of a holistic strategy to improve key areas of mental health services, such as perinatal mental health, services to tackle eating disorders and better crisis care resolution in the community, as laid out in “Future in mind” and “The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health”, so that we can give young people with mental health problems the care and support that they deserve.

My hon. Friend was right when he said that we need to have the proper research in place, because this is an emerging area. That is why the Mental Health Taskforce asked the Department of Health, working with relevant partners, to publish a report by February 2017 to set out a 10-year strategy for mental health research. The final 10-year strategy planned for publication will identify the needs of mental health research. It will include a specific focus on the mental health of children and young people.

We know that there is much more to do and my hon. Friend is aware that the Lords Select Committee inquiry into children’s access to and use of the internet is currently under way. We are watching that closely and will look at its recommendations about online safety and the role that the Government, regulators and media companies can play to protect our children online because we know that more needs to be done.

We recognise the challenge of social media for young people up and down this country. We are determined to do our part to equip them with the tools they need to meet that challenge, not only in terms of their mental health but to protect them online, to make them more resilient and alert to the risks, and to make them confident digital natives who can critically and sensibly harness the power of digital tech for good.

Sir Alan Meale (in the Chair): I call Alex Chalk to sum up—briefly.

5.44 pm

Alex Chalk: This has been an excellent debate but a debate in name only, because there is a profound consensus about the potential for social media—as well as being a force for good, it can cause harm.

I was very pleased to hear from the Minister that some embryonic research may develop into something more robust. Such research is welcome. That is important because we need that platform to press the social media platforms to do more.

I reiterate the point that, in schools, we expect headteachers to take control, in Parliament, we expect the Speaker to take control and, if people are not behaving properly on social media, the platforms should be robust in dealing with them.

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.10(14)).
Steel Industry

1.30 pm

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of the steel industry.

I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a member of the Community trade union. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for co-sponsoring the debate, which is much needed to get the steel industry crisis back on the national agenda.

The steel industry is not a dead or dying industry. That is something I and colleagues here today have repeated throughout the crisis and prior to it. I know everyone here understands the importance of the industry, but some confusion persists, so I hope colleagues will understand if I reiterate why the steel industry is particularly significant to the UK.

Fundamentally, steel is a strategic and foundational industry. If the Government want to rebalance the economy away from London and to build our manufacturing sector, they simply must support the steel sector. The products of our steel industry supply the booming automotive manufacturing industry and the aerospace manufacturing industry, among others. A successful steel industry helps those industries and a weak one damages them. As well as being the foundation for other industries, steel is strategically important because it allows us to retain the capacity to build infrastructure projects, from Trident to transport to energy. It means our security, our ability to compete and our ability to keep the lights on are not dependent on other countries.

As an aside, look at the problems the French Government are having in building the Flamanville EPR nuclear reactor. In the summer, France’s nuclear safety authority found weaknesses in what I believe is Japanese-made steel in the reactor, which further delayed the project and raised safety concerns. British steel, such as that made at the main competitor to that manufacturer, Sheffield Forgemasters, is more reliable, and I hope it will be used in the similar Hinkley Point C EPR reactors. That is a simple example of the importance of using high-quality steel for infrastructure and why choosing British steel for such projects is not just the patriotic choice, but the best choice.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that if we really are concerned about taking back control, we need control of our steel industry, so that our infrastructure is built with UK steel?

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. There have been warm and welcome words from the Government about an industrial strategy. The Opposition have been talking about that for the past six years, but be that as it may, the Government are there and we want to work with them over the next few months to form that industrial strategy. There are immediate issues that need to be resolved, hopefully in the Autumn statement, and there are further long-term issues in relation to an industrial strategy, how we form that strategy by sector and how the steel sector needs specific treatment in order to go forward.

The other aspect of the steel industry’s significance is the jobs it provides, the communities it forms and has formed, and the culture of which I am proudly a part. More than 30,000 people work in the steel industry, from watermen to control panel engineers and from craft workers to lab technicians. What is important is not only the numbers but where in the country those jobs are, because as well as adjusting the mix of our economy to include more manufacturing, a long-term aspiration of successive Governments has been to rebalance the economy away from London. The UK steel industry supplies more than 10,000 jobs in Yorkshire and the Humber, 8,500 in Wales, 4,000 in the west midlands, 2,000 in my own region, the north-east, and at least 1,000 in Scotland. Those regions are desperate for jobs and investment, and they have been the worst hit by the decline in manufacturing and domestic industry.

Simply put, if the Prime Minister is serious about spreading opportunity around our nation, she cannot abandon the steel industry. Steelworkers across the UK are not asking for charity, merely for access to a level playing field on which to compete with steelmakers from across the world, but in a number of ways, UK steel is fighting an uphill battle. The trade tariffs that protect American steel producers from Chinese steel are many times those in place to protect British producers. Despite limited Government assistance, energy for British steel producers remains more expensive than for our European competitors, and Government-led infrastructure projects, most recently Trident, continue to use foreign-made steel instead of British alternatives.

Where our industry can compete and has been leading the world is in our people and our skills. It is difficult to estimate the value of the institutional knowledge and experience in Port Talbot, Stocksbridge, Skinningrove or Sheerness, but it has helped those communities to stay afloat and their steelworks to function. The Materials Processing Institute in Teeside is producing world-leading research, and has received visits from German, Slovak and Swedish Government representatives who wish to draw on our expertise in this country.

It is testament to the combination of those institutional skills, the experience of steel communities around the country and the cutting-edge research of institutes such as the MPI that the productivity of the steel industry has consistently improved over the last decades. It is for those reasons that the UK steel industry should be seen as an opportunity—a reservoir of potential—rather than, as it is sometimes called, a burden on a modern economy.

We should be wary of how quickly that reservoir can evaporate. A steel or metals industry cannot be created from scratch overnight. The average age of a steelworker is growing, and the current crisis means fewer young people are coming into our industry. Without a secure future, the skills developed over decades could be lost. Those skills are not important only for the steel industry. I recently met representatives from Metalysis—a company...
[Tom Blenkinsop]

that uses an innovative process developed at Cambridge University to produce metal powders and alloys that will be vital for 3D printing—who emphasised to me the importance of those skills grown in the steel industry for their business. To allow that experience and research reservoir to dry up with the decline of the steel industry would not merely affect the future of steel in the UK, but would cut off our competitive advantage for the metals sector.

Rather than let that advantage disappear, we should build on that potential by creating a steel sector catapult and a metal materials strategy, through which knowledge can be shared, built upon and turned into results for British industry. I hope the Government will work with MPI and members of the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries to fashion a new bid for that catapult. That is something the Government could commit to today that would show that they are serious about the future of the industry. I hope the Minister will remark on that later.

Steel in the UK is not an odd nostalgia but a viable industry with a future. It does not need charity but access to a level playing field on which to compete. If given that access, it is reasonable to believe the industry could be the world leader it already is. There are immediate challenges, though. The five asks on energy costs, business rates, Chinese dumping and procurement have still not been fully delivered on by the Government, and they demand the Government’s immediate attention. They can be acted on now and the solutions announced in the autumn statement.

The drop in sterling and the change in global steel price is not a solid foundation on which to build the steel industry’s future. The Government must not believe that their short-term work is done. They must take action, with long-term milestones and with a long-term view, so that not only people in the House know where they stand, but investors in the industry know exactly what the 20 or 30-year view is, and associated industries that rely on steel know exactly what to expect.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Members across the House could be forgiven for thinking that the Government have assumed that, because the sense of immediate crisis appears to have passed, their foot can be taken off the brake and that we can rely on the industrial strategy emerging next spring to address the problems. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is definitely not the case, and that the Government need to keep at this, on top of it, and give it the priority it deserves now?

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. There are a number of issues within that general question that still hang over the industry. I am at pains to talk about the broader industry and the new, smaller companies that are emerging. The debate tends to be dominated by issues around Tata, for obvious reasons, but we need to look at how we develop smaller companies, hence our desire for the steel sector catapult to be established. Although those smaller companies have come to the fore, they have told me directly that if a steel sector catapult existed, they would have been able to get where they are now a lot quicker and with a lot less capital, which would release more capital to do other things or to develop other research and development potential. One of the most profound issues, which I will go into later on, is the British Steel pension scheme.

Producing steel is a massively energy-intensive process. Despite the Government’s policy, which compensates energy-intensive industries for the disproportionate impact of carbon reduction measures on them, British energy prices are still far higher than those in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. The steel industry is aware of the need to transition to low-carbon energy sources, but only in a way that makes business sense.

Everyone I have spoken to in the steel industry welcomes the inclusion of the energy portfolio in the same Department as the business and industry strategy portfolio. That makes sense, and it is about time it happened. However, the Department has yet to respond to the EEF’s five recommendations aimed at addressing the competitiveness of UK energy costs. Since the initial meeting with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on this issue in June, EEF estimates that the disparity between UK and European energy costs means the UK steel industry has paid £20 million more in energy bills than their continental competitors. What is being done on energy costs? What benefit has the sector felt since the creation of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Can he explain why energy costs are so much lower in continental countries than here? Is it something that we as a Government are doing wrong, or is there some other reason?

Tom Blenkinsop: Other colleagues may want to comment on this, but my view is that in general the energy sector is predisposed to giving the individual consumer cheaper prices, with the costs going more towards manufacturing. The consequences of that have led to some manufacturers going off grid; and a consequence of that may be higher prices for the individual consumer, as capacity cannot be fulfilled by larger consumers. In European countries such as Germany and Holland, there are discounted energy costs for large manufacturers but with the understanding that the individual pays higher bills. There is consensus, to a certain degree, that people are willing to pay higher energy bills in order to maintain manufacturing in their country so that they have a job—but that is with open political consensus. We as politicians need to talk about what type of economy we want. Do we want to move it away from finance and services back to a more balanced economy? We need to talk about that in terms of energy policy, but I will go into that issue in more depth later.

The Government can act to support the steel industry’s attempts to improve its energy efficiency and thereby cut emissions and costs by providing an energy efficiency fund. Such a fund could supply capital for companies to make improvements and efficiencies in the way they use energy, meaning they can better compete on energy prices and millions of tonnes of carbon emissions can be cut.

The second immediate challenge is that of the British Steel pension scheme. The scheme’s deficit, estimated at £700 million earlier this year, has been a major obstacle to the sale of Tata Steel sites. In response to that, the pension scheme’s trustees have asked if it would be
possible to alter the scheme’s benefits in order to make it viable without a sponsor employer. The Government have been consulted on that option and on the alteration to section 67 of the Pensions Act 1995 necessary to alter the scheme’s benefits. We are yet to hear a statement on the consultation, but recently the pensions deficit has been drastically re-estimated at £50 million, due to the trustees taking advantage of the post-Brexit economic situation—I must mention that that has more to do the British Steel pension scheme’s investments in other nations’ stock, which has boosted the pension fund.

If interest rates were to rise and the scheme’s asset value continued to increase, hypothetically the trustees may wish to withdraw their request to change the scheme’s benefits, and therefore a change in section 67 of the Pensions Act may not be necessary. The compounded complications are that any change to section 67 could affect any other workplace pension scheme, and any other representative of any other constituency without a steel interest would be highly hesitant about voting for such an action. I hope we can keep in constant contact with the Minister, so that if the scheme’s benefits continue to rise, we can look at measures short of the scheme falling into the Pension Protection Fund, because that is fundamental to the existing Tata sites. The Government must act to explore that possibility, provide certainty in an uncertain situation and secure the continued viability of Tata Steel sites. The BSPS is a fulcrum of the continuation of the current Tata sites.

As well as the five asks, strategic decisions will need to be made soon by Government that have the power to end or secure the industry’s future. Those are decisions that come in the wake of Brexit. There are many implications for the steel industry of the UK leaving the European Union, from workers’ rights to an ability to attract expertise and investment from the continent, but I wish to focus on one: trade, and in particular access to markets and trade defence measures.

Earlier this week, I warmly welcomed the Government’s actions to secure investment, jobs and growths at the Nissan plant in Sunderland, via the production of the two new Qashqai and X-Trail models. That move is warmly welcome, not least because Nissan is one of the largest buyers of British strip steel, largely from Tata Steel sites. It is a shame the Government did not take the same decisive action when it came to the closure of the SSI Redcar steel plant over a year ago, which I am certain my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar will talk about. None the less, it seems the Government have reassured Nissan that it will have access to European markets tariff-free. That is fantastic news, but it is not just Nissan or the automotive industry that rely on access to tariff-free trade with Europe.

Over half of all British steel exports are to the European Union, therefore any tariffs on British goods would damage the health of UK steel. I hope the Minister will commit today to providing steel producers with similar assurances. Doing so would again demonstrate this Government’s commitment to the sector, and of course do much for those whose jobs are dependent on the steel trade. The Nissan deal also reflects how big and powerful the industry players and the automotive lobby is as a whole. Steel requires its players to come together and command such attention. It must also gain the understanding of the auto sector and all the other industrial lobbies that the UK steel supply on their doorstep requires their clear verbal support.

Leaving the European Union presents both an opportunity and a threat in terms of trade defence measures—a threat in that it means we would leave behind the trade defence measures provided by the EU, modest and limited though they are, and an opportunity in that it allows this country to implement our own trade defences. As many here will know, the over-production of primarily, though not exclusively, Chinese steel and its dumping, sometimes at below-cost prices, in foreign markets poses a real and significant threat to industry here in the UK. Currently the EU’s tariffs on steel differ by product: the highest import duty is about 73% on heavy plate steel, whereas in the US in March duties were set at over 265%.

While Chinese production of steel did slow as global demand dipped, the latest International Steel Statistics Bureau statistics show that Chinese exports remain at a year high, with August levels being some 7% above last year. The problem is not going to go away; it will certainly re-emerge. However, this Government seem to have set their face against trade tariffs on Chinese steel, as two quotes reveal. The first, from the Chancellor, was on granting China market economy status: “Our position on China’s market economy status is that we gave certain undertakings to China and believe that we are bound to go down this route.”

Recognising market economy status for China would limit our ability to apply duties on Chinese steel, potentially opening up our markets to a flood of cheap steel, undercutting domestic producers and risking thousands of British jobs.

Commitments made to endear ourselves to China should not take precedent over commitments to steelworkers or common sense. It is obvious that Chinese steel is not made under market competition conditions, and it is also obvious that by campaigning for MES for China, the Chancellor is campaigning against the interests of British steelworkers. This may be further complicated by Brexit. If we campaign for market economy status for China—as a country, I add; that is the Government’s position—while we are in the EU, will not this Government be obliged to recognise that once we can do so unilaterally after leaving the EU? Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that.

The second telling quote came from the Secretary of State for International Trade. During his speech to the Conservative Way Forward group, the right hon. Gentleman, now infamous for calling British business people fat and lazy, said we “must turn our backs on…voices that tell us: ‘It’s OK, you can protect bits of your industry, bits of your economy and no one will notice’”.

That seems to set the right hon. Gentleman against any industrial strategy and certainly against trade defence measures for the steel industry. I hope that that misapplication of free trade dogma to trade with a communist country and its state-owned and subsidised steel industry does not spill over into Government policy. I hope Ministers from BEIS have explained the absurdity of that position to the Secretary of State; if not, I fear someone will have to very soon. Those two aspects of the Brexit negotiations are fundamental to any industrial strategy and I hope the Minister will outline today the conversations he has had with and the cases he has been making to the Chancellor, the
Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union about Brexit and our industrial strategy.

I would like now to address my own Front Benchers. As a party, we have been vocal in campaigning to save our steel industry, and we should be proud of that, but, if our party is to help to revive the steel industry in the UK, as I hope it will, and not merely be its pallbearer, we must stop cutting off potential demand for British steel by opposing or sitting on the fence over major infrastructure projects. Heathrow will require 370,000 tonnes of steel and could support hundreds of jobs in the industry. Labour does not seem to have a settled opinion—I know mine—and we must be clear. Trident will support British jobs in the steel industry, despite the Government allowing French steel to be used in the vessels’ hulls, but Labour’s own leadership casts doubt on our commitment to this project, despite party policy and a consensus at our conference and among trade unions to accept it.

Shale gas is an example. Our party has vowed to ban the practice of fracking. The GMB union called this decision ridiculous, nonsense and madness, and my union, Community, said the decision was rushed and did not fully consider the evidence. Both unions have since signed a memorandum of understanding with United Kingdom Onshore Oil and Gas, the industry trade body. Two proud unions, with large private sector bases and affiliated to our party, are asking the party to back a proposal that would provide jobs in regions across the UK—not just jobs, but secure, well paid jobs that would help to stop our reliance on autocratic nations for our energy. It would offer people, not least the thousands of offshore oil workers being made redundant, well trained, highly skilled, long-term roles, but we have denied them that option. Shale gas would cut energy prices for the steel industry more profoundly than any tax break or subsidy. On Teesside, it would provide a gas supply to a much-needed chemicals industry at 50% less than the cost of conventional North sea gas.

The infrastructure and sites would also require thousands of tonnes of steel. The viability of British-made welded steel pipes for fracking is currently being explored. It is vital to both Corby’s and Hartlepool’s pipe mills. The industry is moving ahead without the Labour party. We should be shaping the shale gas industry, not ignoring it for our own satisfaction. We should be making sure it is safe, that it uses British steel, that energy price cuts are passed on to steel producers and that they organise their workforce so that it can bargain collectively and secure benefits for local communities.

Blanket opposition to infrastructure projects may offer the false comfort of the moral high ground, but it is not responsible. Failing to make these choices is not the action of a Government in waiting who intend to deliver for steelworkers. As a party, we must be pro-jobs and pro-steel choices, and not just attend marches and wear badges. I hope my party will think about these issues and choose jobs over familiar, fashionable and flawed opinion.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): From one Tom to another, I call Tom Pursglove.

1.53 pm

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Davies. It is always a pleasure to follow the other Tom, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop), who is a passionate advocate for our steel industry and with whom I very much enjoy working. People out there in the country often take a dim view of the proceedings they see in Parliament, but I believe strongly that the work of the all-party parliamentary group on steel and metal related industries is incredibly important and crosses party lines, which have nothing whatever to do with our work. We all work together for what is best for our steel industry. All Members here this afternoon can be proud of that.

I welcome the Minister to his place. I have great regard for him. He is one of the hardest-working Ministers in the Government. I am also delighted that we have a Secretary of State from good, steelmaking stock, which brings a lot to this debate. He completely understands what is at stake, given his family background. I welcome both Ministers to their new positions and look forward very much to working with them.

It would be remiss of me not to thank the previous ministerial team for its efforts. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and I regularly disagree on certain matters, particularly in relation to the European Union, but I have enormous respect and admiration for her work and her engagement with Members who have steel-related industries in their constituencies. She went around the country visiting our steelworks and talking to employees, unions and site managers about the steps that needed to be taken. She should be given a lot of credit for that.

I pay tribute to the Community union and Roy Rickhuss, whom I enjoy working with. He is a real advocate for our steel industry. Roy’s representatives on the ground do much to ensure that the views of steelworkers throughout our steel sites are heard as part of these debates. Great credit should be paid to him.

I am proud of much of what the Government have sought to do to try to help our steel industry. We have moved the debate on energy compensation along and have a package in place. We have made great strides forward on procurement, and I will come to that. Although there is more work to be done on dumping, I, for one, have appreciated Ministers’ efforts to raise directly with the Chinese the consequences of what is happening.

The big concern in Corby—I visit the steelworks regularly to talk to the site management, unions and employees—is that there seems to be a bit of a vacuum. Not much information is coming from Tata on where we are, and this is at a time when we have had some positive announcements about other sites, such as Scunthorpe, where the workforce now have real certainty about the future. We need further certainty about Tata’s existing portfolio. I know that discussions are ongoing with ThyssenKrupp, but I urge that the message from this Chamber this afternoon is that Tata should say publicly as much as it can about the current state of play, which hangs like a cloud over our steel towns that are Tata sites. We must try to put an end to that uncertainty as quickly as possible and to do the right thing for our steelworkers.
There are three areas where Government leadership will be key in the coming weeks, months and years. The first is EU exit. I campaigned to leave the European Union and I am pleased that the British people’s verdict was that we should leave, but I accept that other people have sincerely held views to the contrary. Exit offers a real opportunity to our steel sector, but engagement will be crucial to getting it right, and we must thoroughly engage with the unions, the companies and the workforce to get the policy absolutely right. We need to understand the requirements, needs and aspirations of our steel sector for the years ahead.

I believe that when we leave the European Union we will have more tools at our disposal, but it is important to get that right. The Government will be able to act directly on dumping and state aid rules; they have had to go through Brussels in the past. We all agonised over the difficult few months when Ministers were going to Brussels and making the case for the energy compensation package, only to see the can kicked down the road. We eventually got to the right place, but it is welcome that in future the British Government will be able to put those things in play.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very insightful speech, but the fact is that the way in which state aid and the European Commission work is that national Governments must provide the Commission with a list of their priority cases. It is a matter of record, however, that this Government consistently failed to put the energy-intensive industries package at the top of that list. The Commission was dealing with cases as they came from our Government, so it was the failure of our Government to make that a priority. Only thanks to the pressure that we put on them did they suddenly put the energy-intensive industries compensation package to the top of the list, and the case was then resolved within three months.

Tom Pursglove: My understanding was that British Ministers were going over to Brussels regularly to make the argument for the energy compensation package. I remember having numerous conversations with Government colleagues about the importance of that, and they were certainly relaying the significance and severity of the delay and its impact on the industry. Again, I commend them for those efforts.

Another point is that outside the European Union the British Government would be in a position, if they wanted to, to emulate the sorts of tariffs that we have seen in the United States. We would be able to do that if we felt that it was in our national interest. Whereas before we would have had to try to enact it through Brussels, we would be able to do it directly. I think that we should look at all these things.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Forgive me, but I am a little confused. Was it not the UK that, in the EU, was holding back the EU from having strong anti-dumping measures? If the UK Government were not able to do that in the EU, how on earth does the hon. Gentleman think that outside the European Union, that will be entirely within the gift of the British Government. We will not have to get agreement from multiple member states to make progress on these things. I have consistently said that I think we should look at the tariff side and, where there is flexibility and opportunity to increase tariffs in response to particular problems, we should look to do that.

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend has been a champion of Corby steel since the day he became the Member of Parliament for Corby. The one thing that I want to pick up on in these exchanges is that people talk about “the Government”. We have a new Government, a new team, a new Prime Minister and new Ministers. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) agree that we have seen a different attitude to steel since we have had a new Prime Minister?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful for the intervention. I certainly agree with that point and will touch on it later.

Of course, there is a particular challenge with the current tariff situation. Ministers have said consistently that one difficulty has been that some of the tariffs are bound up with other things; the impact on other things also comes into play. It would be much easier outside the European Union. We would be able to take those decisions ourselves. We would be able to take the decisions in isolation, separated out, and not have to get that wider agreement from other nation states.

Tom Blenkinsop: I thank the hon. Gentleman, a vice-chair of the APPG, for giving way. Whether we are in the European Union or not, that issue is resolved. On the issue of tariffs, he agrees with me; we have some consensus there, and we are willing to work together to try to build those trade defence mechanisms. The real issue is Chinese market economy status. The Government are advocating a policy of no tariffs with China—a country that is the primary problem, in terms of dumping, in the world. That presents significant complications for the UK steel industry, and we need to work together to try to change the Government’s opinion about market economy status for China so that we can defend not just steel but manufacturing generally in Britain.

Tom Pursglove: Again, I am grateful for the intervention. I have consistently said that I think it is incumbent on British Ministers to make the point to the Chinese that if they want to play in the premier league, they have to play by the rules. That is fundamental; it has to be front and centre in our ongoing discussions with the Chinese Government as we try to make progress. That is absolutely right and proper. If they want to be regarded as a significant international player in trade, they have to play by the rules.

I welcomed the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland to say about trade earlier, because I think that this issue will be crucial. What opportunities will there be to better export British steel around the world in a post-EU exit world? I ask that because the steel that this country produces is the best in the world. There is no doubt about that, and I think that we ought to be shouting from the rooftops, making the point that the steel that we produce is of that high quality, that it is good value for money because of that, and that we want to sell it the world over. I would be interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on that.
I also want to know about some of the early cross-departmental discussions that are taking place. What is the current thinking? What is the interface between the different Departments to ensure that the steel sector is properly represented in those discussions? What work has been done to hear what the needs, aspirations and requirements are? I recognise that there will be many competing priorities at the moment, but for my constituents and me—and for all hon. Members present, the steel issue is very pressing and we need to know what the direction of travel is likely to be.

On industrial strategy, I come back to the point about the emphasis of the Government. I very much welcome the shift in emphasis. The steel APPG, to a man and woman, campaigned for it. We always wanted to see an industrial strategy develop that would help to bolster the steel industry. I am proud to be part of a Conservative Government who are delivering on that, who have recognised the need for an industrial strategy that is designed to ensure that steel is properly represented in our industrial policy. That is a very big step forward; it is a step change. And I say that coming at the debate as a small-c conservative. I recognise that the Government do not have all the answers, but this is about getting the broad economic conditions right and ensuring that where there are opportunities for our industries to thrive and prosper, we try to fit all that together to ensure that it works and has the best possible outcomes.

An industrial strategy is key to ensuring that we have strong core industries in this country. We have all said for a long time that steel is fundamental to our national security. Having an industrial strategy means that policy discussion in this country focuses on that point and ensures that no community is left behind. In Corby, people feel acutely that the steel industry is what our town is all about. Our town was built on the steel industry; that is what we are about in Corby, and I think that this measure gives real regard to that. I would therefore be interested in a progress report from the Minister on where the thinking is on the industrial strategy, what engagement there has been and what opportunities he thinks that will bring for our steel towns.

On procurement, I commend the Government, because we have made enormous strides forward, working across Government, in recent months. Of course we must maximise the public sector opportunities that exist. Today we heard about the construction of a number of new prisons. I urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice to ensure that British steel is used. One of the sites is Wellingborough, which is 10 minutes down the road from my constituency. We can provide top-quality steel, probably within the hour, if that is what is needed to build that new prison.

We must ensure that these big, Government-backed infrastructure projects use British products, British content and British steel at every opportunity. I want to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland about fracking, because Corby is one of the sites that would be strongly placed to provide top-quality steel for fracking. When the Government are looking at subsidies for renewable energy projects or any energy projects, it makes sense to hammer home the expectation that British content and British steel will be used. That should be the key condition.

However, this debate is not just about the public sector; it now has to be looked at also in the context of the private sector. I welcomed Heathrow’s commitment to use British steel in the forthcoming construction. I hope that that will lead the way in encouraging other companies and organisations around the country to use British content where ever possible. On most occasions, we can cater for their requirements, and if we do not cater for those requirements, we have the ingenuity and ability to innovate to make that happen. The industry should be given the opportunity to cater for these projects whenever possible, because it is morally right to use British steel. We have great quality and a great workforce, and we should feel the benefit in the supply chains in this country.

Earlier, there was an urgent question on air quality. In my view, it does not make sense to be bringing poor-quality steel across from other countries around the world when we can produce great steel in this country and reduce some of the transport costs and implications of shipping steel from all over the world. Overall, that must be better for air quality across the globe.

Those issues should be front and centre of what the Government, the public sector more broadly and the private sector ought to be championing. That is a key element of the debate. How does it link to the industrial strategy? That will be a very important consideration that we need to reflect on as we move forward. How does the whole thing link together to ensure that, from end to end, we do right by British steel producers?

I am a regular visitor to the Corby works and I pay tribute to all those who work there. They are incredibly talented and hard-working people. We have a remarkable workforce and we can all be exceptionally proud of that. Whenever I visit at the moment, I am asked about three key policy areas: where is Government thinking on the industrial strategy, on the EU exit and on procurement? We have to show leadership on all those points.

I am proud of Corby’s steelmaking—the quality of our product, our incredible workforce—and of our rich steel history, which is what the town of Corby is all about. I am proud of the Conservative Government for really trying to show some leadership and for listening, acting and getting out there in pursuit of solutions to help to secure the future of the industry. But I am under no illusions; I do not think this is going to be straightforward. It is not going to be plain sailing as we move to a world outside the European Union. It is going to be difficult and there are going to be bumps in the road. However, if we get out there and get the engagement right, we can have an enormously successful future chapter for our steel industry because we have got those broad policy foundations in place.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): From a small “c” conservative, to a big “L” Labour, I call Angela Smith.

2.10 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) on securing this debate.
It is always timely to have a debate on steel, such is its importance to the economy, but at this particular moment, given the wide range of issues we face, including Brexit, it seems particularly timely.

I want briefly to go back to October 2015, when the SSI crisis hit TV screens. As we know, the company went into liquidation and 6,000 people lost their jobs. That is 6,000 men and women lost to the industry; potentially forever, and 6,000 families who face an uncertain future. Yet since the collapse of SSI and the problems that Tata faced earlier this year, although there have been some improvements in the conditions faced by steel producers—not least because of the 16% devaluation of the pound—there are still major problems facing the steel industry.

The Chinese dumping of steel continues, and the UK is still blocking attempts to put meaningful tariffs on that steel as it comes into Europe. It has never been about protectionism—this is a really important point. Rather, it is about effectively countering the hidden subsidies that the Chinese state has embedded in its own production of steel. I have listened to the Chinese and have heard them say they will roll out figures on their production and about how they are reducing the volumes of production, but they never, ever refer to the fact that they are effectively undercutting the global steel market by embedding subsidies in their pricing structures.

Let us not forget that we still have all the other issues that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland mentioned in his opening remarks: the five key asks that were developed some time ago by UK Steel, supported by the union Community and supported by parliamentarians across the House. My hon. Friend did an excellent job setting out the key strategic issues facing the industry at this point. I will not go through them all again, because he did that brilliantly and the case is made.

As would be expected of me, and because of the situation I face in my constituency, I want to focus briefly on the situation with the Tata holdings in the UK. Although the sale of Port Talbot has been suspended while Tata and ThyssenKrupp talk about a joint venture, Speciality Steels, which has plants in Sheffield—in Stocksbridge, in my constituency—and Rotherham, is still up for sale.

I do not apologise for rehearsing the point about the importance of the Stocksbridge plant. Members have heard me say before that the steel produced at Stocksbridge is in the top 7% of the value chain for global steelmaking. Two thirds of the aviation steel made globally is made in Stocksbridge: it makes steel for landing gear, for the Rolls-Royce engine and for the sliding doors on the aircraft body. It is an incredibly important and valued part of our steel industry. I have even heard it said—by people who frankly do not know a great deal about what goes on there—that there is effectively old-fashioned steelmaking going on in that facility, in something that looks like a shed. I know that the Minister has visited Stocksbridge and so entirely understands my point. What goes on inside that building—that very old facility—represents some of the best and most advanced steelmaking technology in the world.

I am incredibly proud of what Stocksbridge does, and I know that the community is too. We are confident that the plant will have a future and we know that the right investment plan can secure that future. It has got the vacuum induction melting facility, but it needs further capital investment if it wants not only to maintain its place in the value chain, but to move up it. That is the ambition: to move into the era of 3D printing mentioned by my hon. Friend. Stocksbridge wants to be able to produce—if hon. Members will forgive the layperson’s way of saying it—the powdered steel, which we know will enormously increase the value of what we make there. That is something like £30,000 to £40,000 a tonne initially. It is critically important that we get the right buyer for Tata Speciality Steels: a buyer who is in it for the long term and prepared to make the investment.

Recent reports about the apparent boardroom manoeuvrings at Tata are a little worrying, to say the least. Given the current instability at the global board-level at Tata, I ask the Minister what the Government are doing to ensure that the sale of Tata Speciality Steels in South Yorkshire is not compromised by the uncertainties apparent at boardroom level at Tata HQ. What communication is he having with Tata at the highest level? I do not expect the detail, or for commercial sensitivity to be compromised, but can he tell us what discussions are taking place to make sure that the sale of Speciality Steels is given the priority by Tata that it deserves?

Yesterday, during Prime Minister’s Question Time, I raised the Prime Minister’s visit to India next week. I did not really get the clear answer I was looking for, but I now ask the Minister to commit to ensuring that the delegation led by the Prime Minister that is going out to India next week takes the opportunity to raise with Tata the business of ensuring a sustainable future for Speciality Steels and, indeed, the other Tata holdings at Port Talbot and elsewhere? In other words, what are the Government doing to support Speciality Steels, Port Talbot and the other Tata holdings in the forthcoming period?

If we are to have a successful steel industry, we need demand for steel produced both for home markets and abroad. Recently we have heard some pretty bad news about the demand for UK content even in British infrastructure projects. We all know about the recent decision to award the contract to supply the steel for the pressure hulls of the new successor Trident submarines to a French company, despite the fact that we have the capacity here in the UK and two UK firms submitted a joint bid for the work. There are other upcoming projects that could, with a bit of support and leverage from the Government, absolutely maximise the use of UK steel.

Tom Blenkinsop: On the Ministry of Defence contract, which occurred two years ago, when two British firms—or two UK sites—came forward with ideas for the plate steel for the hulls on the successor programme, they were actively told to go away by the MOD, as it had already procured the contract from a French site. The two British sites involved, which wanted to come together and provide a solution, just wanted a bit of time—given the time that has subsequently passed, those two sites could have provided the steel. That was another missed opportunity in a period when we were still members of the EU, and defence contracts are exempted from competition regulations.

Angela Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. His point relates entirely to the situation with shale gas. My hon. Friend made an impassioned case for the shale
gas industry earlier this afternoon, and I entirely support him in that. I support the signing of the memorandum of understanding by Community and by the GMB. We all know that the domestic supply of shale gas will help not only the steel industry, but a range of industries in the UK, because it will provide valuable feedstock for the chemicals industry, for example.

Are the Government continuing to support the development of the relevant steelmaking capacity to ensure, for instance, that UK steel will be used in developing the new industry? There have been difficulties in ensuring that the UK steel market can provide that capacity, but we know that work is ongoing, in partnership with the oil and gas industry, to get over those obstacles and make it possible for the UK steelmaking capacity to deliver the steel that the shale gas industry needs. That relates entirely to the point my hon. Friend made: will we ensure this time that we do not miss an opportunity to expand the UK steel industry and exploit new opportunities that become available, such as shale gas?

The same can be said of the Swansea bay tidal lagoon. Is the Minister providing input on the process to the so-called Hendry review? That is critically important. There are huge advantages for the UK steel industry from that project, if it goes ahead.

**Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab):** My hon. Friend is giving a passionate speech, as always. It is also important to note that the Swansea bay tidal lagoon is just the first in a number of projects. The economies of scale coming out of that could deliver lagoons in various places around the country—far larger, in fact, than at Swansea bay—so the potential for steel and steelmaking from lagoon projects is enormous.

**Angela Smith:** I completely agree. Potentially, this is an exciting new industry for the UK that would provide reliable baseload energy to meet the nation’s needs. The steel necessary for building those tidal energy projects will come not just from south Wales, but from Firth Rixon andForgemasters in Sheffield. It will involve some of the best and most technologically sophisticated steelmaking available in the UK. Is the Minister absolutely committed to ensuring that the voice of the steel industry is heard at the heart of Government in looking at whether we give the project the go-ahead? Can we look forward to hearing something specific about that in the autumn statement?

**Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP):** The hon. Lady’s point about tidal and wind energy is absolutely key. Does she agree that the Government’s lack of support and their pulling of support, particularly in the wind energy sector, will have a knock-on impact? That is a serious opportunity for steel production missed by the Government.

**Angela Smith:** A number of opportunities have been missed over the years, and wind energy is one of them. The turbine-making capacity is not now available here in the UK. Wherever possible, it would be good to see the Government attempting to work with industry to put those mistakes right and see what we can do to develop that capacity in future.

Unlocking all that potential will mean an active industrial policy from the Government. Will the Minister therefore reassure the House that UK steel will be at the heart of the forthcoming industrial strategy? As was mentioned earlier, will he give an absolute commitment that steel—which, let us remember, is a foundation industry—is an ongoing priority as we await the publication of the strategy and that it will be at the heart of everything that the new Department does between now and next spring, when the strategy is introduced?

In an industry where investment is vital and timescales are long, certainty is important, so my concluding remarks are of course about Brexit. It is my firm view that, as an industry, steel needs full access to the single market. That is vital, especially when one considers that 50% of all the industry’s exports go to the European Union. Given that the automotive industry has secured a guarantee from the Government, as we leave the European Union, to allow the necessary investment and ensure that it continues in Sunderland—I absolutely welcome that, by the way; it is great news for Sunderland and really important for the UK economy—will the Minister tell us whether we can expect the same sort of guarantee for the steel industry? It is critical that the steel industry should be able to continue to enjoy access to its key markets. Let us remember that many thousands of jobs depend on a successful steel sector.

Steel is vital to a country that wants to continue to be a manufacturer. We need the Government to be fully engaged in helping the industry not just to survive but to develop and to provide security against the uncertainties of the global economy. The future is not going to be easy and although Brexit is frequently posited as bringing many opportunities—these nebulous opportunities that have yet to materialise—we can be absolutely certain that it will deliver more than its fair share of challenges. The steel sector will need the Government to be an active partner to help it to deal with the uncertainties it faces.

What happens to the steel industry if, when we Brexit in two years’ time—presumably in April 2019—the Government have not negotiated a long-term deal? What happens if they have not even been able to negotiate a transitional deal with the European Union? What happens to the steel industry if we end up falling back on World Trade Organisation rules? The Government need to be clear and to work closely with the steel industry and Parliament to ensure that those uncertainties are minimised and thought through, and that we are absolutely certain that, in the worst-case scenario, the Government will be there with a plan to support the steel industry as it moves forward—indeed, to support all manufacturing industry. That question is critical and is worrying the business sector to a degree that I have never seen before in my lifetime in politics.

A country without a steel industry cannot class itself as a major economy. The stakes are that high, and I implore the Minister and the Government to do everything necessary to make sure we secure a thriving steel industry for the future, preferably with the UK as a full member of the single market. Whatever happens, we need to ensure that the Government, who had no plans for Brexit, certainly have a plan if the worst materialises in two years’ time.

**Geraint Davies (in the Chair):** Moving from a big “L” to a big “C”—or should I say a deep “C”?—I call Mr Peter Bone.
2.27 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), whose speech was very good—for at least the first two thirds. It was a very good speech and she made a strong case for the special steel produced in her constituency. I also liked the plug at PMQs for the Prime Minister to do her best when she goes to India. Years ago, I was on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and I remember a huge business tycoon from India. I asked him, “What is the one thing we could do to boost trade between our two countries?” He said, “Pull out of the EU.” At that time, of course, nobody ever thought that would happen, but now he will get his wish. Absolutely, too, on shale gas, that makes obvious sense.

I also congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop). I always think that Westminster Hall is where we have the best debates. We do not get the party-politics nonsense that we sometimes have in the main Chamber. The way in which he made his speech will allow the Minister to deal with it in a very grown-up fashion. It was also particularly courageous to make the points he did against his party’s current policy in some regard. I will return that, I hope, and say some of the things that I think have gone slightly wrong in the debate on steel.

My interest is also connected with that of my right hon. Friend—sorry, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove); he should be right honourable. My constituency abuts his, and a lot of my constituents work in and supply goods and services to the Corby area. I suppose I should also declare that I spent 13 years in south Wales and regularly played cricket close to the steelworks—off my bowling, the ball quite often landed in the steelworks.

As all hon. Members here will probably say, British steel has a future. Not only that; it has to have a future. It is a strategic industry. There have been two Governments recently—the one under David Cameron, and the new Government, under the new Prime Minister—and there has clearly been a shift in emphasis. What I would criticise about the previous Government is the slowness with which they did things. Very early on, when there was clearly a lot of working together and establishing things that needed to be done, such as reforming business rates and dealing with energy costs, the previous Government said, “Let’s deal with Chinese dumping.” But we did not seem to be getting there as quickly as we should have. With the new Government, things have moved on a lot.

Let me deal with the thing about free trade, the Chinese and dumping. Yes, a lot of us believe in free trade because we think it benefits everyone, but free trade does not mean that one country can dump its products in another country. Countries cannot sell their products below cost or with huge subsidies. The reason it is done, of course, is that with things such as steel, there are large fixed assets. The marginal cost of producing the steel and selling it at a loss allows those fixed assets to be kept. That is exactly what the Chinese are doing, which is why we should impose severe tariffs—not for protectionism, but because they are dumping. As any free trader will say, dumping is absolutely not allowed. I listened to the arguments about how dumping would work or did not work in the EU. I think my views on the EU are pretty clear, but we are where we are now and we must look at the advantages.

Let us look at the single market argument. I have only been in Parliament for 11 years. Before that, I was in the manufacturing business. Of course, exporters want to have something that other people want, and they want to be able to sell it. If a tariff exists, and the exporter pays the tariff and sells the product, that is fine, but it is better not to have the tariff in the first place. The exporter wants free trade access to their customers, which is not the same as a single market. If we did not have that, and there were world trade rules, exporters would pay a tariff. But let us look at what has happened since we have come out—since the referendum.

Nic Dakin: We have not come out yet.

Mr Bone: No, unfortunately we have not.

Since the referendum, sterling has fallen by, say, 17%. That makes exports to the EU 17% cheaper and exports into the UK from around the world 17% more expensive. Therefore, a small tariff is irrelevant because we have already had a huge dividend from Brexit. There has been a lot of confused talk around the subject. I absolutely agree with putting tariffs on China—and other countries, if they are dumping—but I do not agree with the idea that somehow there will be a huge problem if we have world trade rules because 50% of exports go to the EU. Clearly we have benefited enormously from the devaluation of sterling. I know that a lot of people want to speak today, but we must look at two issues: the benefit of sterling and the fact that we can absolutely believe in free trade while absolutely having tariffs on dumped goods. That is rather important.

Finally—I really do appreciate that there is a time pressure—I agree entirely with having British steel for British goods. Rushden Lakes is a large development in my constituency, and all the steel there is British. Today, the Government announced a new prison for Wellingborough—I apologise that I must leave the debate temporarily to deal with a matter to do with that prison—which is an opportunity to use British steel. There is a great opportunity for us in the future. The work of the all-party parliamentary group and other hon. Members here today has kept British steel on the agenda. I think the new Government have listened, and I am really very positive about the future of steel.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Thank you very much, Mr Bone; I hope you are not going to prison for too long. [Laughter.] I will not pronounce Jonathan Edwards the big “P”, but I call him to speak. If hon. Members can limit their remarks to 10 minutes each, we will get everyone in.

2.35 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I will endeavour to follow your instruction.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing the debate. I commend the hon. Gentleman on his opening remarks, in which he showed a deep understanding of the industry. It was
a genuine pleasure to listen to him. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this important debate.

I speak on behalf of the steel industry in Wales, which is arguably the most important component of the Welsh economy. Tata Steel Port Talbot employs about 4,000 people directly, and its supply chain is reported to sustain 20,000 jobs in Wales and to contribute £3.2 billion per annum to the economy of my country. We talk about things having national economic strategic importance, and steelmaking in Port Talbot is one of the most important components in a Welsh context.

It is almost impossible to talk about anything these days without mentioning Brexit, so I will get this point out of the way right at the start. Recent revelations about the back-room deal that the UK Government cut with Nissan highlights the Tories’ strategy to pick winners when it comes to Brexit. I will of course back any incentives that support important industries such as the automotive sector, both in their own right and as customers of the steel industry, but as other hon. Members have said, guarantees of that nature must also be extended to the steel industry, which is the backbone of the Welsh economy. My answer to the Government’s Brexit conundrum when it comes to steel is to stay in the single market and the customs union.

It is fair to say that that last time we had a debate of this nature, the mood was dark and there were genuine fears about the future of steelmaking in Wales and the UK. The reasons behind the pressures on the industry are well documented and have been restated today. Instead of repeating them, I will highlight some points made in an excellent report by Swansea University that was published in September. The report, “The sun has risen over steel town: Developing a sustainable steel industry in the UK”, was written by some of the most eminent steel experts in the UK: Professor Sridhar Seetharaman, Professor Dave Worsley, Dr Cameron Pleydell-Pearce and Mr Brian Edy. I commend them for their work.

The report puts forward a very positive prognosis for the steel industry, if supported with swift strategic Government action. The Tata Steel strip business in Port Talbot is today making a profit, performing above the ambitious targets set in the local transformation plan put forward at the height of the crisis last year—a plan that had been rejected as over-ambitious by the Tata board in Mumbai. That is quite an incredible achievement. However, in a session held a few weeks ago by the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee of the National Assembly for Wales, evidence from steel producers and manufacturers indicated that order books, although buoyant at present, could take a turn for the worse in the second quarter of next year, demonstrating once again the huge volatility of the industry and that the next crisis could come sooner than anyone would hope. In other words, this is no time for Governments in London and Cardiff to take their eye off the ball. Therefore, the issues surrounding high electricity prices, whereby domestic steelmakers face a £17 per megawatt disadvantage compared with competitors in Germany, continue to be ones that should be urgently addressed.

The UK and Welsh Governments need to look at business rates and at what can be done to remove plant and machinery investments from rateable calculations.

We need firmer protocols on procurement. As the Swansea University report highlights, only 40% of domestic demand is supplied by domestic producers. I point the finger at the Welsh Government as well in that regard. The report also highlights that a main consideration for the profitability of plants such as Port Talbot are prices of raw materials and sales prices. In 2014-15 the global weighted sales price fell by 26% due to much-documented Chinese dumping; at the same time the price of iron ore fell by 60%, which is hugely significant given that Port Talbot’s annual spend on raw materials is $1 billion.

A core aim in creating a sustainable industry, therefore, is to build resilience to fluctuations. The report clearly states that it would be logical to use a period in which conditions are favourable, like now, to make the necessary technological innovations needed to make the sector more resilient. The report makes the case that Port Talbot could evolve into a leading-edge, zero-carbon steelmaker with carbon-positive products that utilise locally generated by-products as a chemical and raw materials feedstock. It also argues that Port Talbot would have a viable future once in the hands of an owner with a long-term vision that will commit to and invest in transformational change.

Tata’s ability to deliver that much needed transformational change has arguably been hindered by its decision to vastly reduce research and development investment in its UK plants and to centralise activity at Ijmuiden in Holland. That brings me to the current state of play in Port Talbot, where Tata is in advanced discussions with ThyssenKrupp about a merger of their European operations. If the Minister takes one thing from today, let him be in no doubt that the proposed merger is a real threat to the future of Port Talbot. As the Swansea University report states:

“TKS believe that capacity reduction is necessary in Europe, and Port Talbot could become a convenient sacrifice for them.”

Those are not new concerns and have previously been expressed by others and by me in this place. Unite the union made the point strongly in evidence to the National Assembly only a few weeks ago.

My constituency colleague in the National Assembly and predecessor in this place, Adam Price AM, has argued on behalf of my party that the UK Government should intervene if the proposed merger goes ahead, unless there are specific guarantees about the long-term future of Port Talbot. His reasoning is perfectly valid when considering the record of ThyssenKrupp. In August 2016 Reuters reported that Andreas Goss, chief executive of ThyssenKrupp Steel Europe, had announced a new aggressive cost-cutting plan for its operations based on plant closures. It is worrying that the voice of the UK Government in Wales, the Secretary of State for Wales, is on record as saying that the proposed merger is “encouraging”.

My last point is that there is an alternative option on the table that seems to be far more encouraging in terms of achieving the long-term sustainable future we all desire. The recent news that two former rivals, Excalibur Steel and Liberty Steel, have joined forces is welcome. Significantly, the bid has Welsh Government support. This rival bid would lead to the creation of a new domestic company, probably the largest Welsh company in terms of turnover.

Liberty, of course, made its name in taking over steel operations in the UK and converting them by installing furnaces capable of recycling scrap steel. The process
obviously helps to remove fluctuations from the business model, helping to create a more sustainable business. The Swansea University report indicates that 60% of steel in the United States is now produced from scrap steel by re-melting it in electric arc furnaces. The Excalibur-Liberty deal therefore offers the exciting prospect of green steel and primary steel being produced side by side, thereby helping to meet the transformative challenge set by the Swansea University report.

Tom Blenkinsop: Every option has to be considered in terms of Port Talbot’s future. I remember talking in a debate about whether Tata was going to retain Port Talbot, as we foresaw that changes in prices of strip and the potential profit from Port Talbot. I reiterate that Liberty is a good company that has come in, but without the production of primary virgin steel, there is no scrap steel to recycle. My concerns are about any mill rolling slab or rebar, where that steel is coming from. That goes back to the questions about Chinese imports. We need guarantees on the primary source of slab, rebar and billet.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention. I was endeavouring to make the point that the Liberty-Excalibur deal potentially offers a future in which green steel, as it is called, and primary steel are produced side by side in the two blast furnaces at Port Talbot. Keeping those two blast furnaces open is vital for the viability of Port Talbot. He is completely correct.

I have a simple message for the Minister: this could be a huge success story for Wales and the UK as a whole. My last ask today is for him to agree at least to be a huge success story for Wales and the UK as a whole. My last ask today is for him to agree at least to be a huge success story for Wales and the UK as a whole.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call Anna Turley. We have all been waiting for her speech.

2.45 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

I welcome the new Minister to his place and thank him for the accessible way in which he has already met me to discuss the former SSI Steel Industries site and the future for Teesside. I also welcome the shadow Minister to her place. She represents a steel town, and we think of her husband with great fondness—he was in this place for far too short a time, but he fought hard for the steel industry in his time here.

It will be no surprise to Members here or those watching at home that I find it painful to speak in another debate on steel and to have to continue fighting for an industry that, although fundamental to the British economy, was ripped out of my constituency last year like a heart from a body. The people of Teesside remain angry and disillusioned, and rightly so. They are the ones battling to deal with the aftermath of the Government’s failure to protect Teesside’s steel industry last year. Many are still seeking work, many have had pay and conditions slashed in new jobs and many have had to move away from their home and some may never work again, but they are all resolute, determined, made of steel. They are trying to look forward, so I owe it to them to try to look forward in this debate and to keep working for the industrial and manufacturing future not only of Redcar and Teesside but of our country.

Before I do that, I also owe it to them to raise again questions to which we have never had answers and injustices that have never been acknowledged. Why were the Government not willing to take a stake in SSI or to lend it the requested £100 million to restructure and save the plant, yet willing to take a 25% stake in Tata to save Port Talbot earlier this year at the time of the Welsh elections? Why would the Government not step in to mothball the blast furnace to allow it to be relit when market conditions picked up, as they already have? Why were offers from local companies to produce foundry coke, which could have kept the ovens alive and paid for a mothballing, never accepted?

I ask all that now not just to look back. If the Minister wants to tell us to move on and get over it, I am afraid that we cannot. I look about me now at the economic picture for the global steel market and the conditions in the UK and I could weep. The SSI Redcar plant was the one with the greatest export activity in the country, so the current drop in the pound had the greatest potential to boost our exports. It may have been able to turn around the picture at the most efficient site in the country, which before Christmas 2014 was in the black.

Industry experts tell me the value of SSI’s exports to our balance of trade could now have been £1 billion, with those exports principally heading to the far east—in other words, outside the EU. I see that international expectation in the industry is that the price of steel will continue to increase. I see a new runway being commissioned for Heathrow that needs 370,000 tonnes of steel—the same as building 16 Wembley stadiums—and a company there that wants to buy British. I see cutting-edge new developments in steel in this country—two thirds of UK steel products were not even invented 15 years ago.

SSI lacked the reserves to keep the plant alive through the crisis. If only it had been supported, it would now be exporting extremely successfully. Surely if we believe in an active, interventionist Government who support this country’s industry and exports, we are an example of where they should have stepped in.

Tom Blenkinsop: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for the Redcar site, which I know well. She commands great loyalty in the town from many people and I respect her for how she has played the grim hand that she was dealt as soon as she was elected. Does she agree that the sad irony of the SSI site—the old Teesside Cast Products site—is that it was the second most efficient plant in the European Union after Dunkirk?

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is right. The SSI site was not only efficient but had a fantastic workforce. An enormous amount of money was put in to bring it up to such standards. The site had everything that could have seen it playing a leading role in the steel industry. It is a tragedy that the site could not be supported to weather a few months of difficulty so that it could thrive in the future.

The site now stands looking over the town, cold and rusting, with its future tied up in faraway wrangles between an official receiver and faceless banks in south-east Asia that show no signs of progressing. I would be
[Anna Turley]
delighted if the Minister had anything—anything at all—to share with us about what steps the Government are taking to wrestle the site out of the hands of the Thai banks, so that the people and businesses of Teesside can start to rebuild, invest, regenerate and bring much-needed jobs to our area.

I believe that the future for steel on Teesside did not disappear entirely with SSI. Potential inward investors recognise Teesside as the preferred location for UK investment, with its unique availability of infrastructure, supply chains, innovation support and skilled workforce, and its transport benefits through its geographical location and existing assets. Our British steel beam mill is doing fantastic work and has a great workforce. If the Government are concerned about the future of the UK steel industry, they need still to be concerned about Teesside. I have met serious potential investors who are looking closely at it, but we need the former SSI site to be liberated. Although I have come here to bat for the wider steel industry in this country and to fight for the jobs and livelihoods of steelworkers around the country, I do so on behalf of Teesside, with an anger that cannot be repressed and a determination to achieve some form of future for steel in our area.

I turn now to some broader issues. The June referendum result has huge implications for every part of our economy, and businesses from all sectors will be seeking favourable terms in the Brexit negotiations. Last week’s Nissan announcement was fantastic news for the automotive industry, and I congratulate every single man and woman at the plant and in the supply chain who sent out the message to the world that the north-east is the best place to come invest and build the cutting-edge cars of the future. We have a fantastic workforce, terrific businesses in the supply chain and world-beating research and development.

It is important that Brexit does not become a game of who can shout the loudest. Our approach to an industrial strategy as we leave the EU must benefit everyone. My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) is absolutely right and businesses from all sectors will be seeking favourable terms in the Brexit negotiations. Last week’s Nissan announcement was fantastic news for the automotive industry, and I congratulate every single man and woman at the plant and in the supply chain who sent out the message to the world that the north-east is the best place to come invest and build the cutting-edge cars of the future. We have a fantastic workforce, terrific businesses in the supply chain and world-beating research and development.

I also want to mention the importance of innovation to the future of the UK steel industry. Innovation is core to our domestic industry’s success. Such is the impact of British inventiveness that two thirds of UK steel produced here is in forms not invented 20 years ago. That is why I was appalled to learn earlier this year that officials at Innovate UK judged support for materials and metals not to be a priority for Britain. The implications of Tata’s announcement in March revealed the short-sightedness of that approach, so it is reassuring that the Government have overruled that decision. I would love it if the Minister agreed in this debate to the overwhelming evidence for a materials and metals catapult.

We fought to secure this debate to ensure that tackling the risks to the future of steel remains a Government priority. Many of the industry’s asks remain unanswered. The primary importance of the Brexit negotiations cannot mean that other issues fall by the wayside. Many industry proposals to redress the huge imbalance in electricity costs for UK steel compared with our competitors have so far not been carried forward by the Government, and the delay has cost the sector an estimated £20 million since June. The Government have also not yet accepted the request for plant and machinery to be excluded from business rate calculations, meaning that French and German steelmakers continue to pay up to 10 times less in rates than their UK counterparts. I sincerely hope that the Government are considering that ahead of the autumn statement.

I have mentioned Heathrow’s important commitment to use British steel in the recently approved airport expansion. The same support for local materials must be present in other major construction and infrastructure projects, including High Speed 2 and 3, the new fleet of nuclear submarines and Hinkley Point. More than two thirds of UK steel exports went to the European Union in 2015. It is crucial that freedom to trade in the single market is maintained.

Steel is also a crucial foundation industry, underpinning the manufacturing sector as a whole, which itself relies on single market access for both the export of completed goods and the import of parts and raw materials. The assurances given to Nissan were positive for the steel industry, particularly as they are the biggest automotive customer of UK steel. However, the automotive sector has a large supply chain, and those companies need the same assurances that they will not be hit by tariffs when we have left the EU. It cannot be the case that the biggest companies who shout the loudest secure special protection.

On Teesside, every single one of our boroughs voted by more than 60% for Brexit. I spoke to lots of people during the referendum campaign who were motivated to vote leave by anger at the loss of our steelworks and the idea, wrongly pushed by the leave campaign, that inaction in Europe was to blame. They want the Government to be more active in their support for the industry and to challenge unfair trading practices by China. When forming post-Brexit trade policies, the UK must implement robust anti-dumping measures to stop the flood of subsidised steel that has devastated the industry in the UK, not push the hands-off attitude suggested by one leading Brexit Minister, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland exposed.

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If we are to retain our lead, public support needs to reflect the research requirements of Britain’s increasingly fragmented industry and the principles of relentless continuous innovation by making long-term commitments advocated by UK steel experts, rather than Whitehall. I recommend to the Minister the work of the Materials Processing Institute in my constituency, which was established in 1944 to provide research to a then-fragmented industry similar to the one emerging again now.

The institute is Europe’s go-to steel and materials research expert, as my hon. Friend said, welcoming delegations from Germany, Sweden, China and elsewhere this summer to advise them on how to future-proof their domestic steel industries, which are wrestling with many of the same issues as ours. Just this week, the institute was approached by one of the world’s largest steel companies overseas to become its preferred research partner.
Its proposals for long-term support to commercialise innovation have the support of Tata Steels Speciality Steels, British Steel, Celsi Steel, Liberty Steel, Albian Steel, Acenta Steel, the British Stainless Steel Association and UK Steel. I would be delighted to welcome the Minister to discuss the matter further and see the institute’s world-class facilities for himself.

Bridging all these issues is the need for a long-term industrial strategy that supports British industry and manufacturing to be competitive in the global market by creating an environment for investment, innovation and, ultimately, the creation of more highly skilled and well paid jobs. The assurances given to Nissan and the proposal for a 25% Government stake in Tata UK steel assets are two examples of a more interventionist Government prepared to support British industry, which is good to see. It is a marked improvement on their complacency and inaction during the SSI crisis in Redcar; this must be the start of a more proactive approach to industry. UK steel is still in crisis, but with the right help, its future both nationally and on Teesside can be secured.


2.57 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Davies. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) for securing this debate, and for their contributions. I welcome the Minister and shadow Minister to their places.

A year on from the closure of Redcar, our steel industry is still in crisis. Make no mistake: we are still staring into the abyss. My constituency is built around the town of Port Talbot, which is living under a cloud. We are a steel town. The steelworks is the blazing heart of our economy, our community and our lives, and we do not know whether it has a long-term future. Our steel industry and the communities built around it face a perfect storm: a long-term declining British manufacturing base; an economy facing fundamental challenges, particularly in light of the referendum; and a Government who are quick with excuses but glacial when it comes to solutions or strategy.

That perfect storm comes together to create an uncertainty with a real, lived effect. It is not only hitting the order book—running down the short-term prospects of our industry, without which there can be no long term—but affecting people’s lives. I have constituents who cannot get mortgages or loans, because there is no guarantee that they will have a job in six months; constituents who do not know whether they will be able to help their kids through university or college; constituents who, simply put, do not know whether they and our town of Port Talbot have a future.

That existential uncertainty has been dragging on for more than two months, unsure whether theirs would be the jobs that went. Then, about a month later, came the potentially devastating news that Tata wanted to sell. From a fire sale we got the slow burn, which somehow morphed into the joint venture in July. Today we are no clearer.

We are told that the joint venture is still the option, but what that means is not clear. What does it mean for primary steelmaking, investment and jobs? Is Tata’s British arm even part of the joint venture plans? Apparently not, unless there is a resolution on pensions. But any further delay has a real impact, because there are very practical decisions that have to be made now if the industry is to continue, such as relining the second blast furnace at Port Talbot, without which there is no sustainable future for primary steelmaking in this country.

The Government, along with both companies, must set out clearly what the joint venture really means and must give us the cast-iron guarantees that Roy Rickhuss of the union Community called for just this week on jobs, investment and the long-term future of Port Talbot and the rest of the business. Although we do not know the reality, our fear is that this joint venture is little more than a smokescreen for cutting Tata Steel UK loose to consolidate the business on the continent. ThyssenKrupp has never shown much real or active interest in Tata’s UK operations; we know that the joint venture is right at the bottom of its priority list, beneath its internal restructuring, domestic jobs guarantee and ongoing negotiations with the German union IG Metall. When that is added to Tata’s complex internal dynamics, which we saw in the changes in Mumbai, the result is a sword of Damocles, forged by an inept Government with dumped Chinese steel, hanging over the heads of people in Port Talbot.

[Mr Clive Bets in the Chair]

The situation is even more precarious given the vote to leave the European Union. Brexit poses real challenges for our industry. More than half of our exports go to the continent, so it is essential that the Government act to protect the steel industry throughout the Brexit process and negotiations. First, they must ensure continued access to the single market and continued membership of the customs union. Those matters because they will allow us to avoid tariffs that would devastate the industry and because they strengthen our hand in fighting Chinese dumping. The Minister should confirm today that his Government will strain every sinew to ensure unfeathered tariff-free single market access for British steel and the tariff protections that come from standing with a market of half a billion consumers. Secondly, they must act to protect the steel supply chain. Around half the steel used by UK carmakers comes from Tata and Port Talbot; the automotive and steel industries are inextricably bound together, and each needs the other to stay in the UK in order to be successful. Last week’s news about Nissan was welcome, but the Government must commit to offering the same terms to other automotive producers such as GM, Toyota, Ford and JLR to ensure that they remain in Britain.

Those are just two of the actions that the Government must take to ensure the future of the steel industry. However, it is the Government themselves who are the greatest cause of uncertainty for our communities. For years, we have seen an approach characterised by indifference and incompetence, and now we can throw in complacency. The Government act as if the weakness
of the pound is a knight in shining armour, riding to the rescue of the steel industry, but it is really a Trojan horse attacking our industry from within. In the short term, the 15% drop in the value of the pound has helped UK steel exports, but come the new year the penny will soon drop. The cost of the raw materials that we have to import—coke, coal, iron ore—and of energy will shoot up. Those costs will have a huge impact on the bottom line, as they already do for those who process scrap, who buy month to month or week to week. As Bimlendra Jha put it two weeks ago, “you can’t make a business profitable on currency, we have to make it profitable on a structural basis.”

The reality is that the industry does not see the structural problems being fixed, because we have a Government who can talk a good game but who are sitting on their hands. It is straightforward to change that, but the Government must take concrete action in a number of areas. First, will they guarantee that the co-investment and soft loans offered last April still stand? Secondly, 12 months on from Redcar, will they finally make progress on the five asks? Thirdly, will they protect the steel industry from further Chinese dumping by voting against market economy status for China? This month, the European Commission will decide its position on this question, ahead of the December vote at the World Trade Organisation. Let us be clear: a China with market economy status is a China that can and will keep dumping with impunity. Will the Minister let us know how the UK Commissioner will be mandated on MES? Will the Commissioner vote in accordance with the European Parliament and the clear will of this House?

The autumn statement gives the Government other opportunities to give steel a fighting chance by removing plant and machinery from the calculation of business rates in a way that also compensates local authorities and, crucially, by acting on energy prices. I have no doubt that the Minister will point to the compensation package and talk about energy efficiency. That is fine, but it should be the icing on the cake. We need the actual cake first. Our prices are £17 per megawatt-hour higher than Germany’s. That is 40% to 45% more expensive, and it is killing the competitiveness of our industry. We cannot save 45% through energy efficiency alone.

The Government are motivated by tactics, not strategy. They are more interested in producing a political fig leaf to keep us quiet than in solving the problem—but we will not be silent, the industry and the workforce will not be silent and our communities will not be silent. We know that our futures depend on solving this problem and we know that the Government can and must act better.

“We have also heard about how business rates, energy costs and procurement requirements undermine the competitiveness of the sector. The uncertainty about the ownership of much of the British steel industry and the increasing fragmentation of the sector remain important issues, not to mention the impact of Brexit and the lack of clarity about what our trading relationship with the rest of the European Union will be. However, my speech today will focus on how the steel industry can have a sustainable and prosperous future in the long term. I am not downgrading, by any stretch of the imagination, the importance of the short term or how the industry remains in crisis mode, but we need to think about how steel needs to make an important and growing contribution to our manufacturing sector in the decades to come.

Several hon. Members have mentioned changes in the Tata group. The sacking of Cyrus Mistry as chairman in the past ten days obviously raises greater uncertainty, which is never a positive for business, but it could lead to a change in strategy that could boost and safeguard Tata Steel’s operations in the UK. Last week, the Financial Times reported “a person with direct knowledge of Tata’s plans” as “saying that…Port Talbot…was ‘virtually safe’ following Mr Mistry’s ousting, and that the company would invest ‘whatever it takes to make it efficient’.”

Those words are very welcome, but where do they leave the steel industry or Tata Steel’s footprint in our country? What about other parts of Tata Steel, such as the speciality products and the pipe mills in Hartlepool?
I am not expecting the Minister to provide a running commentary—a fashionable phrase at the moment—on the changes at the top, but does he accept that since putting the assets up for sale earlier this year, important parts of our steel industry remain in a state of limbo? That is bound to have an adverse effect on the recruitment and retention of skilled workers, whose skills are essential to the ongoing competitiveness of our steel industry. It will also have an impact on suppliers and customers of steel products, who may be concerned about getting paid and having the orders delivered.

With this additional uncertainty on top of global pressures, will the Minister—who I very much welcome to his place—take this opportunity to set out the discussions he has had with Tata, and can he say whether further reassurances and commitments about ongoing operations have been made?

Tom Blenkinsop: In addition to the removal of Cyrus Mistry and the return of Ratan Tata to the board, there is the issue of ThyssenKrupp’s sale of assets in Brazil. Its removal from the South American economy is happening at the same time as Tata’s change at the top. Will that have any effect and will the Government investigate that in conversations during the trade visit to India by the Prime Minister next week?

Mr Wright: My hon. Friend makes an important point. He has also mentioned the importance of a proper industrial strategy. Everybody who has contributed to this afternoon’s debate has mentioned that, so what are the Government doing to put in place a proper industrial strategy—this is very important to us on the Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—and how does the steel industry fit in with such a strategy? How will the Minister’s departmental responsibilities help the steel industry? Joining business, energy and industrial strategy into one Department provides a better degree of co-ordination and should help sectors such as steel by providing consistency and the co-ordination of policy, but how will that work in practice?

Just over a year ago, on 15 October 2015, a steel summit was held. Three working groups, on competitiveness and productivity, international comparisons, and public procurement, were set up to address some of the challenges facing the industry. What is the current status of those groups? Did they survive the new Government and the change in the business Department? What are the findings arising from the work and how are they being incorporated into a proper industrial strategy? The universally well respected Community union, which has the long-term interests of the steel industry at its very heart and its core, and which is not prone to hysteria or exaggerated pronouncements, recently stated:

“After an initial flurry of activity and plenty of rhetoric we are becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of urgency demonstrated by the UK government. To date very little meaningful support has actually been delivered—certainly we have not seen the game-changing intervention our industry desperately needs.”

That is a crucial quotation from an important stakeholder in our steel industry. Where is that meaningful support? Given the policy co-ordination under one departmental roof, how will Ministers take forward action on the energy costs that undermine the competitiveness of our industry? Crucially—this has been mentioned several times—will Ministers resolve to address the concerns raised about the business rates that dis-incentivise manufacturers, not just steel manufacturers, from investing in more efficient plant and machinery by raising what is essentially a tax bill?

Procurement is also a major way in which a co-ordinated industrial strategy can provide meaningful support for the steel industry. We have heard already about the hulls of the Trident submarines being built with French steel. That is immensely disappointing and really does not show a joined-up, co-ordinated Whitehall approach to industrial strategy. What lessons are being learnt from this to ensure that the British industry is able to address the needs of the customer, in this case the Ministry of Defence, and that local steel content can be increased?

On commercial operations, many hon. Members have quite rightly mentioned last week’s welcome decision that Nissan is to build the new Qashqai and bring the manufacture of the X-Trail to the factory in Sunderland. That should also provide more opportunities for local British-based steel producers.

We found in our Select Committee inquiry last year that Nissan, one of the most productive car plants anywhere in Europe, used British-made steel for three quarters of the steel content needed for the Qashqai. Vauxhall buys 50% of the steel it needs for production of the Astra at its factory in Ellesmere Port from Port Talbot. Given the strength of the UK automotive industry, what active steps are the Government taking to ensure that more of that successful sector’s requirements in metals are being provided in a competitive manner by British-based firms?

The UK automotive industry currently consumes about 17% of British manufactured steel. There is surely scope for a successful and winning automotive sector to take more of a growing pie. How are the Government identifying commercial opportunities for British steel? How are they encouraging and incentivising investment in technology and innovation and in the higher quality, higher value steel required in the automotive and aerospace industries? I hope the Minister will respond directly. The Materials Processing Institute can provide the means by which technology, innovation and support can be given to producers to make sure they can move up the value chain. That is vital.

This is not only about automobiles; this week is offshore wind week. Offshore wind currently generates about 5% of the UK’s electricity needs. This will double to a tenth of electricity generation in five years. Firms in my constituency such as JDR Cables are winning great big orders in this field. The steel content for offshore wind is immense, but it is often imported from France and the Netherlands. How will we ensure that British-based and British-made steel provides steel content for the offshore wind industry? Are the Government working in the proactive and collaborative way needed in the modern industrial age to ensure that as much of the value in the offshore wind supply chain—more than £18 billion of new projects in the pipeline in the next five years—is captured by domestic content?

The steel industry remains a vital and essential part of our manufacturing base. It cannot and must not be viewed by anybody as a sunset industry. I hope we will see the implementation of a proper industrial strategy to ensure that the opportunities arising in the next few years are captured as much as possible by our British steel industry and that the barriers preventing a proper level playing field are addressed and resolved. That is
possible only through active work by the Government, in close collaboration with the industry. With the greatest of respect, that work seems to have gone off the boil in recent months, at a time when we need it more than ever to sustain the long-term viability and prosperity of the British-based steel industry. I hope the Minister will use the opportunity today to state that the Government recognise the importance of the steel industry and will act accordingly, not only to save steel but to make sure it has a proper and fitting future in our manufacturing sector.

3.17 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am delighted to follow the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), who put forward such a comprehensive case, after so many excellent contributions already to this debate. I want to begin by paying tribute to everyone working in our steel industry and its supply chain. They make a massive contribution to the UK economy and to communities such as mine in Scunthorpe, where I live.

In September 2015, when I asked the then Prime Minister to call a steel summit, many on the Government Benches were sceptical of the need. By the time the summit took place in Rotherham, however, it was crystal clear even to them that the steel industry was in crisis. Now, just over a year on from the summit and the collapse of SSI on Teesside, a further 6,000 jobs have already been lost from the industry. There remains, therefore, a pressing need for Government action.

The long products business, centred on Scunthorpe, was taken over by Greybull Capital and relaunched as British Steel in June 2016. It is to the enormous credit of the workforce and management that the business is operating at a surplus. The leadership shown by Community, Unite and the other trade unions, alongside the management team, has been crucial to that success, but they would say with one voice that there is still much to do to deliver the sustainable future that everyone working in our steel industry and its supply chain wants to see. I welcome the sense of greater certainty for Scunthorpe expressed by the hon. Member for Corby (Mr Wright). This is just another chapter and we need support from the Government. We do not need the Government to assume that everything is okay now.

The Government have a crucial role in helping to deliver. They can set the climate and the context for delivering the level playing field that our steel industry needs to prosper. There is a real, palpable concern that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool said, the Government’s eye is once again off the steel ball as it grapples with Brexit and other issues. As a result of the immense popular pressure exerted by steel unions, steelmakers and MPs for steelmaking constituencies, the Government set up several working groups on the key issues of concern after the summit in Rotherham, but there is yet to be any real traction as an outcome of that work. There is now a Department with “industrial strategy” in its name, and we have yet to see whether that is anything more than a welcome strapline. The Government now manage to talk the talk, but we still do not know whether they will walk the walk, as we want them to.

Procurement is a case in point. One of the most tangible outcomes of the Government’s work in the past year was the new procurement guidelines that ensure that social and economic factors can be taken into account in steel procurement. However, the Government appear to have fallen at the first hurdle. The Defence Secretary, a former steel Minister, was happy to cut the first steel, marking the start of the work on Trident submarines, the only problem being that it was French steel. That is not exactly the vote of confidence in UK steelmakers that we all want. When I asked the Prime Minister in one of her first outings at the Dispatch Box whether UK steel would be used in Trident’s successor submarines, she said that

“where British steel is good value, we would want it to be used.”—[Official Report, 18 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 566.]

I tell the Prime Minister, the House, and the public that British steel is good value. It is the best value.

It has taken a lot of parliamentary questions to try to establish why UK steel was not used for the hulls. Answers suggest that there was not a viable UK bid, without giving any inkling of what “viable” might look like. It also looks as though the new procurement guidelines were not applied, although the Government say that they would be in future. I welcome the written answer in which the Minister said that, and wish him the best of luck in his role.

In October 2015, Scunthorpe’s plate mill was mothballed and facilities in Scotland were closed. Confidence about procurement lines in relation to successor submarines might have led to a different outcome. That is a reminder, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) said earlier, of the need to ensure that the capacity to make the right sort of steel is available in the UK when it is required for large infrastructure projects. That demands a decent timeline of planning and certainty, which we have clearly not had in recent years. The steel sector Catapult is a potential benefit to give us extra traction in that area. I hope the Government will push forward with it and answer the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) in her powerful contribution.

The long-awaited announcement about Heathrow was accompanied by a clear statement from Heathrow that it intends to use UK steel in the construction of additional airport capacity. That is the sort of clear, forward-thinking decision making that is in the interests of everyone. It is leadership in action and we want more of that. That is why I welcome the Scunthorpe Telegraph campaign for High Speed 2 to be built with UK, preferably British, steel. The Scunthorpe Telegraph is adding its campaigning voice to mine and those of the Community union and others who have been making these arguments for some time. It is a very welcome move by a strong, campaigning local newspaper. HS2 is a massive public infrastructure project, forecast to require 2 million tonnes of steel, and we know that we have the expertise and the capacity to manufacture the necessary rail, long products and steel plate in British Steel, centred on Scunthorpe.

To be fair about rail procurement, we have the best example of best practice in the way that Network Rail has developed and delivered its procurement practices over the years, but that should not be an exception. It should be a template for others to learn from and aspire to. We also have the capacity to produce the steel needed for North sea wind farms being built as part of
the massive Hornsea project. My area is rightly proud of the opportunity that the Humber, as the energy estuary, offers for development and jobs locally. It would be a missed opportunity if Dong were to ship in steel from elsewhere to build that crucial infrastructure. However, I fear that it may, like BAE Systems, dodge under the bar. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

While we consider infrastructure projects, let us not forget that if we develop shale gas extensively in the UK, we should have the procurement policies and practices to ensure that high levels of UK steel content are used. The same arguments apply as for wind and all other forms of energy. Local procurement is also important, which is why it is so positive that a large number of councils—including, to its credit, North Lincolnshire Council—have made a commitment to sustainable steel. The procurement guidelines should be followed, and companies such as BAE Systems and Dong should not be able to dodge under the bar. I hope that the Minister will respond to that point.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on obtaining the debate. I welcome the Minister to his place, and want to compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) on his great speech. His constituency is adjacent to mine, and I assure the House that he and I are working together for the people who live in our constituencies and work at Tata Steel.

To say it has been a difficult year for the steelworkers of Neath and Port Talbot would be an understatement. The challenge of competing in a global market, the absence of anti-dumping tariffs, the lifting of the lesser duty rate and Brexit all conspire to create a world of uncertainty and fear. Of the 1,050 jobs lost in the UK steel industry since the year began, 750 of them have been lost from Port Talbot. That was on top of the 400 jobs lost in 2014.

Steel and the steel industry are essential to Wales and its economy, and that is particularly the case for my constituency and the people of Neath. The notion that it does not have a future is simply unthinkable. There are 575 businesses making up the steel industry, employing 31,000 people across the UK. More than 50% of those jobs are based in Yorkshire and Humberside or in Wales. However, between 1997 and 2014, iron production in Wales fell by 3,210 kilotonnes—or by more than 50%. Steel production has fallen by 25% during the past 40 years. Nevertheless, last year was a record-breaking one for Tata Port Talbot, with the plant producing 3.2 million tonnes of steel.

Decline and uncertainty are things that our steelworkers have had to deal with for many years and, being as robust as the steel that they make, they have bounced back every time, working through it all to keep our country supplied with the finest steel in the world. However, the uncertainty has taken on a new form in the shape of Brexit. The European Union accounts for more than 40% of direct British steel sales—and more, when the exports of British manufacturers are considered. Post-Brexit tariffs on British steel or an elongated trade agreement might signal the death knell of an industry already fighting to compete on a level global playing field.

I remind Members that the forerunner of the European Union, the European Coal and Steel Community, was set up not only to cement peace but to help economic growth by pooling resources and preventing unnecessary competition. Its architects would be astonished at the current state of affairs and the UK Government’s inability to work with our European partners to prevent unnecessary competition from across the world. The latest industrial revolution taking place in China may well be the biggest of all. In 2015, the Chinese produced 804 million tonnes of steel, or 50% of the total worldwide output. The UK produced 11 million tonnes during the same year. It is a matter of not whether there will be implications for the UK steel industry as a result of Brexit but what their extent will be. If the Government do not do all they can, exports will be hit hard, output will be slashed, jobs will be lost and communities will be forsaken.

The picture painted may be bleak compared with a golden past, but I firmly believe that steel in Wales and the UK has a strong future. A future for any industry is all about adapting to change and turning threats into opportunities. The future of the steel industry is clearly about innovation, and technological innovation is in its business model. Beyond the heavy end of steel production that we all know so well, we also have organisations that innovate and produce high-tech products that are changing the way we view steel.
it has received from the EU—without which it probably would not exist—but because of the potential loss of a market in which it could promote and sell its products. It is that sort of high-level innovation that needs to be harnessed and nurtured if we want to see a future for our steel industry.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is making an excellent and comprehensive speech. It is important to underline the fact that the quality of the steel is possible only through primary steelmaking. It must be produced on the basis of a process that starts right up the chain with a blast furnace, not with an electric arc furnace. If we are going to take steel into the 21st century and as high up the value chain as we can, we must retain primary steelmaking in this country.

Christina Rees: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point.

An innovative product is only one part of the story; we must also use the current crisis as an opportunity to change the way we do business so that a structure can be established to protect the steel industry for many years to come. What about a management-workforce buy-out at Tata Port Talbot, and perhaps elsewhere? It could be set up in the shape of a co-operative and take advantage of the benefits of a tripartite model of delivery that would also involve investment from the public and private sectors. There are many such examples from across Wales and the UK, including Tower Colliery, John Lewis, Welsh Water and hundreds of credit unions. Welsh Water’s slogan is “For Wales, not for profit”; we could apply the same principle to our other key industries, which for Wales means steel.

Co-operation, consensus and community are the founding principles of not only co-operatives but the Labour party. It is on those shared values that figures from across the Labour movement have led the development of organisations that have anchored communities during difficult times and helped to create a buffer against global economic shifts. Let us consider the possibility of doing the same in communities such as Neath, Port Talbot and elsewhere. I urge the Government to play their part in this endeavour.

3.34 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing this debate, and for their sterling efforts on behalf of the all-party group on steel and metal related industries, which is out today in some force.

Last week, the Community union, which does an absolutely fantastic job for its members, quite rightly praised steelworkers in a statement, saying:

“We believe the workforce should be commended, in the strongest terms, for continuing to deliver for Tata throughout this exceptionally difficult period and indeed restoring previously loss making parts of the business to profitability”.

I start with that quote because it is right that we always acknowledge what a difficult time this is personally for those who work in our steel industry. We must never underestimate the effect the continued uncertainty is having on steelworkers and their families. I know that from talking to those who work for Tata at Llanwern and at Newport Orb. A steelworker emailed me last week to say:

“We feel forgotten about and we have no news on the Government’s and Tata’s plan for the pension, no news on where we stand on the future on any proposed merger, no answer on the deficit etc. Things seem to have come to a standstill and there are no answers coming from Parliament or Tata”.

That very much echoes what my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) said at the start of his speech. Aberavon and Port Talbot’s fortunes are very much linked. I absolutely concur with what my hon. Friend said about that feeling of uncertainty and how difficult it is for people. Many steelworkers feel that their lives are on hold. I hope the Minister understands that and takes it away from the debate.

We have in this phase relentless debates, questions and statements about steel. Just yesterday there were two fantastic questions at Prime Minister’s questions from my hon. Friends the Members for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith). In response, the Prime Minister said:

“This Government have stood up for British-made steel, and we have taken a number of measures”.—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 880.]

She also said, “we recognise both the importance of steel and the importance of Tata in the United Kingdom.”—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 886.]

On the lack of clarity about Brexit, she said:

“I am very clear that what we want to achieve is the best possible deal”.—[Official Report, 2 November 2016; Vol. 616, c. 880.]

We appreciate those words, but we need more detail and more commitment from the Government, with stronger words and stronger action.

Workers in my constituency want to know that the Minister is fully engaging with the short-term urgency of the problems facing the Welsh steel industry. There are bits of good news, but the underlying problems have not gone away, as many other Members have said. We are still waiting for assurances from the Government about Port Talbot, which will affect Llanwern, and for any news on the joint venture between Tata’s strip products division and ThyssenKrupp, which could affect Orb in my constituency. If there is such news, what assurance can the Government give that commitments will be made on jobs, investment and the continuation of primary steelmaking at Port Talbot and across south Wales?

The Government lobbied against the EU imposing tariffs on the dumping of Chinese steel. The Prime Minister did not even put Chinese steel dumping on the agenda when she first met the Chinese Prime Minister. Electricity prices are still a huge issue in the UK, with a disparity of £1 million a week between the UK and Germany, which has an effect on competitiveness. As many Members have said, despite the procurement guidelines, French steel is still being imported for Trident renewal. I know we will all be watching as large infrastructure projects get the go-ahead. The Government cannot let up on ensuring that all major procurement projects—from rail to airports and tidal barrages, which will be important for places such as Newport if Swansea bay tidal lagoon goes ahead—use British steel.
As every one of my hon. Friends has said, the Nissan announcement is brilliant news, but where is the Brexit plan for the steel industry? So far, the Secretary of State for International Trade has said that Tradas has no plans to support the steel industry with trade defence instruments. When combined with the other uncertainties Brexit has caused, that is a major concern. Brexit has many other implications for the industry, so we want similar assurances to those given to Nissan.

In brighter news, the Welsh Government are thankfully doing all they can with the powers and levers available. I very much welcome the active work of Ken Skates, the Welsh Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, who through Business Wales is supporting the industry through Welsh public sector infrastructure and construction projects.

I appreciate that it is not all gloom and—I will make this point before someone intervenes on me to make it—I also appreciate the point about primary steelmaking. Liberty Steel now employs about 1,500 people, including in the steelworks in my constituency and the two Scottish steel plate mills, one of which I know opened recently in the constituency of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). Liberty Steel also has the SIMEC Uskmouth power plant and it is involved in the tidal lagoon initiatives, which were mentioned earlier and which are very important, not only for Swansea but, further on down the line, for places such as Newport.

Liberty Steel has a long-term, sustainable strategy of steelmaking in the UK and actively invests in steel power and the downstream industries. As we heard earlier, that is all built around a green steel vision, whereby Liberty Steel is working towards producing steel made from recycled scrap metal and powered by renewable power. That is an important addition to the traditional steelmaking industry.

Finally, I take this opportunity to invite the Minister to visit Newport East to see the site in my constituency and see at first hand the plans for Liberty.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): It is now time for the Front-Bench spokespersons; no more than 15 minutes each, so that there are a few minutes at the end of the debate for the mover of the motion to wind up.

3.40 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you very much for calling me to speak, Mr Betts, and I assure you that I will not keep you nearly as long as 15 minutes.

I speak today on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who unfortunately is unwell and so cannot be here. I represent the constituency of Livingston. While Livingston does not directly have any steel jobs, it is a traditional manufacturing constituency. Over the years while I was growing up, I saw closures of sites by companies such as Motorola and Bausch & Lomb, and the devastating impact that such closures can have on a local area, so first and foremost, I will say that my hon. Friend and I stand in solidarity with the constituencies across the UK that have been devastated by the closures of their local factories.

The quality of the debate today has been fantastic and the debate itself has been very consensual. Clearly, there will be differences of opinion on certain policy matters, but on issues such as this one we have to transcend politics and come together, to call for our vital steel industries to be protected.

Last year in Scotland, as is well known, the Tata Steel plants of Dalzell and Clydebridge faced huge uncertainty, as do many others across the UK today. The Scottish National party-led Scottish Government worked with the company, with local members of all political parties, with trade unions, with local government and with local communities, and they kept their promise of leaving no stone unturned though the work of that steel taskforce and through the work of Fergus Ewing, who was the Business Minister at the time and who has recently won an award for his work on this issue.

The steelworks of Clydebridge and Dalzell have now been bought by Liberty House and are coming back into production. They had been mothballed and I absolutely take on board the point that the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) made about his disappointment at the lack of foresight and strategy in not supporting the mothballing of a site so that it can be brought back into production later.

For the avoidance of doubt and in case anybody wants to raise this point, as it has been raised in other debates previously, in April this year, then Prime Minister David Cameron mistakenly claimed that there was zero Scottish steel in the new Forth road bridge. That was quickly corrected by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), who, as Members will know, is an assiduous pursuer of the facts, because steel from the Dalzell plate mill was used in the girders at either end of the bridge. My right hon. Friend further pointed out that the reason why there was no Scottish bidder for the main steel subcontract for the bridge was the closure of the Ravenscraig steel mill.

Tom Blenkinsop: The original contract let by the Scottish Government was with a Chinese company and a Catalanian company. The Catalanian company had to withdraw and it was actually Cleveland Bridge, in conjunction with Tata’s Dalzell plant, that stepped in to fill that gap. The original contract—as signed off by the Scottish Government—fell through and Cleveland Bridge, which is in Darlington, and the Dalzell plant stepped in to fill that gap. So Scottish steel was used—in fact, it was British steel, as it was slab from Scunthorpe.

Hannah Bardell: I will take that point on board, but the hon. Member will know that much of that steel was rolled and developed in Scotland. Nevertheless, I thank him for his clarification.

I was going on to say that one of the reasons that situation came about was the closure of the Ravenscraig steel mill by a previous Tory Government in 1992. I know that Labour Members—the predecessors of the Labour Members here today—fought hard alongside our party’s Members to save Ravenscraig. I pay tribute to all those Members who tried to save Ravenscraig.

That comment by the former Prime Minister reveals the lack of understanding about Scottish steel and indeed about steel across the UK, and the cavalier attitude with which such important communities about the industry. We cannot let that continue; there must be, as so many Members have said today, proper commitment from the Government.
I say that because the issues that we are discussing today are not limited to the steel industry but extend to British industry in general. Post-Brexit, the uncertainty and anxiety are greater than ever, because we have no idea what kind of deal many industries will get. We know what the car industry will get, although we do not have the detail of that deal. We do not know whether other deals will be made sector by sector, or area by area. Before the Brexit vote, we knew that the international demand for steel was falling: the OECD had said that excess global capacity was expected to widen to 645 million tonnes. Now, post-referendum, the pound is falling, so UK steel will be cheaper for foreign buyers, but as other Members have said, the cost of the imported raw materials will be higher in the long-term, which will make things very difficult.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) on securing this debate and on the passion with which he spoke. He highlighted the contrast between the approach and guarantees given to Nissan and the automotive industry with the support for the steel industry. That is ironic, given that the World Steel Association has said that on average 900 kg of steel is used per vehicle. So we will be making cars in Britain but importing the steel to make them and many parts of those cars. I hope that irony is not lost on the Government and that they take this issue very seriously.

Strong anti-dumping measures are critical. They were nearly secured with our EU partners. In our view, it is indefensible that the UK Government blocked EU attempts to regulate Chinese steel. The hon. Member for Corby spoke about the importance of the all-party group on steel and metal related industries and its collaboration with others. He made a plea to Tata for more information and said that the Government’s leadership would be key. Although he is a self-professed Brexiteer, he wants better leadership. However, given that it was the UK that blocked the EU attempts to regulate Chinese steel, I am not sure how he thinks the UK will do a better job. He was not able to answer that question earlier; perhaps the Minister will be able to answer it. We are all interested to know how the UK industry will fare if the UK ends up operating under World Trade Organisation rules, as the Secretary of State for International Trade has said. To be fair, the hon. Member for Corby was encouraging his colleagues in the Government to be proactive in their industrial strategy and said they needed to champion steel.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Hillsborough spoke passionately about the speciality skills and products produced in her constituency and the importance of the Prime Minister’s visit to India next week in ensuring the future of speciality steel—

Angela Smith: I was the Member for Sheffield Hillsborough; I now represent Penistone and Stocksbridge. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), is now the MP who represents Hillsborough.

Hannah Bardell: My sincere apologies. My lack of parliamentary constituency knowledge has failed me there, so I sincerely apologise to the hon. Lady and I thank her for her intervention. I will be honest—on this occasion, Google has let me down.

The hon. Lady spoke about how a country without a steel industry could not call itself a major economy. We in Scotland are proud and glad to have secured steel and to call ourselves a major economy, but we worry for our neighbours and friends in other parts of the UK. I agreed with so much of what she said, particularly on renewables and single market access.

The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) gave us an insight into which team he is on; it is clear that he is backing the new “May Way” and not the old Cameron regime. He urged us to be positive about the future and mooted the merits of free trade and market access. He agreed that we should be tackling the issue of Chinese dumping as well.

The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards)—I hope I have got that right—talked about the future of steelmaking in Wales and about his party’s desire to remain in the single market, as well as the importance of the single market and the customs union. He also highlighted the short-term upturn in the steel industry and the report from Swansea University that said there are opportunities in the long term to strengthen factories such as Port Talbot, but swift strategic action was essential. I wish him well in getting either swiftness or strategy from the Government. He also spoke about the Liberty and Excalibur deal and the importance of giving it careful consideration.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) spoke extremely passionately about the SSI closure—it was a highly efficient and productive plant—and the devastating impact that has had on her constituency. I congratulate her on the work she has done. I agree that it is devastating that the plant could not be mothballed. I am at pains to know why that could not have been done. I cannot understand it. I hope the Minister has more than warm words for her and her constituents.

The hon. Lady’s colleague the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) spoke about the tragedy of Port Talbot and the cloud hanging over him and his constituency. Again, the message was clear: swift and decisive action is needed, particularly given that the cost of raw materials will rise once we leave the EU.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) spoke of his admiration for his colleagues and what they were doing every day. Other Members spoke about the personal impact the issue is having. It is so important that we send that message to people outside. Members are in their constituencies as much as they can be, but with so much business here, balancing things is a big challenge. I know from travelling up and down the country how difficult that can be. We may have many differences of opinion, but the hon. Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Neath (Christina Rees) and for Newport East (Jessica Morden) sent a clear message. They made passionate pleas to the Government.

The consensus and the message is that we need strategy, action, investment and access. Those things are not outside the grasp or ability of any Government. The Government need to act now to save jobs and an industry that is vital to constituencies and areas across the UK. Through that, the communities of Members here today can be protected.

3.51 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Betts. I begin by congratulating my
hon. Friends the Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing this vital debate. I also congratulate all my hon. Friends who have spoken. I welcome the new Minister to his place. The irony is not lost on me: I am a daughter of a steelworker addressing a Minister who has a family link with steelmaking. I think I heard that at the beginning of the debate.

The number of Members who have spoken today speaks volumes about the importance of the issue. It is a pleasure to be among this dedicated group who have been fighting for the future of the steel industry with such determination for many months and years. We must pay tribute to the all-party group. I am sure we are all awaiting the forthcoming report. I also thank the trade unions and their officials for their hard work representing their members and supporting them and the wider communities that rely on steel in incredibly uncertain times. Both they and the manufacturers have approached the situation constructively. I thank the Daily Mirror for its ongoing “Save Our Steel” campaign, which has done so much to keep the issue on the political agenda and to raise wider awareness of how crucial the steel industry is to the economy.

The last time Parliament debated the crisis in the steel industry was at the beginning of July, shortly after the EU referendum and David Cameron’s announcement that he would be standing down as Prime Minister. Members were grappling with the consequences of those things for the future of the steel industry. There were a lot of questions, but few solid answers.

Four months on, very little has changed. We have seen the chairman of Tata replaced by his predecessor, but the future of Tata steelworks across the country is no clearer than it was previously. Thanks to the drop in the pound’s value, a slight rise in steel prices globally and, not least, the dedication of our steelworks, there has been a slight improvement over the past few months. However, we must not let an uptick distract us from the fact that the industry is still in a deep existential crisis—it is hanging by a thread.

The industry has had plenty of warm words from both the old Prime Minister and the new, but so far there has been little in the way of practical policy. Although the new Prime Minister has spoken about strategically important industries needing Government support, steel manufacturers are crying out for the rhetoric to be matched by action. We have seen that Ministers are prepared to support industries in need—just look at their recent deal with Nissan. As much as we would all love to know what the deal entails, I appreciate that this may not be the debate in which to discuss it. Nevertheless, I am grateful to the Government for ensuring the continuing presence of Nissan in the UK, not least because the automotive sector is of critical importance to steel. It does, though, prompt the question: if Nissan and the automotive industry can be supported, why not steel?

With all the uncertainty hanging over the steel sector, workforce morale is understandably low. Workers are casting about for alternative careers, and once they have taken their expertise with them, they cannot be easily replaced. They need reassurance that their jobs and their industry have a viable future, and they need that reassurance now. Uncertainty also means a steady shrinking of customer confidence, and there is no surer way to undermine the steel industry than to allow its customers to think that it has no future.

Both the workforce and the manufacturers are united in calling for the Government to take a number of concrete steps. Members have highlighted those key asks this afternoon, and I want to reiterate them to the Minister and ask how his Department will respond to each of them.

The first issue is energy prices. The price of electricity in the UK for extra large users is the highest in the EU, to such an extent that it undermines our competitiveness. The difference means that UK steel manufacturers pay nearly £17 more per megawatt-hour than Germany—the next most expensive—costing the UK steel industry nearly £1 million every week. Industry has put forward a number of proposals to balance that disparity, such as a review of National Grid’s transmission charging regime and a review of the impact of the carbon price floor. However, the response from the new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has so far been silence. Now that business, industry and energy are all under one departmental roof, I shall be interested to hear what discussions the Minister has had with his colleagues on the matter.

Mr Bone: The hon. Lady is making a very interesting speech. I would like to know—this goes to the heart of some of the problems with energy costs—the Opposition’s view on what should be done on energy prices.

Gill Furniss: We have to look throughout Europe and find examples of best practice that we can adopt in this area of work, which is clearly important.

Secondly, there is the issue of business rates. By including plant and machinery in business rate calculations, we are not only at variance with but less competitive than France and Germany, where business rates are as much as 10 times less than ours. We are also creating a disincentive for manufacturers to increase productivity and are effectively taxing investment. Perhaps the best example is in Port Talbot, where Tata invested £185 million in a new blast furnace only to find £400,000 added to their business rates. Our current one-size-fits-all regime for business rates is a hangover from the days when manufacturing dominated our economy. That has not been the case for decades, and we need a tax regime that reflects that change.

Tom Pursglove: Does the hon. Lady agree that a balance has to be struck on taxes? Taking her back to the energy point, one of my concerns is that in the past, the right balance has perhaps not been struck between green taxes and levies and making sure that the needs of our energy-intensive industries are properly reflected in policy. What does she make of that? Is she concerned about the green taxes and levies?

Gill Furniss: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point, but a lot of work needs to be done in the green energy industries to start with, because we really are missing a bit of a home goal by suddenly putting them on the sidelines. I am sure we will pursue that.

Tom Blenkinsop: On green taxes, I remind the House that the Opposition voted against the unilateral introduction of the carbon price floor by the previous Chancellor of
the Exchequer. That was brought in without any conversation with the industry and without the EU’s prior knowledge. When the then Government attempted to reverse that, they were prevented from doing so by European legislation. My hon. Friend will also be aware that as well as opposing the CPF, we also put forward European legislation. My hon. Friend will also be aware to reverse that, they were prevented from doing so by prior knowledge. When the then Government attempted the Exchequer. That was brought in without any central role in our transition to a low carbon economy if we manage it correctly and it can continue to lead the world in terms of quality and innovation. Will the Minister reassure us that BEIS will put steel at the heart of its industrial strategy?

Steel is not a dying industry. It is not a relic of a bygone era. It may be a proud part of our industrial past, but it also has the potential to be a dynamic part of our economic future. Without it, we will not only have lost an industry—make no mistake—we will have lost our entire manufacturing base. No one is asking for special treatment; we are asking for a level playing field that will allow the industry to move forward with confidence. Four months on since we last debated this issue, the steel industry is still in crisis. I urge the Minister to show more energy than his predecessors and do what it takes to save our steel.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): If the Minister would just allow a few minutes at the end for the wind-up speech, that would be appreciated.

4.3 pm

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): I will certainly do that, Mr Betts. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and to welcome the new shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), to her place. It has been a really good debate. I know I am meant to say that, but I mean it. Anyone listening to or reading the debate whose livelihood depends directly or indirectly on this critically important sector will be in no doubt about the passion felt for the sector by their elected representatives, on both sides of the House, who have championed their interests, and none more so than the hon. Members for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) and for Redcar (Anna Turley), who made this debate happen and who have spoken so effectively.

I do not think that I or anyone will ever give the hon. Member for Redcar full satisfaction on an explanation for the past, but she knows from the meeting that she had with me and the Secretary of State that we are determined to do everything we can, on top of the support for the taskforce, to support and engineer a beautiful rebirth of the site to the best of our ability. I repeat my offer to visit at whatever point is appropriate and valuable. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland gave a masterful speech. It was extremely well informed and constructive, and contained a good mix of challenge both for his party’s Front Bench and for the Government.

Out of respect for the debate, I am going to resist what was already a weak urge to simply unload a section of prose prepared by civil servants. I will do my best to try to respond to the debate. First, I must do something important, which is to register our complete understanding of the frustration about the uncertainty, which various Members have expressed. That is entirely understandable. I will go further and say that the Government share that frustration, because we are deeply worried, as I will come on to say, about the deep structural difficulties that the sector faces in both the long and short term.

As most Members who know more about this industry than I do will recognise, those underlying issues are extremely complicated, and therefore the solutions that
the Government can implement that would have a long-term, sustained impact—that is what we should be about—are not that straightforward. I will be very frank: we are also frustrated about the pace and speed at which decisions are being taken in the private sector. I give full assurance to the Members who probed on that point that, although we might be in a slightly different age, when the steel industry is not necessarily on the front page of the newspapers, the Government are deeply aware that the difficulties have not gone away. We are fully engaged at all levels—ministerial, Secretary of State and official—to stay as close as we can to all the complex conversations that are going on. Our message to everyone is that we are here to support a long-term, sustainable future for the sector.

I refute and push back on the suggestion that underlay a number of speeches: that the Government’s eye is somehow off the ball. That is not true. We absolutely share the view expressed in the debate—I heard the Secretary of State say this directly to the chief executives of the industry—that this is not an industry with a past or a sunset industry, as the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) called it, that we should look at through a lens of nostalgia. We are interested in working together with the sector, stakeholders, the all-party parliamentary group, the Select Committee and everyone else who wants to shape the industry, to present a story around the sector of growth and seizing some of the very real opportunities that are out there. We are entirely sincere in that view and in that determination.

It is worth restating that that is not just because of the importance of the sector, which employs 31,000 people, or because of the huge weight and importance it has to the fundamental identity of many towns across the country represented here today, its value in terms of exports, or the fabulous opportunities that we see for it to be positioned as a dynamic component in an invaluable supply chain, supporting some of the industries where we see big opportunities for growth—the hon. Member for Hartlepool mentioned a couple of those, such as the automotive industry and offshore wind. It is not just for those reasons, but, as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland and other Members described, because we see it as a foundation sector underpinning the infrastructure of this country. It is, in that respect, strategic. We are determined—I echo the words of my long-standing hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)—that this sector has got to have a future. We must collectively shape that.

In that context, we totally understand that, even though there may have been some short-term improvement in trading conditions, we cannot be deceived. The Secretary of State and I had a meeting with the chief executives of most of the major companies last week, and they were very clear that trading performance is improving in some ways, but they do not trust that to be sustainable. The overwhelming, crushing issue is that the picture of overcapacity in the industry has not changed, despite some shifts at the margins. Demand remains weak, the volatility of raw material prices is an issue, particularly for coke, prices remain a problem and the spread remains a concern. In conclusion, the situation remains very difficult. We have no illusions about that.

Some of the rhetoric has been: “The Government are all talk. It’s all words.” I am not complacent about this, but I need to state categorically, and to echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), that although the work is not done, action has been taken in some critical areas. We are aware that energy costs—specifically industrial electricity costs—remain a significant problem, but since 2013 more than £120 million-worth of public resource has been effectively reallocated to the steel sector to mitigate these problems. To anyone who describes that as limited, I say that my constituents would not consider £120 million to be small change. I know that is appreciated by the industry, and anyone who says that it is just words on this issue is wrong.

**Nic Dakin:** I am not surprised that the Minister pointed to that, but does he accept that the support was very slow in coming? It took about three years from being promised to being delivered. We do not want that sort of sloth from the Minister and the Government now.

**Mr Hurd:** I hope I have never been associated with sloth—my mother might disagree. I do not know the background to it fully enough, but the more substantive point is that, despite that weight of money, more clearly needs to be done. We have not solved the issue. The pace may be important, but the fundamental challenge for us all is that we have not cracked the problem.

**Angela Smith:** I am pleased to hear that last comment, because the wholesale costs of energy are also of major concern, not just for steel but for the chemicals industry and all other energy-intensive industries, so the Government need to move on the reform of the wholesale energy market.

**Mr Hurd:** I will come on to that issue. The point I am trying to make is that the Government have not been all talk: we have taken action on energy.

I refute the allegation that the UK has been a fundamental obstacle on dumping. We have pressed for anti-dumping measures, specifically on wire rod, seamless tubes, rebar and cold rolled products. The EU now has 39 trade defence measures in place, and imports have fallen significantly as a result. We are an active member of the G20, which, as hon. Members know, set up a forum to look at the issue of dumping. The lesser duty rule is an issue; I do not know whether there is party division on that. Our position is that measures taken against dumping need to be proportionate because we have to balance the interests of consumers, the industry and businesses. We have been and will continue to be a very active voice on dumping.

My hon. Friend the Member for Corby rightly talked about procurement. Again, the UK has been the leader in the EU on responding to the new flexibilities, and new guidelines are in place. The feedback from the chief executives at the meeting last week was that they did not really want to talk about procurement because they recognised that action had been taken and other issues were more important to them, not least business rates, which I acknowledge continue to be an issue. The Government have reformed business rates in a way that is designed to present a net benefit to the UK economy. Steel companies will benefit from that reform. Does it go as far as the steel industry wants? No. Are there big complexities, not least around the affordability and doability of what the steel industry wants? Yes, but we will continue to try to work through them.
[Mr Hurd]

On the strategic direction, the Government have stepped up and offered to fund the capability study and work with the sector to identify the capabilities that are needed—that was the point made by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith)—and growth opportunities for the future. There has been action, but we are clear that our work is not done. There is no room for complacency, given the pressures on this critically important industry.

We are looking at all the options for energy. They are complicated, because what we have got to do is legal and, as the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland said, a consensus has to be built on who pays. If the steel industry pays less, the chances are that someone else is going to have to pay more. Our instinct is to focus on a strategic, sustainable approach; we have to move on from the sticking-plaster approach. I am glad hon. Members are nodding.

I am going to accelerate to fulfil my pledge. Of course Brexit brings tremendous uncertainties. As hon. Members know, we have not even started the negotiation process, let alone finished it, but I say to them what I said to the chief executives last week: this Department is your liaison point. It is our responsibility to listen very carefully to the sector to make sure that the issues you face are totally understood by the Government. In that respect, the steel sector is the same as the automotive sector and other sectors. Our responsibility is to listen to the sector and understand the granularity of the issues it faces so my Secretary of State, who is at the table with the decision makers in this process, is fully informed and able to represent the industry.

Stephen Kinnock: The Minister is making a comprehensive speech. On the topic of Brexit and inter-departmental co-operation, I draw his attention to the remarks made by the Secretary of State for International Trade. He said:

“We must turn our backs on those that tell us: ‘It’s OK, you can protect bits of your industry, bits of your economy and no one will notice.’ It is untrue... We must be unreconstructed, unapologetic free traders.”

Does the Minister think that, under his right hon. Friend’s guidance and as we leave the European Union, our ability to deploy trade defence instruments against the dumping of Chinese steel will be strengthened or weakened?

Mr Hurd: I am going to accelerate now. We are clearly being proactive about championing both free and fair trade, and we are very active with the EU on measures about that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Corby made clear, Brexit may in theory present us with some opportunities and freedoms that we do not have at the moment, but all that is to be decided. It all needs to be agreed as a result of very full engagement with the sector.

My final point is about industrial strategy, which is where everything comes together. I will simply say what we said to the industry leaders: we want to work together to move the story of the sector away from any suggestion of sunset, failure or survival to talk of exciting growth. We need to work together on that to understand where the opportunities for growth are, where the capabilities are and where Government can provide support by ensuring that Brexit is right, by levelling the playing field and by helping with the innovation that is critical. We are absolutely serious in that determination. With that, I leave the Floor open to the sponsors of the debate.

4.18 pm

Tom Blenkinsop: It is interesting that the Minister said that the Government’s eye was still on the ball and talked about short-term gains, but said that we should not underestimate the long-term issues of overcapacity in the industry and that the Government were under no illusions. He has reassured us that the Government are not all talk, but that action in critical areas has happened—it has, to a certain extent, but we will see more in the developing months.

The Minister refuted any assertion that the Government were an obstacle on dumping, and he said that he believed in free and fair trade, which Labour Members are and where Government can provide support by ensuring that Brexit is right, by levelling the playing field and by helping with the innovation that is critical. We are absolutely serious in that determination. With that, I leave the Floor open to the sponsors of the debate.

4.20 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 8 November 2016

[Mr Peter Bone in the Chair]

**CPS and Disability Hate Crime**

9.30 am

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Crown Prosecution Service’s approach to prosecuting disability hate crime.

It is nice to speak in this debate under your stewardship, Mr Bone. I welcome the Government’s action plan for tackling hate crime. I know others have been less complimentary because they do not see, for example, a “prevent agenda” for disability hate crime in it. Nevertheless, it is important to hold on to the plan that the Government have produced. “Action Against Hate” sets out that “Any crime that is motivated by hostility on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity can be classed as a hate crime.”

There are three categories of hate crime in legislation: incitement to hatred offences on the grounds of race, religion or sexual orientation; specific racially and religiously motivated criminal offences, such as common assault; and provisions for enhanced sentencing where a crime is motivated by race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or transgender identity.

It is worth noting that annex A of the plan sets out the College of Policing’s hate crime operational guidance and shared definitions established by the Crown Prosecution Service and the Association of Chief Police Officers. That guidance goes into a little more detail for those who will implement the actions on the ground, so to speak. Disability hate crime remains both underreported and under-prosecuted. That needs to change.

**Ms Margaret Ritchie** (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that improving the understanding of disability hate crime among prosecutors is an essential step in giving more victims the confidence they need to come forward, as we have seen in other areas?

**Peter Dowd**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will touch on that point a little later.

We are seeing intolerance rising, particularly in relation to disability, which does not lie well in a society where we claim to be liberal and tolerant. I increasingly get the sense of an intolerance to all sorts of people since the referendum—I do not want to bring that issue up, but it is important that we do not pretend that things have not happened and are not happening. In fact, even the most eminent people such as Lord Thomas, the Lord Chief Justice; Sir Terence Etherton, Master of the Rolls; and Lord Justice Sir Philip Sales are not immune to the prevailing intolerance stalking the country. I deplore the abuse of those public servants for doing what, at the end of the day, is their job.

Even the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination said it was “seriously concerned” about British politicians’ rhetoric in the lead-up to and following the referendum. Reports indicated that immediately following the referendum, hate crimes surged by 42% in England and Wales, with a total of 3,076 incidents recorded across the country between 16 and 20 June. That rise was in less than one week, and it almost inevitably raises concerns about hate crime in a broader sense and particular groups’ prospects in the future.

For clarity, the disability hate crime statistics I am about to use are from the CPS’s own website on 13 July 2016. It said:

“The volume of cases referred to the CPS by the police for a charging decision increased from 849 in 2014/15 to 930 in 2015/16, an increase of 9.5%.”

It went on to say that the number of convictions had gone up over the two years from 503 in 2014-15 to 707 last year—a big increase of 40.6%. The conviction rate remained broadly consistent over the two years at 75.1%, which I believe compares with an 83% conviction rate for all other hate crimes. Finally, it said:

“The proportion of successful outcomes arising from guilty pleas was 66.1% in 2014/15 and fell slightly to 63.4% in 2015/16.”

That is the context.

The co-ordinator of the Disability Hate Crime Network has stated that those figures underestimate the true scale of the problem due to significant underreporting and believes that as many as 60,000 disability hate crimes could occur annually in the United Kingdom. That is supported by research published by the charity Scope, which has shown that two thirds of disabled people feel they are treated differently because of their disability, and only 40% say the UK is a good place to be a disabled person. That is quite shocking.

Young people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. The Equality and Human Rights Commission found that 22% of young people with a disability between the ages of 10 and 15 had been the victim of a crime in the previous 12 months, compared with only 12% of their non-disabled counterparts. Similarly, 35% of those with social or behavioural impairments such as autism, attention deficit disorder or Asperger’s syndrome had found themselves victims of a crime. Young people and those with behavioural impairments commonly fail to report hate crimes out of fear and a lack of confidence, which goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie).

We often forget the long-lasting damage and devastating effect these crimes can have on not only those subject to abuse but their families. In fact, the Director of Public Prosecutions, Alison Saunders, said in the media release accompanying the statistics I referred to:

“My message is that a hate crime is exactly that—a crime—and will not be ignored. Hate crime creates fear and has a devastating impact on individuals and communities. Nobody should have to go about their day to day life in fear of being attacked.”

Many victims of hate crime suffer long-lasting fear and anxiety, which has a detrimental impact on their physical and mental health, leaving them cut off and in many cases afraid to leave their house or go to public places.

The Disability Hate Crime Network found through a survey of 100 disabled people that the most common place for disability hate crime to happen is on the high street, followed closely by public transport. Others mentioned the local shop, the pub and social media—social media crops up time and again. The research found that
the majority of perpetrators are white and that over half the attacks are conducted by groups of people, rather than just one individual, so there is gangging up. Furthermore, 75% of disability hate crime defendants are men. These hate crimes include verbal abuse and physical abuse, with instances of disabled people being pushed out of their wheelchairs, blocked from accessing disabled ramps and being denied a seat or space on public transport. What kind of people do those things? The research also found that a large amount of the underlying motivation for disability hate crimes is the view that disabled people are on benefits and are therefore lazy and “scroungers”. That is what the research found—it is not an opinion; the evidence is there.

It is telling that disability hate crime has gone up in the past five years, in parallel with the perceived, if not actual, robust approach of the Department of Work and Pensions to disabled people and changes to, for example, the work capability assessment scheme. There have also been regular television series with a morbid fixation, such as “Saints and Scroungers”, “On Benefits and Proud” or “Benefits Street”; the list goes on. I do not want to politicise the issue, but there may be—I will go no further than that—a link between the rhetoric from some, which appears to single out those on disability living allowance and insinuate that a large proportion of those on benefits are somehow cheating the system, and the rise in disability hate crime in the United Kingdom today. There is a danger of going back to the deserving and undeserving poor, but no one knows which is which because of the environment we are operating in. Whether we like it or not, this is a milieu in which hate crime flourishes. We need less rhetoric and a more concentrated effort to raise awareness of disability, as my hon. Friend the hon. Member for South Down indicated, and of other sorts of hate crime and to provide better support and guidance so that people can recognise and report hate crime without fear, concern, trepidation or worry. National Hate Crime Awareness Week, which is usually in mid-October, creates a good opportunity to do that.

We need to do more to raise awareness of disabilities that are not physical, focusing on those involving social or behavioural impairments that affect memory, learning, understanding or concentration because people with such disabilities also find themselves victims of crime far too often.

There is room for best practice to be shared, particularly that from areas that have piloted schemes to help disabled people to report hate crimes. Leonard Cheshire Disability piloted a particularly successful programme in Northern Ireland. The Be Safe, Stay Safe programme provides support and education for carers and disabled people on their rights and how best to report hate crimes. In 2014-15, the scheme, in partnership with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, provided support in 126 incidents of hate crime against disabled people.

The Be Safe, Stay Safe programme uses social media to reach out to disabled people who have been victims of disability hate crimes, including online hate crimes. It launched the Stop Hate to Report campaign to raise awareness of disability hate crime with allied professionals, clinicians, social care workers and others in the disability sector, as well as MPs and Members of the Legislative Assembly, which I am sure my hon. Friends are aware of. I would like to know whether the Government would consider replicating such a scheme more widely. After all, the Government’s current action plan states: “Despite good progress since the last Action Plan, hate crime against disabled people remains a particular challenge. We will look at current best practice examples in tackling disability hate crime and work with partner organisations and the police to promote safety for disabled people.”

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that some disabled people need particular support in reporting hate crime and will he join me in paying tribute to Disability Equality North West, which serves both our constituencies and is based just across the river in Preston in my constituency?

Peter Dowd: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. So many voluntary organisations, charities, local government and other agencies do really good work in this area and it would be helpful to have examples of good practice that we can feed into a national database.

I welcome the Crown Prosecution Service’s consultation on hate crime, which was launched in October at about the same time as its 30th birthday, so happy birthday to the CPS. At the end of the day, the responsibility lies largely with the Government to set the environment in which the Crown Prosecution Service can pursue people responsible for hate crimes against disabled people. It is a team effort for all of us.

In England, some crimes are aggravated by hostility towards disability and those convicted seem to have been given unduly lenient sentences. I recognise that the CPS often comes in for a good deal of criticism in one way or another: that it is either too robust or wishy-washy in its pursuit of alleged offenders. As with most things, I suspect that some criticism is fair and some is unfair, but in the context of the clear levels of disability hate crime out there, the CPS must show that it takes disability hate crime extremely seriously; that it is doing all it can to improve prosecution and conviction rates; and that it ensures consistency across the country.

I have some questions based on the CPS’s October 2014 disability hate crime action plan. It was going to set out a hate crime assurance regime by December 2014. Did it? Is it being monitored? Is it continuing? It said it would refresh the national minimum standards for area hate crime co-ordination. Has that happened? Where is it up to? It talked about detailed analysis, including case examples, of hate crimes against disabled people. Since that happened? Where is it reviewed? Where is it at?

The CPS talked about enhancements to the case management system of monitoring and recording applications for sentence uplifts—the section 146 question. Has that been reviewed and will it be reassessed and reviewed? Where is that up to?

The CPS said there would be retraining in the full range of offending to ensure that prosecutors fully understand the different forms of disability. Has that happened? Has it been reviewed and will it be reviewed again?
Has the CPS’s senior management conference had the session on disability hate crime that was promised in its action plan? If so, fab, but will it be repeated and will it be a regular event at conferences? Has the liaison with the judiciary that was promised to discuss recording and monitoring of sentence uplifts taken place, and is it a regular event? A one-off event is fine, but we need regular contact with the judiciary. How is the CPS’s hate crime sub-group of its community accountability forum proceeding? It would be helpful to know where that is up to. Is it being repeated? Is it up to date? Is it meeting as often as it should? What action is it taking?

I turn to Dimensions, which is a not-for-profit charity that supports 3,500 people throughout the country who have learning disabilities, autism and complex needs. It produced a blueprint for change, “I’m with Sam”, which sets out a salutary and moving narrative, which hon. Members may wish to read. It is a fairly short and concise document and well worth reading. Among other things, it asks the CPS to improve investigation protocols in the criminal justice system when there is a learning disabilities victim. It would be helpful to have a view on whether that might happen. In addition, it seeks better training for police officers and others to help when receiving a report of a crime involving a person with a learning disability. Again, accessibility to the system is crucial, as is the ability for people to have a sympathetic ear from those who are trained or at least have some knowledge of their needs.

At a wider level, we need to engender a culture of disability awareness and give confidence to victims of hate crime that they can come forward and will be listened to. The Government need to encourage and take a lead in creating an atmosphere in which the tone of debate about policy issues, many of which they have initiated, is moderate and reasonable. The last thing this country needs is another round of finger-pointing at the latest collective bête noire. I agree with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government who said in the action plan:

“Tolerance is not something we can take for granted. It is a cornerstone of British values and one of the many reasons we are great.”

If people are not prepared to be tolerant and feel able to abuse vulnerable people, perhaps they should not expect the police and the CPS to be too tolerant towards them. In that respect, there is an expectation from most, if not all, hon. Members that the CPS will redouble its efforts, along with other law enforcement agencies, to send the message to thugs, cowards and bullies—because that is what they are—that the abuse of any vulnerable people, and in this case disabled people, will not be tolerated.

Finally, it is often not sensible to talk of personal experience, but I will make an exception today. I was brought up by a woman, a single parent, a war widow, a Christian, of Irish descent, who in her later years was brought up by a woman, a single parent, a war widow, an experience, but I will make an exception today. I was tolerated.

People, and in this case disabled people, will not be that is what they are—that the abuse of any vulnerable will be taken seriously. The hon. Gentleman quoted the Director of Public Prosecutions and the CPS demonstrated that it had prosecuted a record number of hate crimes. We can always be either depressed or optimistic about this sort of data. It is always depressing to see the number of hate crimes going up, or those being prosecuted going up, because it can be said that the problem is getting worse. However, on the basis that certainly in the area of disability hate crime, and hate crime generally, it is accepted that more of it occurs than is tackled, the right way to read the statistics is that we are seeing more of the problem, capturing more of the problem and tackling more of the problem. In a funny sort of way, a set of statistics that shows more referrals to the police, more referrals to the CPS, more prosecutions and more convictions is actually good news, because it shows an increase not in the hate crime but in the ability of the system to tackle it. However, I understand from those who know this field best that a big gap still exists between the problem and the ability of the system to tackle it.

The hon. Gentleman is right to mention a 41% increase in hate crime prosecutions, compared with the previous year, and the highest proportion of sentence uplifts, which is very welcome. Four in five hate crimes in general result in a conviction, so that should give victims confidence that if they report a hate crime, it will be properly looked at and properly prosecuted and there is a very good chance that the cowards, bullies and thugs that the hon. Gentleman referred to will be properly dealt with.

The hon. Gentleman quoted the Director of Public Prosecutions, who has sent a very clear message that hate crime will not be ignored but will be taken seriously by Crown prosecutors. That is worth repeating.

It is also worth saying that—to be fair to the hon. Gentleman, he did recognise this—he has recognised that the Conservative Government had, and this Conservative Government have, a plan to tackle hate crime. The hon. Gentleman was not as enthusiastic as I was, but he did welcome that plan. It will always be capable of improvement, and
I have some questions for the Solicitor General about areas that I and some organisations think could be improved, but having a plan is very good.

The action plan that was published this July deals with prevention, with how we respond to the problem, with reporting, with supporting victims and with understanding the problem by being better at collecting the data and setting out the issues.

Seema Kennedy: Does my right hon. Friend agree that awareness by a victim that they are actually the subject of a hate crime is very important, because in some of these cases the criminal is not a stranger? Does he also agree that campaigns—such as the one by the Lancashire police and crime commissioner, “Say No To Hate”—which raise awareness, are good for everyone because victims have more awareness that they have actually been subject to a hate crime?

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I will say more later about disability hate crime, particularly against people with learning disabilities. In that respect, raising awareness of what is a hate crime, whether someone has been a victim of it and what they should do as a result is particularly important, and I join my hon. Friend in commending the efforts of her local enforcement bodies locally.

To pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Ribble (Seema Kennedy) just raised. It had some myth-busters, if I can put it like that, to dispel some of the erroneous assumptions that people have about prosecuting disability hate crimes. For example, it made it clear that even if the offender is a carer or family member, it is still a crime. It also made it clear that even if the victim did not have an easily identifiable impairment, which is exactly the point that the hon. Gentleman made, it is still a crime and should be prosecuted.

I wanted to raise a bit of a specialist point with the Solicitor General, who will know that I have recently taken over as chair of the all-party group on learning disability. The secretariat for the group is provided by Mencap, which supports the 1.5 million people with learning disabilities across the UK. Again, Mencap has welcomed what the Government have done on dealing with disability hate crime, but it has a number of questions.

It supports the Dimensions campaign, “I’m with Sam”, which the hon. Member for Bootle mentioned, but I want to ask the Solicitor General about a number of issues in particular that it has raised.

How easy is it for people, particularly with a learning disability, to use the system? In my understanding, accessible information and support is not always available to guide them through it. I draw the Solicitor General’s attention to a resource that has been produced in Gloucestershire by students from the National Star College, working with Gloucestershire constabulary, to raise awareness of disability hate crime. That video sets out what disability hate crime is, how people can recognise it and how they can report it and have it dealt with. Much as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble said, that sort of local resource is being taken seriously by my county council, which provides excellent support for people with learning disabilities, and by the police and crime commissioner and Gloucestershire constabulary.

All those bodies sending out that powerful message is very helpful. A little bit from the Solicitor General on accessible information would be welcome.

As the hon. Member for Bootle said, Mencap is also interested in looking at using the data better so we can see whether any types of disability hate crime are a particular problem—that might be learning disabilities or people with autism, for example—or whether it is a problem more generally.

The Dimensions campaign asked for a legal change so that online hate crime against people with disabilities is specifically made a crime. I am interested in the Solicitor General’s view on that because, in my understanding, if someone behaves in a certain way online, it is still a crime. It may be more or less difficult to get evidence, but if someone behaves in a way that is a crime, the fact that that behaviour happens in the online space does not mean it is not a crime, so I do not know whether it is necessary to change the law specifically to criminalise behaviour online, which is one of the asks in the campaign. It might be helpful if the Solicitor General is very clear in his response that some of the abuse and intolerance that we see online, which the hon. Member for Bootle referred to, is a crime and can be prosecuted.

An advantage of online crime in one sense is that it provides a helpful audit trail for police and prosecutors,
but I understand that dealing with that is very resource-intensive. It might be helpful if the Solicitor General set out a bit about what is going on there.

I shall make a couple of other points before I finish. The Law Commission has carried out a review into sentencing in this area and has looked at whether the "stirring up offences", if I may call them that—those that apply currently to race, for example—should be extended to disability. It has concluded that they should not be, but it has made two specific recommendations about sentencing. It said that there should be new guidance from the Sentencing Council about the sentence uplift provisions that are available in the Criminal Justice Act 2003. It has also said that when an offender is convicted of a disability hate crime and the sentence uplift is used, the offender's record on the police national computer should be updated, so that there is a record of that. My understanding is that the Government have not yet responded to those recommendations. I know the Home Office has said that it is keeping them under review and I wonder whether the Solicitor General can provide the House with an update on that before he finishes.

I have a couple of final questions for the Solicitor General. When he was responding in the House of Commons to oral questions, he said that he attended a round table at the national College of Policing in September last year specifically on hate crime and disability hate crime, in particular. It was about sharing best practice across police forces and, of course, the national College of Policing does an excellent job in trying to spread best practice and raise policing standards generally. Will he update the House on any progress that has flowed from that round table, and does he have any further plans in that regard?

Finally, let me turn to the one area of disagreement I had with the hon. Member for Bootle. We agree on the way in which people with disabilities are sometimes reported by the media, but as we have an independent media, politicians are not responsible for what they do. We can suggest to them that they are not being very responsible, but it is not our job to tell them what to print. I do not agree with him, however, about the impact of the Government's policies on supporting disabled people. I should declare an interest, Mr Bone: before the general election, between July 2014 and March 2015, I was the Minister for Disabled People. The Department's entire focus—whether it was through the Disability Confident campaign or trying to deliver more help and support for disabled people—was on trying to get disabled people into work where they can. I had a recent debate in Westminster Hall about looking at more opportunities, post-Brexit, for disabled people to get into work. A huge number of people with learning disabilities, for example, could work if they are given the opportunity. They do not get that opportunity. We have seen 350,000 more people with disabilities being given the opportunity to work, so as far as the Government's messages are concerned—that is what politicians are responsible for; I cannot be responsible for what the media print—they are very clear: they are about providing more opportunity and more help and support.

In the past couple of weeks, a Green Paper was published by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the help and support that should be available for getting more disabled people into work where they can work and about increasing the support for disabled people who are not able to work. The messages from the Government have actually been very supportive and I do not think any increase in disability hate crime could fairly be attributed to the policies of the Department for Work and Pensions. The points made by the hon. Member for Bootle may be more advisedly directed to the media, and I hope that they also listen to the debate and behave accordingly.

This has been a very valuable debate and it is an important subject to get on to the agenda. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it and I look forward to the Solicitor General's response.

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say what a joy it is to follow the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper)? We recall his energies as the Minister for Disabled People and thank him for the good work he put in. It is good to see him here contributing to the debate in a different capacity. It was also a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) set the scene so well. This subject is close to my heart and to his, and to the hearts of all who are participating in today's debate.

This issue has seen some traction recently. More people now understand that to discriminate or target someone due to disability is as bad as targeting someone due to race or religion. It is not acceptable. In this debate we are focusing on hate crimes targeted specifically at those who are disabled. It is just as despicable to pick on someone because of that as it is to pick on someone because of their race or religion. Section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003 applies to sentencing when the court is considering the seriousness of an offence in which the offender, either at the time of committing the offence or immediately before or after doing so, demonstrated hostility towards the victim based on the victim's physical or mental disability, or presumed disability; or the offence was motivated by hostility towards persons who have a physical or mental disability or a particular physical or mental disability.

How much those offences rile me personally and each one of us in this House—those who have spoken before me and those who will speak after me. Such actions are horrible, despicable and clearly unacceptable. When we read about them in the press and in the media, or when we hear about them from constituents who tell us what happens to them, our response is to feel so angry. So again, I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for giving us all the opportunity to participate in it.

In cases such as I mentioned, the court must treat the fact that the offence was committed in any of those circumstances as an aggravating factor, and must state that in open court. The amount by which the sentence will be increased will depend on the circumstances of the case and the seriousness of the aggravation. There has been an impetus to prosecute more such crimes to send a message, very clearly, that they will not be tolerated in decent society. Can the Solicitor General tell us how many such crimes have been prosecuted in the United Kingdom?

To imagine that someone would be targeted because of their disability is beyond despicable. For that reason, I welcome the news that the CPS has prosecuted a
record number of hate crimes—15,442—in the past year, which is a 4.8% rise on the previous year of 2014-15.

Ms Ritchie: The hon. Gentleman, my friend from my neighbouring constituency, is making a compelling case. Does he agree that the Government could demonstrate their commitment to tackling hate crime by publishing a response to the Law Commission’s 2014 consultation paper, which considered extending existing offences? We would like to hear from the Solicitor General on that.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady, who is a friend as well, for her intervention. She has outlined the issue clearly, and I hope that the Minister responds to her point.

Every single day in the United Kingdom, 15,000 people are attacked because of their disability. The number of prosecutions for the year 2014-15 marked a 4.7% increase on 2013-14, so there has been an increase in the number of prosecutions for the past three years, which indicates that there is a commitment from the Minister’s Department and the CPS to make changes and prosecute these crimes. I will come to more figures later in my speech, but the number of crimes is enormous. The number of prosecutions is just the scrape of the scab, the tip of the iceberg or whatever other descriptive phrase we might use. The CPS’s eighth hate crime report details a “41% increase in disability hate crime prosecutions compared to 2014/15.”

Even online hate crimes are being successfully prosecuted, and this message must be spread widely: people cannot hide their prejudice or hatred behind a keyboard and a laptop and think that it will protect them. It does not, it cannot and it never should. More than four in five prosecuted hate crimes result in a conviction, with more than 73% of those charged pleading guilty. In 2015-16, recorded sentence uplifts reached 33.8%, which shows a good use of the legislation for what it was designed to do.

I thank the Minister and his Department for what has been done, because it is positive, but I will outline something that I have said, that other Members have said and that those who speak after me today will say. In a written question some time ago, I asked the Attorney General “what progress his Department has made on providing disability hate crime training for all prosecutors; and what improvements this training will bring to conviction rates.”

It is important to have training in place so that we have people who know how to respond. The answer was: “Mandatory training relating to disability hate crime was delivered, across the Crown Prosecution Service, between September 2015 and January 2016. Prosecutors will deploy the knowledge gained from the training in the course of prosecutions thereby improving performance. The CPS are enhancing the support provided to prosecutors in dealing with crimes committed against disabled people. They are reviewing their policy and legal guidance on disability hate crime, which will provide assistance to the public of how the CPS intends to deal with such crimes.”

Following on from that, I ask the Minister to provide an update on whether that training has been a success or whether it needs improving. I would like him to update us on where we are and on what improvements could be made to make the training even better.

Other figures have not been so encouraging. The number of hate crime cases referred by the police to the CPS for decision in 2014 was 14,376—an increase of 2.2% on the previous year. However, in 2015-16, the number of referrals decreased by 9.6% to just under 13,000. I ask respectfully whether the Minister can give us some indication of why that happened. Is it because police resources are not focused on disability hate crime? If they are and there is a fall-down, I ask him to let us know so that changes can be made to address the issue. The optimist in us all would love to believe that the decrease in the number of referrals by the police to the CPS is due to more people recognising the boundaries of how they can treat others, but that is probably not the reason behind the drop.

The hon. Member for Bootle mentioned Northern Ireland’s Be Safe, Stay Safe campaign. Just over a year ago, back in October last year, I made the House aware in a question—I think it was to the Solicitor General—that the Police Service of Northern Ireland had launched an online campaign after 44 disability hate crimes were recorded over a six-month period. The PSNI contacted the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability, which, as the Solicitor General will know, has set up an advocacy scheme to help disabled people access the criminal justice system. Will the Solicitor General consider similar action? He responded positively to that question, in which I underlined what we are doing in Northern Ireland.

As the hon. Member for Bootle said, if something good is happening in the United Kingdom—legislation or whatever it might be—whatever the debate is, we should all learn from it. We are doing something good in Northern Ireland, as the hon. Gentleman clearly, gently and supportively said. What we are doing in Northern Ireland is a response to the general public’s request to put positive legislation in the hands of the police to make it happen and make a difference.

More must be done to ensure that disabled people are aware of the rights that are enshrined in law already and, more importantly, that they have the support they need to approach the police and to give evidence to further their case. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more than 60,000 incidents of disability hate crime are committed in England and Wales over a year, so I want to ask about prosecutions. I am thankful that the CPS has made more than 15,000 prosecutions, but if there are 60,000 incidents of disability hate crime, we are a long way from getting to where we need to be.

I know that the Minister is absolutely and totally committed to making the changes that are needed, as his demeanour and his response to the questions that he has raised will indicate. There is a chasm between 60,000 and 15,000, and I hope the Minister will respond to that point. More must be done to ensure that those two figures are more closely aligned. That is not to say that every off-the-cuff comment is worthy of prosecution, but I firmly believe that many crimes are being committed and not reported, which means that there is no help for the victims. The House must address that.

We must look at how the message can be made clearer that disability hate crimes exist and are not acceptable, that victims will be not further traumatised but helped and supported, and that justice can be served without it being at victims’ expense. Could that be done in conjunction with the Department for Education?
Could part of the process involve co-operation with media channels to spread awareness? I am not one who watches the soaps on TV. I could tell hon. Members nothing about the storylines and little about who the characters are, but my wife loves those programmes and could tell hon. Members the details of every character’s life. Some of those soaps could be used for good. One example is “Coronation Street”. Although I am not an avid watcher of the programme—indeed, I do not watch it—I understand that it portrays the issue of Down’s syndrome. There are ways of using the media and the TV for good. Perhaps the Minister could look into that possibility.

We must ask our ourselves whether we have done all we can to encourage the process of making people aware of protection, how serious disability hate crime is, and how seriously it will be treated. To our shame, I do not believe that we have. I implore the Minister to do more to take the matter further and bring about real change. Yes, we have done much good and made gigantic leaps forward, but we have not finished. More can be done.

I thank the House for the opportunity to speak. I very much look forward to the Minister’s response, which I know will be positive, and I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing the debate. This is one of those special debates where it is easy to find broad consensus, which we should always cherish when we find it.

In the past year, the Crown Prosecution Service has prosecuted 15,442 hate crimes in England. That is a 4% rise on the previous year, which also saw a rise of 4.7%. Campaigners are convinced that those prosecutions are the tip of the iceberg and that the true scale of the problem is much greater. Many cases go unreported, as the hon. Members for Bootle and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have pointed out in some detail. Indeed, the Disability Hate Crime Network believes that there are 60,000 hate crimes against disabled people every year, and the hon. Member for Strangford set out that case in some detail.

The Disability Hate Crime Network fears that disabled people lack confidence that they will be listened to, and we must recognise that there is some real hostility towards disabled people. Figures published by The Independent last year suggest that that hostility is real and growing, and it is often facilitated by our online digital world, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) said.

Under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, disabled people now have the same legal rights as everyone else following high-profile campaigning by disabled people themselves. It is shameful to think that, before that legislation was enacted, a disabled person could be legally turned away from a restaurant, prevented from using public transport, fired from their job for being ill or even isolated from society behind the walls of their own home. Changing the law to protect people was important to our society because it said that discrimination against disabled people—indeed, against any people—is simply not acceptable but, as we have heard today, there is some evidence that attitudes towards disabled people are hardening. The hon. Member for Strangford gave us some examples of that.

More needs to be done to address the pervasive, low-level negativity towards disabled people that provides the perfect conditions for hostility and hate crime to thrive. Scope, the disability rights charity, says that 42% of non-disabled people do not know a disabled person so, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, education is important.

Police investigations of such cases have improved since the tragic death of Fiona Pilkington, who killed herself and her disabled daughter in 2013 following years of bullying and abuse—that bullying and abuse was ignored at the time by the police. Her Majesty’s Crown Prosecution Service inspectorate has indicated that the police still need to do more to address such abuse, which is suffered by too many disabled people on a regular basis.

The CPS completed 941 disabled hate crime prosecutions in 2015-16, compared with 666 in the previous year, and convictions increased by 40%. It has publicly said that it wants to push up the rates of prosecution and conviction for such crimes, sending out a message that those crimes will be treated extremely seriously, but an understanding of hate crime needs to be developed among prosecutors, as the hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) said.

As the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, progress is being made—we are capturing more of these crimes—but we still have a long way to go. Hate crime is a crime committed against a person or property that is motivated by “malice or ill-will towards an identifiable social group”.

The Scottish Government have invested more than £100 million in promoting equality and addressing discrimination. A refreshed and strengthened disability action plan will be published later this year specifically to raise awareness of disability hate crime.

The environment in which we operate matters. Although we know that disability hate crime is underreported, we also know that more victims are finding the strength, the facilities and the support to come forward. That is enough to tell us that we have a duty to continue raising awareness about this issue so that even more victims feel able to come forward with confidence that they will be listened to, and that such crime is simply not acceptable in our society.

We must also build strong, supportive, cohesive communities where people can live in peace. Work has been undertaken in a practical sense, with Police Scotland visiting schools and communities to raise awareness and educate groups of all ages about disability hate crime. I mention those examples because we all could and should study good practice in one part of the UK to see how it can be deployed in other parts. I have said that in just about every single debate in which I have participated in this place, and today I find myself in the esteemed position of echoing the words of the hon. Member for Strangford.

Despite the hate crime action plan published by the UK Government, I feel compelled to point out that the ideologically driven austerity agenda, which is perceived as targeting disabled people, has helped to encourage
toxic rhetoric about the most vulnerable in our society. That apparent targeting of disabled people is not necessarily deliberate, but it is enough that it is thoughtless and insensitive. When some social security powers are devolved to Scotland, we will base our system on dignity and respect—new employment support programmes for disabled people will begin to be delivered in Scotland from April 2017.

When our society is marred by prejudice and hatred towards those with disabilities, we all agree that we must react. We cannot and must not underestimate the impact of such crimes on individuals and their families. Such crimes leave disabled people and their families feeling isolated, intimidated and rejected. We must continue to reinforce a zero-tolerance attitude to such crimes and towards those who engage in them. That is why I am so proud that the Scottish Government are further promoting their Keep Safe initiative, which works with local businesses to create Keep Safe spaces for disabled and vulnerable people. I note with interest the comments of the hon. Member for Bootle, who spoke about how some disabled people feel that it is not even safe to leave their home.

I would like to hear the Solicitor General speak today about what further we can do to work together across the United Kingdom to ensure that all in our society are given the respect and dignity they need and deserve. As we have heard today, we clearly cannot take tolerance for granted.

10.27 am

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. It is also a great privilege to speak opposite the Solicitor General for the first time. As a fellow Welsh lawyer, I look forward to speaking opposite him and to our future debates.

I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing this debate and on the nature of his contribution. He started his speech by defining disability hate crime very precisely. The only point I would add to that and to the debate is that we have been talking about disability hate crime in terms of open hostility, but there is also a very different type of crime: those who befriend disabled and vulnerable people, seek to take them into their confidence and take advantage of them. I hope that, in addition to hate crime, the Solicitor General will consider that strand of crime.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle set out the political context extremely well. Hate crime and disability hate crime have a detrimental impact on victims, their families and friends. This is a key issue that goes to the heart of what we are as a society. We in this place should judge the quality of our policies and those of our Government not by their effect on the strongest but by their effect on the most vulnerable in our society and by the protection those people are given.

This has been a constructive debate. The hon. Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie) made a good point about the sensitivity of the prosecutors of such crimes. Indeed, she asked about a response to the Law Commission report, which I will come to in a moment.

The hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) talked well about raising awareness and supporting disabled people in the reporting process. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has momentarily popped out, spoke powerfully about how crimes are committed online—the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) also made that point—and there has to be a strong and powerful message that the keyboard warriors who spread bile and hatred online have no hiding place behind their monitor and keyboard. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke powerfully about attitudes in our society and what we must tackle in that respect.

I agreed with the vast bulk of the speech made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean, particularly what he said about awareness in schools. He made a number of constructive suggestions, including about support through the criminal justice system as more and more cases are, hopefully, brought. That will clearly be important. However, I want to take him up on one point. He is entirely right that it is not politicians’ fault what the press choose to write, nor should we interfere in that choice, but politicians can create a permissive environment. I will give one specific example. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), said on the “Today” programme in October 2012:

“It is unfair that people listening to this programme going out to work see the neighbour next door with the blinds down because they are on benefits.”

The problem with a statement like that is that, first, it divides people into workers and non-workers. Secondly, it implies that all those on benefits are the same. It also seems to imply an inherent sense of unfairness that people are on benefits. We must be careful with our rhetoric. The environment that it creates can lead to the demonisation of disabled people in our society.

Mr Harper: I tried hard not to be tempted, but the hon. Gentleman has pushed me too far. I take his point, but the former Chancellor made it clear which people he was talking about. The Government made it clear that people who can work should work. He was not attacking people who cannot work, and I do not think that anyone honestly thought that he was. The Government have been clear that we support people who cannot work, but that we expect those who can work to do so, and not to live off others. That is the point that the former Chancellor was making, and it is a reasonable view that I think would be shared by people across the country.

In my experience, the people who get most cross about people who could work but do not are those who live next door to them, who are struggling hard and who see others not doing their fair share. It is in no way an attack on people who cannot work. The Government spend £50 billion a year on supporting disabled people. It is right that we should do so. We will continue to support disabled people who are not able to work, as is right in a civilised society.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: All I can say is that it is a shame that the Chancellor of the Exchequer did not go on to make that distinction when he made those comments on the “Today” programme, which I was careful to quote precisely and not to paraphrase. I am afraid that such comments, in isolation, can have the effect that I mentioned.
I will turn to my remarks to the Solicitor General, because I want to make some constructive contributions. One good point made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean involved the provision of Hansard reports of debates on this subject to the ongoing Crown Prosecution Service consultation. In its 2014 consultation paper on hate crime and whether the current offences should be extended, the Law Commission said that “we share the view expressed by most consultees that it is undesirable for the aggravated offences not to apply equally to hostility based on race, religion, transgender identity, sexual orientation and disability. It sends the wrong message about the seriousness with which such offending is taken and the severity of its impact, if offences attaching a specific aggravated label and a potentially higher sentence only exist in relation to two of the five statutorily protected hate crime characteristics.”

Can the Solicitor General comment on the possibility of reviewing the operation of aggravated offences to consider parity across all protected characteristics?

There is also a great issue involving data. Last month, a report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance found a number of areas of concern involving incidents of hate crime in the UK and apparent failure to prosecute such crimes, including specifically a lack of data on the use of extended sentencing powers. It made a couple of recommendations. One involved sections 145 and 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, with which the Solicitor General should be familiar. Where they are imposed, that should be recorded, including, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, on the criminal records of offenders. I suggest that we also need to collect data on where aggravated offences and enhanced sentencing have been invoked initially but then dropped through the process of accepting a guilty plea. The ECRI report also recommends, finally, that steps be taken to narrow the gap between hate crimes being recorded and subsequently referred for prosecution. I would be grateful if the Solicitor General commented on that in his remarks.

Such measures are extremely important when one looks at the statistics. The latest statistics that I could find, in “Hate crime, England and Wales, 2015 to 2016”, published only last month, show that 3,629 disability hate crimes were recorded by the police in 2015-16, a 42% rise from the previous year. That should be welcomed, of course, but concerns remain that levels of reporting are still extremely low. The 2014-15 national crime survey for England and Wales estimated that the annual figure might be closer to 70,000, which shows that there is much more for us to do.

The Crown Prosecution Service’s own 2016 “Hate Crime Report” showed that 941 of those 3,629 offences, or 26%, were prosecuted, and that 707 of those prosecutions were successful. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle pointed out, that is a 75% conviction rate, which is still below the rate for hate crimes generally, which is 83%. Although we are, admittedly, discussing a low base and small figures, the conviction rate is pretty stubborn. We have managed to move from 503 convictions in 2014-15 to 707, but successful convictions are still around 75%. I also urge the Solicitor General to consider carefully the regional variations, why they exist and what can be done to make the policies comprehensive across this country and give them an impact as close to universal as possible.

Finally, I return to where the debate started. It is vital that we have strong measures, that the Solicitor General reviews and keeps under review the position on aggravated sentencing, that we have strong and robust data and, above all, that we seek with the laws of our land to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

10.37 am

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing the debate; I am profoundly grateful to him. He and others who have taken part will know that the issue of disability hate crime has been close to my heart not just as Solicitor General but as a Back-Bench Member of Parliament, and indeed as a parent, for a number of years.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) made particularly apposite remarks about the fact that many people in our society just do not know somebody with a disability. That lack of understanding and awareness lies at the heart of some of the attitudes that we see towards disability. It is too big a picture to be laid at the feet of any particular Government or of an alleged ideological approach to austerity, which I utterly reject. It is a long-term societal issue, and only in recent years have all of us, irrespective of party, started to wake up to it and put ourselves in the shoes of individuals with disabilities.

I reiterate the Government’s co-ordinated and cross-departmental approach to the issue. I am particularly delighted to welcome the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, whose presence at this Westminster Hall debate eloquently represents her commitment to the issue. We have met about it, and we will continue to meet and, more importantly, to take co-ordinated action to ensure that all relevant parts of Government do everything they can to tackle this scourge, because scourge it is.

I am equally grateful to my right hon. Friend the Minister for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who did so much as Minister for Disabled People to advance the cause, paying attention to the sort of detail that he has raised today. I hope to be able to answer his questions, and indeed those of the hon. Member for Bootle. I will seek to do so in the course of my remarks.

As I said, it is important to put ourselves in the shoes of a person with disability. That person faces three things. First, they sometimes lack the awareness that they have been or continue to be the victim of a crime, because for so many people with disabilities it has become normal and part of their way of life—it is just something that they accept. We know that is not good enough. Secondly, when that lack of awareness ends and a person starts to understand that they are a victim, what do they do? Who will listen to them and help them to report the crime? Thirdly, when that crime is reported, how do the authorities deal with it? Those are the three stages of the problem that need to be understood. It is clear that we need to do more to support people with disabilities at every stage.

I am grateful to the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South Down (Ms Ritchie) for raising the Northern Ireland experience. We have discussed before the Leonard Cheshire initiative, which puts advocacy
at the heart of the project. Advocacy for people with disabilities will be the key to unlocking many of the issues that have come up, and we are seeing that approach taken widely in parts of England, Wales and Scotland. In my own area, Swindon, I am lucky to have the Swindon Advocacy Movement, an organisation that empowers people with disability to understand their rights and entitlements and helps them if they have been the victim of crime or abuse. It is all about a move away from doing things to or for people with disabilities and towards helping people with disabilities to help themselves and empowering them to become part of mainstream society.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran was right to remind us that only 20 years ago, before the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which was passed by a Conservative Government—I am proud of that—people with disabilities were facing a kind of Jim Crow situation. They were not able to access mainstream life and were being excluded—not only physically excluded from premises, but excluded, in a societal way, from mainstream life.

Therein lies one of the problems. One of the perceptions we need to challenge at all times relates to what disability means to people with a disability themselves. We sometimes use the word “vulnerable” a bit carelessly; there is an assumption that just because somebody has a disability then they are automatically vulnerable is not helpful to them. I think a person with a disability would say to us that there are times when they end up in situations that make them more vulnerable than others, but that does not mean that they are vulnerable at all times. Once one starts to make that sort of cosy assumption, the wrong sort of conclusions are reached. For example, people start to ask questions about why people with disabilities go out in public. Why do they go nightclubbing or shopping? Why do they do all these things that put them in danger? That is the wrong approach.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I agree entirely with the point that the Solicitor General is making. Nevertheless, does he accept that there can be situations in which vulnerable people are taken advantage of by confidence tricksters? We should focus on that as well.

The Solicitor General: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point. I welcome him warmly to his position and congratulate him on attaining it. It is a pleasure to work with him. He is quite right to talk about “mate crime”. Perhaps such examples highlight one of the deficiencies and inadequacies of using a phrase such as “hate crime” to describe the full panoply of crimes committed against people with disabilities. Mate crime is an insidious way in which perpetrators gain the confidence of often isolated and sometimes rather lonely people, perhaps with a learning disability such as autism, or another disability, and, using the trust they have built up, proceed to abuse it, very often in the form of financial crime, such as fraud, or worse—violence and sexual crime are also covered by the definition of mate crime. That is worse than confidence tricksters; it is an abuse of trust. In my mind, that makes the crime even more serious.

I am grateful to my right hon. and hon. Friends and Opposition Members for having raised some of the important figures and statistics relating to the increase in the number of reported disability hate crimes and, indeed, prosecutions for those offences. There has also been an increase in the use of the sentence uplifts that are available to judges under section 146 of the Criminal Justice Act 2003, from just over 5% of cases in 2014-15 to 11% of cases in 2015-16. We are coming from a low base, but that is going in the right direction.

The hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) asked about the recording of applications in which there has not been an uplift. I hear what he says, but the difficulty is that the Crown Prosecution Service is currently recording a vast number of indices through the flagging system, and it is difficult for every area of the CPS to record information with precision and then translate it in a way that makes it readily available to people like me. I hear what he says and will certainly ask whether it would be feasible, but I have to put that caveat on his request. It is clear to me that having more data is always useful, but it is then a question of how they are to be used and understood. We need to step back from that to a more fundamental position on training and awareness.

Jim Shannon: I indicated in my contribution that the figure for prosecutions was down in the past year, and asked whether that was because the police were not giving the issue the focus and priority that they should. If the Minister can answer that now, that would be good, but if not I am happy to wait for a response. Is disability hate crime a priority for the police?

The Solicitor General: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance he seeks. On as many of the questions he asked as possible, I shall outline the measures that are being taken. The mandated package of training—to which I think he referred in a question to me in the main Chamber some months ago—has been delivered through a classroom-based approach, as opposed to using the internet. That is very important. It was a mandated package, so it had to be delivered to all prosecutors, and it was delivered between September last year and January this year. In particular, it incorporated the victim’s perspective and provided support on identifying evidence of hostility in order to obtain those important recorded sentencing uplifts.

I parenthesise a moment by reminding Members that section 146 is not the end of the story when it comes to how judges should sentence for offences with a disability element. There are guidelines that allow judges to look at the situation or vulnerability of the victim and their characteristics and take that into account when assessing the overall length of sentence. That message, too, has gone out loudly and clearly to all those involved in the prosecution of crime.

Members should reflect on where we hit a difficulty—perhaps we can debate this in future—which is on how to approach sentencing when it comes to people with invisible, not hidden, disability. I think in particular of learning disability and autism. Far too often, the perpetrator is able to say, “Well, I didn’t know he was autistic.” That puts the judge in a very difficult position, because they then do not have evidence of either hostility or some sort of motivational offence, or that the perpetrator even knew about the victim’s characteristics. We are getting into the debate about the eggshell skull theory,
with which the hon. Member for Torfaen will be familiar, but it is a debate we need to have when it comes to how adequately we protect and support people with invisible disabilities.

I turn to the other questions that Members asked. I am glad to say that the hate crime assurance scheme is happening, and that live files are being tracked as a result. That is helping to support the quality of casework, with real-time scrutiny as cases progress.

As we have seen, that scheme is having results with an increased number of sentencing uplifts being applied. It also checks all finalised hate crime cases, so that we can identify best practice and any lessons that can be learned. In other words, and to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Torfaen, the failed applications are being looked at and that is a vital part of how we can improve our approach.

Members are aware, of course, of the 13-week consultation published by the Crown Prosecution Service in October, which sets out the approach taken by the CPS to such crimes. A plain English version of that consultation is available too, which is particularly important for people with disabilities themselves, so that they can have their voice heard. Also, the legal guidance for prosecutors will be updated and published at the same time as the consultation response, so work is ongoing.

The statement that has been provided by the CPS has been developed with the involvement of interested groups and community representatives, who have highlighted the social model of disability. That model suggests that the prejudice, discrimination and social exclusion experienced by many disabled people is not the inevitable result of their condition but instead stems from the various barriers that they experience daily and that hon. Members have talked about in this debate. That social model is the basis on which the CPS understands, dismantles and reduces the effects of those barriers, as far as we are able to, leading to improved safety and security, access to mainstream life and indeed work, where appropriate, for people with disabilities.

Last month, the CPS also published two guides on the recognition and reporting of hate crimes for individuals and agencies who might be the first to hear about a hate incident. Those guides are intended to increase public confidence and in turn improve reporting levels, so that they more accurately reflect the experience that we know people have in their communities.

We have already discussed such third-party reporting, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) gave an example of it. I was delighted to meet the organisation she referred to when I visited CPS Manchester earlier this year. Indeed, I pay tribute to that hate crime action plan. It has made a number of commitments, which will be delivered by 2020, and I will continue—as a law officer—to work with the CPS, to ensure that perpetrators are punished and to publicise successful prosecutions, because that will create confidence among the members of a community that when hate crime is reported, action will be taken.

New guidance will be produced by the CPS—
Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to interrupt the Solicitor General’s 20-minute speech, but Members will be aware that it is now a courtesy to allow the mover of the motion to wind up the debate.

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to you, Mr Bone, for that clarification. I will conclude by saying that for far too long people with disabilities have accepted being treated as second-class citizens. That is why I commend the work of the CPS in tackling the scourge of hate crime and I again thank the hon. Member for Bootle for raising this important issue.

10.57 am

Peter Dowd: I appreciate the comments of everyone who has participated today; it is an important debate to get out into the open. It is crucial that we push on with this matter and ensure that once an action plan is down on paper—however good or bad those proposals might be—it is put into action; hence my comments to the Minister in relation to some of the points that I raised.

Regarding the comments made by the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), my point was—I was careful to say it—that I did not want to politicise this issue. I was trying to make the point that an environment can develop in which people feel they are having the finger pointed at them. Maybe it is and maybe it is not, but it establishes an environment that is of concern in the round. We have to be very careful that we do not go down the path of having collective bêtes noires—be that immigrants or, as in the past, Irish people or Jews—and so we have an environment in which people can point the finger at others. That takes attention away from the real matter.

I am really pleased that we have had this debate today and I look forward to monitoring the development of these matters in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Crown Prosecution Service’s approach to prosecuting disability hate crime.

10.59 am

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered enhancing Cardiff Central Station.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I am delighted to highlight in this debate a key issue for the Welsh capital: the enhancement of Cardiff Central station. I am delighted also to see here the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), in whose constituency half of the station resides, and the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), and I look forward to their contributions.

Anyone who has been to Cardiff by train will have marvelled at the wonderful listed station building, which shows the significance of this railway hub. Trains from the valleys converge there, providing easy access for passengers to mainline trains heading to Swansea, Newport, Bristol, Swindon, Reading and, of course, London Paddington. No doubt the 13 million-plus passengers who use the station appreciate how its design and structure emphasise the importance of Cardiff as both an economic centre and a key tourist destination. Put simply, Cardiff Central station is the gateway to our capital city and to our nation, Wales, and its significance cannot be underestimated.

However, Cardiff Central needs to move with the times. The bus station opposite was demolished, to be replaced with a new BBC flagship development and top-quality offices. I welcome that development, but I just wish that the cart had not been put before the horse and that a new bus station had been built at the same time, if not before. Nevertheless, not since St David’s 2 has Cardiff seen the scale of redevelopment that will be involved in Central Square and the new transport interchange hub that will be relocated on the edge of it. For someone running a business or catching a bus or a train, Cardiff Central Square will be incredibly impressive, and its success needs to be reflected in our Cardiff Central station.

Network Rail, in its March 2016 “Welsh Route Study”, forecast that the number of passenger journeys through Cardiff Central would be upwards of 23 million by 2023 and 32 million by 2043. I know that the Minister will be aware of those growth projections and of what they mean for a Cardiff Central station that is at capacity now, will be at capacity tomorrow and will certainly be at capacity by 2045. The Welsh capital is a key tourist destination for the United Kingdom; people want to come to Cardiff, more so because of the actions of the UK Government both in the city and across the world. Our Prime Minister is in India right now selling Cardiff as a place to visit and do business, and we need our Cardiff Central station to reflect those ambitions.

Many present here today will know the delights of Cardiff castle and Cardiff bay, and the destination shopping offered by St David’s and St David’s 2. Cardiff has hosted many memorable sporting events. I have mentioned them in the Chamber and in previous Westminster Hall debates, but that does not mean I will be shy in mentioning them again. There have been Football Association cup finals, Ashes cricket and speedway, to name just a few, and there is the excitement about the UEFA champions league final coming in June.
Cardiff Central station is, however, at capacity today, and it will be at capacity tomorrow. Something needs to be done.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman has secured an important debate and I agree with what he has said about the pressures. Cardiff and Vale College and the new businesses that are being built on my side of the station—in my constituency—also put pressure on the station. Will the hon. Gentleman join me in congratulating Cardiff’s Labour council, which has been raising the issue with Network Rail, the Treasury and the Department for Transport for some time? Does he share my concern that we have not had clarity about the important funding that is needed for the governance for railway investment projects—GRIP—studies, which would enable us to go forward with the investment needed to expand the station?

Craig Williams: I will touch shortly on GRIP 2, which is where we are at, and GRIP 1, to which there was a significant private sector contribution, and also a contribution from Network Rail. I want to work with everyone. I will work with Cardiff’s current Labour council—I was a member of the council for eight years—and I want to work with the Labour Welsh Government. However, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the UK Government have been given significant powers and moneys, in the form of £1.2 billion for infrastructure and the city deal. The money is not a great amount in the context of transforming the station now, in phase 1, but bigger ventures are being looked at. If I and the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth agree on something we are bound to be right. I welcome us all working together.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As a former member of Cardiff City Council, I completely agree that it is very important that all parties work together positively to achieve this objective for our wonderful city. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the city deal from which, as he knows, the redevelopment of Cardiff Central station was specifically excluded by the Government. Does he agree, therefore, that it is really important that progress is now made? I think that is what he is calling for today.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is a Treasury Parliamentary Private Secretary, and I, as a former Treasury Whip, hope that this debate has been informed by a little nod and a wink from his boss that we might make some progress in the autumn statement. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can tell the House whether that is true.

Craig Williams: The hon. Gentleman is trying to get me into terrible trouble, so I will happily skirt that matter. As well as the huge infrastructure fund, I have mentioned the city deal and the Welsh Government having access to borrowing powers. It is not always a case of looking up the M4 and waiting for important investment from the UK Government; it is about, quite rightly, working together, across parties, and also with the private sector. I will touch on the developments and on how transforming Central Square enables us to access moneys; it does not always have to be the public sector stepping in.

I want to touch on the situation on match days. The autumn internationals are happening at fast pace—the latest Wales game had a sad outcome, but I am sure we are going onwards and upwards. The struggle at Cardiff Central station was evident during the 2015 rugby world cup, when we hosted more than half a million fans at the eight matches at the then Millennium stadium—now the Principality stadium—in addition to the 160,000 watching in the Cardiff Arms Park fanzone. Considering that only a quarter of the tickets were sold to Welsh postcodes, the stress on the system is evident. I feel for the train operators—for Great Western—because only three of the platforms at Cardiff Central can accommodate trains heading to England. Match days therefore cause capacity problems. A further constraint is that one of those three platforms—platform 0—is too short to accommodate long trains on the services to the east.

The geography of Cardiff city centre is, in my opinion, world leading and brilliant for any sports fan or tourist. The station is certainly world-class for the 20th century—not quite for the 21st, which is why we are here. When someone walks out of the station, they see the Principality stadium—the finest rugby stadium in the world. There is also the SWALEC stadium, where Ashes test cricket takes place, and there are football, athletics and many other stadiums in the city centre. That is a great experience, but it puts more pressure on a station that is already struggling.

The Welsh National Assembly’s former Enterprise and Business Committee produced a very good report, entitled “Rugby World Cup Transport Planning”, which picked up many of the issues, and reiterated the need for substantial investment in the station to meet the expectations of today’s travellers. The agencies involved learned lessons and made substantial changes for the few final rugby world cup games.

The report also highlighted some of the issues with the current arrangements, which I want to dig out. Compared with many newer redeveloped stations, the platforms at Cardiff are narrow and people cram to the edges waiting for trains. That is not what we expect of a modern station. Leading from the platforms are staircases that are no longer fit for purpose at peak times and the subway forces nearly all travellers into a confined area below the platforms, before they spill out into extremely cramped ticket areas. The experience is very similar to that at a crammed London underground station. I can see the hon. Members for Cardiff South and Penarth and for Cardiff West nodding—we have our own experiences up and down that railway.

If we factor in Cardiff’s projected increase in passenger demand, which I have touched on, it is clear that the station, although magnificient, was fit for the 20th century but not the 21st. Waiting outside in the car park to go up old staircases onto narrow platforms is not what a modern rail network wants, or what passengers expect. According to satisfaction surveys, there is a risk that if that issue is not addressed future events might decide to go elsewhere. A busy station that cannot accommodate its current passengers is a disincentive to organisers who could bring prestigious events to our Welsh capital city. Those events are the bread and butter of not just our local but our national economy, and I am incredibly proud of that as a Welshman and as a Welsh MP.
Any redevelopment must respect the existing structure, and it is good to see that the initial artist’s proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the building’s existing frontage and protecting its listing. The frontage is far more than bricks and mortar. I reiterate that for decades it has been the first part of Cardiff that people see. Investors come out and they see “Great Western Railway”. It is something to protect and cherish. I pay tribute to WalesOnline, which helped and the plan to deliver, and they are getting more welcome. I know that the team have got the ambition hugely complicated and hugely expensive, but hugely it is the largest investment since Victorian times. It is the team in Wales operating the Wales and Borders network, the journey time from Cardiff Central to Paddington, The Great Western main line is being electrified, reducing investing in our railways, particularly on the London to Members for Cardiff West and for Cardiff South and redevelopment of Cardiff Central: funding. The hon. price tag. We want something that protects the arcades of our city that increasingly happen in so many major developments. that the redevelopment must respect the heritage, but and Penarth, which is so important to my constituents constituency of the hon. Member for Cardiff South to the south of the station, such as the redevelopment and it is good to see that the initial artist’s proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the Any redevelopment must respect the existing structure, and it is good to see that the initial artist’s proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the building’s existing frontage and protecting its listing. The frontage is far more than bricks and mortar. I reiterate that for decades it has been the first part of Cardiff that people see. Investors come out and they see “Great Western Railway”. It is something to protect and cherish. I pay tribute to WalesOnline, which helped and the plan to deliver, and they are getting more welcome. I know that the team have got the ambition hugely complicated and hugely expensive, but hugely it is the largest investment since Victorian times. It is the team in Wales operating the Wales and Borders network, the journey time from Cardiff Central to Paddington, The Great Western main line is being electrified, reducing investing in our railways, particularly on the London to Members for Cardiff West and for Cardiff South and redevelopment of Cardiff Central: funding. The hon. price tag. We want something that protects the arcades of our city that increasingly happen in so many major developments. that the redevelopment must respect the heritage, but and Penarth, which is so important to my constituents constituency of the hon. Member for Cardiff South to the south of the station, such as the redevelopment and it is good to see that the initial artist’s proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the Any redevelopment must respect the existing structure, and it is good to see that the initial artist’s proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the building’s existing frontage and protecting its listing. The frontage is far more than bricks and mortar. I reiterate that for decades it has been the first part of Cardiff that people see. Investors come out and they see “Great Western Railway”. It is something to protect and cherish. I pay tribute to WalesOnline, which helped and the plan to deliver, and they are getting more welcome. I know that the team have got the ambition hugely complicated and hugely expensive, but hugely it is the largest investment since Victorian times. It is the team in Wales operating the Wales and Borders network, the journey time from Cardiff Central to Paddington, The Great Western main line is being electrified, reducing investing in our railways, particularly on the London to Members for Cardiff West and for Cardiff South and redevelopment of Cardiff Central: funding. The hon. price tag. We want something that protects the arcades of our city that increasingly happen in so many major developments. that the redevelopment must respect the heritage, but and Penarth, which is so important to my constituents constituency of the hon. Member for Cardiff South to the south of the station, such as the redevelopment and it is good to see that the initial artist’s proposals from Network Rail do just that, working around the

We have seen the money spent in Reading on widening platforms and increasing capacity. It is clear that as capacity is increased up the line, it adds pressure to where we have not done that. Newport station was wisely invested in for the 2010 Ryder cup. I do not for a second bash Newport for that, but it is the third busiest railway station in Wales and it has been redeveloped. We should look at the busiest railway station in Wales, which is, unabashedly, Cardiff Central. Without funding from the Department for Transport, the Welsh Government and a contribution from Cardiff Council, the scheme could falter. Network Rail advises that it has done as much as possible within the existing funds. It has completed its initial vision, but it now anticipates it needs something in the region of £4 million to £5 million to move forward with GRIP 2 and the affordability study. Network Rail can then put forward its business case. To my mind it will be easily made, because of the growth projections and the capacity bottlenecks.

We all agree that Cardiff Central needs enhancing, but there is concern over where the money comes from. I do not pretend that it is unlimited—the hon. Member for Cardiff West alluded to our experiences in the Treasury—and I get the concerns that the Department for Transport has expressed about investing everywhere in the UK all at once. The redevelopment represents value for money, but it needs innovative funding solutions. Network Rail is keen to work with partners and current developers around Cardiff Central. A flagship BBC building and new office blocks are going up, and a big Government building is happening somewhere in the city centre, and they need to liaise. We also have the south Wales metro, which will happen mainly on the back of the Cardiff city deal. Once the Welsh Government let us know what they want—whether it is light rail or heavy rail or something else—that will free some contributions to the network so that it becomes a fully functioning transport interchange hub.

The crucial issue for the station’s enhancement is timescale, especially as the Central Square redevelopment is under way at pace. Designs have been published, but they must be completed before Network Rail’s control period 6 starts in 2019 if we are to get there in a timely fashion. Only through that can the Cardiff Central station redevelopment be delivered quickly and completed before the end of CP6.

The station can also match some of its competitors in other ways. I want to dwell on this point. I know that the Arriva Trains Wales franchise is being transferred to the Welsh Government and is coming up for tender in 2018. There is massive potential there. Cardiff Central station is organised and run by Arriva Trains Wales. I am not going to bash it, but I will say that most major stations are run by Network Rail. I get that the Minister will have to be careful, given the cross-devolution issues here, but Network Rail needs control of that station. It can then be innovative and work with private sector partners. Cardiff is going to grow and grow, and its residents want to travel using Cardiff Central station, but with a nod to our Welsh heritage. Great Western Railway cites examples such as Edinburgh’s Haymarket station, which was rebuilt in 2013. To dwell on the point, Arriva Trains Wales’s customer satisfaction is heavily affected by Cardiff Central and its capacity issues. Whatever new station we base it on, Cardiff Central desperately needs enhancing.

The graphics suggest new access above the platforms, an increase in retail space and a canopy across to the new bus station, which we are shortly to hear a lot more about. I hope. Those are much-needed and overdue improvements that will address issues with travellers’ experiences. Additionally, a number of constituents have been in touch with suggestions of improvements around Cardiff Central, including not only the link with the bus interchange and some kind of canopy, but also things to the south of the station, such as the redevelopment of the Brains site and potential drop-off points. I am incredibly interested to watch what happens in the constituency of the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, which is so important to my constituents in the north of the city. Constituents have suggested that the redevelopment must respect the heritage, but they do not want one of those “plastic shopping malls” that increasingly happen in so many major developments. We want something that protects the arcades of our city and nods to our heritage, although that all comes with a price tag.

I will now focus on the pressing issue behind the redevelopment of Cardiff Central: funding. The hon. Members for Cardiff West and for Cardiff South and Penarth have alluded to that. The Government are investing in our railways, particularly on the London to Wales route. I would welcome a comment from the Minister on how this morning’s announcement on electrification will affect progress up the line to Cardiff. The Great Western main line is being electrified, reducing the journey time from Cardiff Central to Paddington, and I welcome that. Talking yesterday to our terrific team in Wales operating the Wales and Borders network, it is the largest investment since Victorian times. It is hugely complicated and hugely expensive, but hugely welcome. I know that the team have got the ambition and the plan to deliver, and they are getting more commercially minded in looking at alternative funding methods for some of the projects I am talking about. I pay tribute to them.

We have seen the money spent in Reading on widening platforms and increasing capacity. It is clear that as capacity is increased up the line, it adds pressure to where we have not done that. Newport station was wisely invested in for the 2010 Ryder cup. I do not for a second bash Newport for that, but it is the third busiest railway station in Wales and it has been redeveloped. We should look at the busiest railway station in Wales, which is, unabashedly, Cardiff Central. Without funding from the Department for Transport, the Welsh Government and a contribution from Cardiff Council, the scheme could falter. Network Rail advises that it has done as much as possible within the existing funds. It has completed its initial vision, but it now anticipates it needs something in the region of £4 million to £5 million to move forward with GRIP 2 and the affordability study. Network Rail can then put forward its business case. To my mind it will be easily made, because of the growth projections and the capacity bottlenecks.

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While I am delighted to talk about that major vision, I conclude on a shorter-term, phased approach. I have spoken more broadly about the big vision that we all support to get the station there by the time we have the huge projected growth, but speaking to interested parties and developers in the run-up to the debate, it has become clear that there is an easy, deliverable, quick solution. In fact, a leading developer and other stakeholders have plans for an early delivery phase to coincide with larger phases going forward, although that would take time and money to get into a future control period.

In closing, I dwell on that point for a moment. The plan is for a quick phase. With all Brunel’s foresight, the station as it is currently constituted goes under the platforms quite well. There is currently a WH Smiths, but there is a way of reconfiguring the station, in my opinion and in the opinion of experts. The staircases could be reversed and things could be opened up. I am led to believe, although I am not an expert, that a similar sum to the £4 million to £5 million for a GRIP study could—we do not want that money redeployed, because we need it for the study—in an early phase transform the experience of people walking out into Cardiff Central. I implore the Minister to enlighten us about his plans and vision for our great station. I implore him, or someone in his Department, to come down to Cardiff to have a roundtable with Network Rail, stakeholders and the four Members of Parliament for Cardiff and to talk to developers to see what can be done in the short term with the Welsh Government and the council. Through that, we can ensure that we tackle the capacity problem now while looking to the longer term for the 2030s and 2040s. With that I will conclude. I hope that we can phase the Cardiff Central enhancements.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Bone. It is my first time speaking as a Minister in Westminster Hall. I find it hard to believe that it has taken until now for rail issues to be brought to this Chamber since I was appointed, but here we are, and I will do my best.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) on securing the debate. He set out his ideas and a compelling vision for Wales’s capital city, Cardiff, including the future role it can play and the part its station will have in the city’s development. I fully appreciate the importance of Cardiff and the station to the vision for Wales. The UK Government have already shown their commitment to the station by funding an additional platform and more capacity at the station in recent years. Network Rail is investing more than £300 million through the Cardiff area signalling renewal project. The majority of that investment is focused in and around the Cardiff Central station area and between Queen Street and the Canton depot. We have also provided additional enhancement funding of £27 million to support capacity, including the development of a new platform at Cardiff Central, which will be brought into use this Christmas.

I noted my hon. Friend’s comments regarding the lessons learned from the rugby world cup. I too looked at the Enterprise and Business Committee’s report published by the Welsh Assembly, and I noted the problems with the first three matches and the ensuing queueing that then occurred. I gather that lessons were learned promptly and urgently and improvements were made for subsequent games. A larger gate line has been installed to enable improved passenger flows, for example, along with the new ticket office and a passenger waiting room on platform 8. That has been achieved by moving the old crew accommodation out of the station into a new modular building off platform 8. The new platform will be commissioned over the Christmas and new year period, and I hope that it will make a positive improvement.

We recognise that there will be a significant uplift in passenger capacity, but demand will still increase, as was pointed out, until 2043. We are currently undergoing testing and validating with colleagues from Network Rail on what the pace of the growth will be, when it will occur and what demand will be placed on Cardiff Central station. We hope to provide better and more reliable journeys into and out of the station, allowing it to accommodate the forecast growth for some time to come.

Stephen Doughty: I note what the Minister has said about growth, but it is not only growth in the city centre that is crucial to the project. I have long argued for the reopening of stations throughout the east of the city in places such as Rumney, Splott and St Mellons. Expanding capacity in Cardiff Central is crucial to that. Will the Minister look at that with Network Rail as part of a wider strategy for enhancing transport in that area?

Paul Maynard: I very much welcome what the hon. Gentleman says. Plans are ongoing to improve the service on the Valley Metro lines and to increase devolution to the Welsh Government over how they configure plans for the future. We are currently waiting for the initial industry advice as to what the priorities are for both the Welsh Government and Network Rail in the Wales area. Once we have that industry advice and the key asks with regard to Wales, we can start to work out what our priorities are for control period 6. The hon. Gentleman has made his point and I am sure my officials have heard it, as will Network Rail, and we will be in touch.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North mentioned, we are investing heavily in new trains across the network. We will be replacing the ageing high speed trains on the Great Western and south Wales main lines with a new fleet of bi-mode intercity express trains. These will offer more seats and up to 40% more capacity during peak times into Paddington, and will be reducing journey times from south Wales to London by about 15 minutes as electrification progresses. Bi-mode trains are capable of meeting the existing line speeds in south Wales, but will also provide more leg and luggage space to enable a better ride for passengers. They will enable us to markedly increase capacity to meet forecast growth on this inter-city route, with improved service reliability and reduced environmental impact. The electrification of the Great Western mainline will bring direct benefits for Wales, as will our provision of £125 million towards the cost of the valley lines electrification.

Kevin Brennan: I have looked at the Minister’s written statement. Can he confirm that it will have no impact whatever or cause any delay to the electrification that he has just mentioned?
Paul Maynard: I noted the hon. Gentleman’s great efforts to try to find the written statement on his mobile phone, and I congratulate him on doing that so adroitly. I am happy to confirm that my focus is on making sure that we deliver electrification to Cardiff on time, and we will make sure that passengers in south Wales benefit to the fullest degree possible. We are also investing in schemes such as the western rail link to Heathrow, which will also benefit passengers in Wales. Such improvements should all make south Wales a more attractive place for businesses to locate and for tourism to thrive.

However, we know that Cardiff Central is the busiest station in Wales. That is borne out in the recently published Network Rail Welsh route study, which forecasts that the number of passengers using Cardiff Central station could grow from 13 million in 2013 to as many as 32 million by 2043. Meeting such growth will bring further challenges. That is why the rail industry introduced a long-term planning process designed to plan the long-term capability of the network up to 30 years into the future. The Welsh route study looked at demand and capability for the period up to 2043, with particular emphasis on the next rail funding period from 2019. It made it clear that by 2024, passengers at Cardiff Central will experience higher levels of congestion around the platform, subway and stairs at peak times and that queues could form when trains are delayed. It identified a case for further platform and capacity improvements and concluded that the need for wider regeneration in the city supports the redevelopment of Cardiff Central station as a choice for funders in the next funding period from 2019. We will look closely at that initial industry advice when it comes shortly. The rail industry will present its advice to help us understand how to meet forecast demand, and it will of course include options that affect Wales.

We will continue to engage with the Welsh Government to understand their priorities for the future, and Network Rail has started to identify schemes that it thinks should be considered for development. I am pleased to note that Network Rail is working closely with City of Cardiff Council and developers to align its plans with the already committed investment plans for the enterprise zone, including those for Central Square at the front of the station. Although there are clearly issues that need to be addressed at the station, the redevelopment scheme suggested in the route study is designed as a stimulus to wider local economic growth, rather than to facilitate forecast rail passenger growth, so we would expect other beneficiaries to contribute towards achieving those goals.

In addition, stations are designed to meet a specific rail need, not those arising from special events. I hope that all those involved in event planning in the city will consider the specific arrangements they need to make to handle their customers as they travel to and from the venue. It is imperative that City of Cardiff Council, the Welsh Government, local authorities and local developers work with Network Rail and through the framework outlined in the capital region city deal to identify further sources of funding for the wider plans to redevelop the station and the adjacent area, in a similar fashion to the joint contribution made by Birmingham City Council and the west midlands authorities towards the redevelopment of Birmingham New Street station. I am told that those who attended our party conference last month saw that it was a great success and an attractive and pleasant station to be in.

The capital region city deal, signed in March this year, will provide £1.2 billion in infrastructure investment, of which the UK Government have contributed £500 million. It sets out delivery of the south Wales metro, including the valley lines electrification programme, as a key priority. Specifically, it has provided local partners with the powers and resources needed to unlock significant economic growth across the Cardiff capital region.

Transport for Wales has been established by the Welsh Government to help deliver the new franchise and the next phase of the metro project. We welcome the shortlist of companies that have successfully pre-qualified to bid in the competition. It is positive news both for Welsh passengers and for those in the English borders region. We will continue to work constructively with the Welsh Government and with Transport for Wales to make sure that the franchise delivers for passengers. We are pleased that we have reached agreement in principle on arrangements to ensure that suitable cross-border links are maintained and developed in co-operation between the Secretary of State for Transport and Welsh Ministers.

We are obviously seeing growth through the first phase of the metro. It has led to improvements including Ebbw Vale Town station, which has already seen some 800,000 journeys annually. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North mentioned the development at Newport, including the new station at Pye Corner, which demonstrates that there is a demand for new stations, and we have schemes in place that can enable them. Phase 2 will follow. The Department for Transport will continue to support the Welsh Government in their procurement for the franchise, as well as the infrastructure proposals that Transport for Wales is still evolving, but we know that some of their plans for a mix of light and heavy rail on the metro lines will have an impact on both Cardiff Central and Queen Street stations and will have to be taken into account.

In conclusion, I hope my hon. Friend will be reassured that the Government remain committed to improving rail services not only in Wales in general, but in Cardiff in particular. We still look to the Welsh Government and City of Cardiff Council to continue to play their co-operative role in developing the plans, and I am sure my hon. Friend will join me in looking forward to the first of the changes over Christmas and new year when platform 8 is opened. I am sure he will have an opportunity to make use of it sooner than I will. I thank him for his time today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
The West Anglia Taskforce was launched by the former Chancellor and the former Transport Secretary in 2015, but with the intervention of the general election, it did not get down to work until halfway through last year. The terms of reference were to look at opportunities to improve connections to Stansted and Cambridge from Liverpool Street station and to encourage opportunities for economic growth along the route, including the expansion of services in the Lea valley. I was asked to chair the taskforce and was supported by a very distinguished group of people, who freely gave of their time and brought their great experience to bear on the subject. We quickly found that, both geographically and politically, we were as one on what needed to be done.

We concentrated particularly on the need for four-tracking the railway between Coppermill junction, just south of Tottenham Hale station, to Broxbourne junction, just north of Broxbourne mainline station. We resisted all the various embellishments and extras that were pressed upon us, such as the four-tracking going further north, extensions of lines or new stations in various places. We took a very limited view, because they would simply add on to the cost.

South of Tottenham Hale remains a problem on the railway because from there it is a two-track railway through Clapton station and three other inner London stations, to Bethnal Green. Services to those two stations frequently hold up other trains seeking to move as fast as journeys allow to the more northerly outer London stations. By recommending the four-tracking of the railway, we believe that nothing would be spoiled. Other things could be done later, but four-tracking the railway impedes no other embellishment.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on this excellent report, which has cross-party support, as I hope the Minister knows. My right hon. Friend is right to focus on four-tracking. In his view, are the short-term improvements the report recommends supportive of the long-term goal? That is what many of my constituents will want to know.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: Yes. I do not think there is any inconsistency. I will refer to those other improvements that can be made in the short term, but ultimately it is as plain as a pikestaff that if one wants to have fast services on this railway to stations such as Bishop’s Stortford, Audley End, Whittlesford Parkway and Cambridge, let alone to the airport, they have to be able to overtake the trains that are stopping at Ponders End, Brimsdown and so on. Anything that can be done to improve the service in the meantime we shall certainly be commending.

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that too many of our commuters are paying a premium rate for a second-rate service, due to the way that the franchises are structured and the fees are taken by Government from those franchisees? What we need is the Government to invest in providing a premium service.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I agree and I shall add to my hon. Friend’s comments later. It is asking a lot to expect people to pay more money each year for a service that has actually been getting worse, not better. That needs addressing.

There is a challenge and an opportunity, and we tried to deal with them succinctly and powerfully in the taskforce report. The Minister probably knows it backwards by now; he was good enough to attend the launch and we were delighted by that. Today he has probably had to quickly refocus on this part of the railway network after dealing with the issue of Cardiff Central station.

Demand has increased on this railway over the years. More houses and more businesses will add to the number of people travelling on the railway. With all the houses that we know are due to be built over the next 15 years, not only in the district of Uttlesford, but in east Hertfordshire, Braintree, south Cambridgeshire and so on, commuters need a railway that offers reliability, comfort and speed. None of that can be guaranteed at present with the state of the railway. Journeys have got longer and more expensive, in older trains on rickety infrastructure. I commend the fact that, having won the new franchise, Abellio Greater Anglia is putting money aside to refurbish—I think the term used is “refresh”—some of the railway carriages with which it has been saddled, but as ageing actresses are inclined to say, there is only so much that make-up can do.

It goes without saying that what commuters from our increased population want is also required by the world-class businesses that we have along the Lea valley and north all the way to Cambridge. World-class businesses need a first-class railway. We also have to consider the travel needs of those in inner London. Transport for London has great ambition for a metro service with frequent trains and, clearly, population build-up in north-east London, through which this line runs, will add pressure.

The other point to address is that the jobs being created further out of London will not be filled by people already living in those areas. The unemployment rate in the Saffron Walden constituency is 0.7%. Stansted Airport alone is scheduled to create 10,000 jobs over the next 15 years, never mind the other businesses large and small. They will have to find workers from elsewhere and the railway is the key. People could travel from east and north London. If their railway line were reliable
and swift, they could travel that way to work, which would ease the pressures on the social communities in which the businesses exist.

There is also the matter of freight. It is generally accepted that getting freight off the road and on to the rail as far as possible is a good thing. We should think of accommodating extra train paths that would enable more freight trains to run without interfering with the passenger traffic during the day.

Then, of course, there is Stansted airport, which is designated London’s third airport. It is there; it is a fact. Many of my constituents and people in neighbouring constituencies did not want a third London airport at an inland site, but it is there. It has got the legal right to increase its capacity from 24 million to 35 million passengers per annum, and there is no doubt that, as Gatwick has shown, more than that can be done on a single runway. A decision has only now been taken about building another runway in London—the Government have chosen Heathrow—but the most optimistic date for it to be operational is 2025. Many of us think that even that is optimistic. Given that Gatwick and Heathrow are virtually full, where in the meantime is extra traffic to London going to go? It seems that the only realistic spare capacity that could be employed is at Stansted, so how many more people will want to use that railway line? They will press it to breaking point if we are not careful.

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend’s point is correct. Even if there is no further growth in the next 10 years, the service our constituents currently receive is inadequate. Our line is not fit for purpose. There is no more capacity on it that can be utilised comfortably.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: That is right, and I thank my hon. Friend for underlining that point. If we consider the airport alone—and leave aside business growth and the houses that will yield more future commuters—it is hard to see how the railway can bear the strain unless we take action along the lines of the taskforce’s recommendations.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): The concern among my constituents is that their service is already poor, so the four-tracking is definitely needed, but they will lose out further if the four-tracking does not happen because Stansted and the further services will be the priority, and the service on the locally stopping trains will become even poorer than it currently is.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I very much take the right hon. Lady’s point. The history of the past few years shows that, in the end, everybody suffers. The Stansted Express started as a service that was non-stop, apart from Tottenham Hale, and did the journey in 41 minutes. It now takes 47 minutes, and some of the trains take longer than that, because everybody has had to compromise and the misery has been shared. It is an utterly ridiculous situation.

It is possible that we could get earlier and later trains for the airport service. That seems sensible. Improved connectivity is needed with Stratford, which is, of course, a major centre of activity in our capital city. Four-tracking would pave the way for the Crossrail 2 project, which will be of enormous benefit to Greater London and will bring a lot of investment into a sector that has been relatively starved, compared with other parts of the city. That vital new railway, which was originally based on the idea of the Chelsea-Hackney underground line, will be an important link between the gateway to east Anglia and south-west London. I do not want to get into an argument about which stations will be served if the project goes ahead. The way Crossrail 2 is conceived at the moment, it cannot go ahead unless there is four-tracking along the west Anglia line.

I have used the word “need” a great deal, because it has to be stressed. Right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken pointed to their constituents’ needs. The growing pressures simply cannot be met on a two-track railway. The fact that we can think of extra track capacity being installed only by 2026 is a cause of deep worry, because the pressures are going to get much bigger before that. In every year in which nothing is done, the problems get worse for all our constituents. Last Wednesday, a train failed, and there was an 87-minute delay on a journey that was supposed to take 47 minutes from the airport. If the situation gets worse, I would advise Abellio Greater Anglia to adjust its order to Bombardier for new trains to include sleeping cars.

We do not have the luxury of an easy alternative to four-tracking. Incremental improvements will help but, in the view of the taskforce, they alone will not get us to Cambridge in 60 minutes and Stansted in 40, which is our aim. If the Government are minded to see this problem as one that has to be resolved, committing to an early start will fuel, not frustrate, the economic growth on which we vitally depend. I am conscious of the fact that the Minister and the Government are beset by other claims for further improvements to our railway network. I do not want to detract from the big strides that have been made over recent years, but there is still a lot to be done. A document seeking a comprehensive metro service for our capital city has been published, and it is right and proper that that is accommodated. There is also the report of the Great Eastern Main Line Taskforce, which is headed by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Chloe Smith). I declare an interest in those recommendations, too, because a number of my constituents use Chelmsford station in particular for the metro service. The metro aims, the great eastern main line and the west Anglia main line are all jostling, trying to get the Minister’s attention and indeed that of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. One has to be realistic: I do not think that all those ambitions can be met at exactly the same time, but it is not possible to do 12 trains an hour on a two-track system while maintaining fast services to the outer London destinations. There will have to be some give and take as improvements begin. Understandably, I am today concentrating on the west Anglia component.

The Government have accepted a bid from Abellio Greater Anglia to run the greater Anglia franchise with—astonishingly—new trains across the piece. Every single carriage is going to be replaced. They understand that Stansted airport will expand its passenger throughput and create more jobs in the next few years, and they have given a benevolent nod in the direction of the Crossrail 2 project. I say to the Government: therefore join the dots. Why have new trains with improved acceleration capacity if they do not have the tracks on which to use it? All those things logically point to the fact that the infrastructure has got to be improved.
I turn again to the challenge. I defy any train operator possessing a collaborative workforce and equipped with new trains to provide an acceptable, let alone an enhanced, level of service on a railway that has defective points, signals and overhead wires, too many crossings, and a gross lack of track capacity. That sentence is a summary of the taskforce’s assessment, in respect of which it has offered a staged remedy.

Apart from the challenge, there is the opportunity. There is some hope. In the taskforce report, we refer to the fact that new, better performing trains for inner London services are on order and will be delivered in 2018-19. The STAR project, with a third track between Stratford and Angel Road, will be delivered in 2018. Network Rail is reviewing the crossings, of which there are 82 between London Liverpool Street and Cambridge, to see what potential there is to contribute to line speed and reliability improvements.

The train operator, confirmed as Abellio Greater Anglia, will examine the scope for timetable adjustments within existing constraints, including the introduction of earlier trains to serve the airport. There is a commitment, to which I have referred, to introduce a complete set of new trains by 2020. Four-tracking the railway, therefore, between Coppermill junction and Broxbourne junction by 2026—if that is the earliest it can be done—will be a major contribution towards the development of Crossrail 2, which will be an enormous bonus for passengers, benefiting people travelling to and from outer London destinations as well as supporting metro services and housing growth.

Four-tracking, which is the principal, and admittedly most expensive, recommendation of the taskforce, is the essential precursor to Crossrail 2. It will supercharge connectivity between Surrey, London and Hertfordshire, and provide an important gateway to the Anglian region.

Mr Charles Walker: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. Before he concludes his speech, will he cover the support he has received, as we all have, from the local authorities along the track? Their contribution has also been important.

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. Perhaps I had rather glossed over that in reference to the composition of the taskforce, but we have had full representation from local authority people from different points along the line as part of the taskforce. They have bought into this plan completely, and we have also had the support of the local enterprise partnerships. What has been stressed is that local authorities and business can assist in bringing forward as early as possible the infrastructure improvements, if they can be prioritised, and therefore ensure that any money going, to which they can contribute, will help the project to come to the top of the pile.

We ended up by believing that the goal should be Cambridge in 60 and Stansted in 40. I say to the Minister: let us get on with it.

2.53 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) on securing the debate and on the report that we are debating. As chair of the West Anglia Taskforce, he has helped to make the strongest possible case for investment in rail to support growth. I pay tribute all members of the taskforce, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), for their hard work. They have produced a comprehensive and timely report that I have no problem wholeheartedly endorsing. I would like to give a special mention to my friend and fellow Enfieldian, Doug Taylor, the leader of Enfield Council and one of the taskforce’s 16 members. I was pleased to hear the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden pay tribute to the council leaders and councils who are supportive of the taskforce’s work.

Mr Charles Walker: May I pay tribute to Mark Mills-Bishop? He is the leader of Broxbourne Council, which has also been entirely engaged in the process.

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. The taskforce is a fine example of Members of Parliament and their local authorities working closely together on something that is so important to their local areas’ development and economic development.

In championing the development of the west Anglia main line corridor, our council leader, Doug Taylor, has played an important role in making Enfield’s case for why the upgrade of the line is so vital for local residents and the economic development of our borough. I am sure the same is true for Broxbourne.

The primary focus of my speech will be on the potential benefits to be unlocked in Enfield, from transport to growth and productivity, employment and housing, by four-tracking the west Anglia main line in advance of Crossrail 2. Many of my constituents will agree with the taskforce’s analysis that rail services along the west Anglia main line are “relatively slow” and “infrequent” and that “the line lacks resilience.” In fact, I would be willing to bet that a fair few would say that is putting it mildly. I receive many emails from constituents frustrated with the service who do not put it quite so mildly, and understandably so.

Mr Walker: I am sure that, like me, the right hon. Lady also gets many representations from constituents about the appalling performance of the Hertford loop line and Great Northern. We have twin problems that we need to deal with.

Joan Ryan: Indeed I do. In fact, I travel on Gavia’s service on the Hertford loop almost every day, as I know the hon. Gentleman does, so I can give testimony to that. I also have experience of turning up at Liverpool Street to get the Stansted Express only to find a huge number of very frustrated passengers—they would be passengers if they could get on a train—many of whom are frantic that they will miss their flight. That cannot be good for Stansted or any of the development in business that we wish to see up the Lea valley corridor and in the Cambridge-Stansted corridor. It is most serious. In Enfield we are trapped between these two train lines, and it seems we have been talking about four-tracking for a long time.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I have bulging case files in my constituency office from local commuters who have contacted me time and time again to complain about last-minute cancellations on the line. The only thing that surprises me—I am pleased that it is the case—is that they will not give up. They are not going to get used to this. It has to be addressed.
[Joan Ryan]

As the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden said in the foreword to the taskforce’s report, “people travelling to work require reliability”. Their jobs and livelihoods depend on that. I met with the managing director of Abellio Greater Anglia, Jamie Burles, recently and raised the concerns of passengers facing cancellations, delays and poor service every day on the west Anglia main line. With a new franchise agreement secured, Abellio has ambitious plans to improve the customer experience.

While we need urgent improvements in the short term, Abellio’s promise to replace its current rolling stock with faster, more reliable trains by September 2020 is welcome. I fear that many of my constituents will stand back with horror at the idea of another four years of where we are now, but I also recognise what the right hon. Gentleman said about the refresh of the trains. No matter what improvements Abellio may make, services for my constituents will continue to be severely hampered unless we are able to upgrade the current twin-tracking of the line from Coppermill junction through Enfield and towards Broxbourne junction.

The limited space on the tracks affects journey times, reliability and capacity, as we have heard. I was not surprised to learn that a Network Rail assessment indicated that four-tracking this section of the line could reduce delays by half. Greater capacity, however, would not only mean greater reliability; it would also mean faster and more frequent trains, with 12 more trains per hour in each direction from Crossrail 2. Frankly, that would transform the lives of commuters and rail users in Enfield, and the improvements might also result in another huge benefit for residents—a better quality of life.

The borough of Enfield is bounded to the north by the M25 and to the south by the North circular, the A406. Other major arterial roads cut through Enfield, such as the Great Cambridge Road or A10, the Hertford Road, Bullsmoor Lane and Mallison Avenue. They are all heavily congested. My constituents living on or around those roads have had their lives blighted for too many years by pollution and poor air quality. Furthermore, now we know what we know about NOx—oxides of nitrogen—and what a poisonous form of pollution they are, that is even more worrying.

I take the point made by the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden about freight, because that is a major issue for us. Bullsmoor Lane, for example, is pretty much an extension of the M25, with huge lorries coming down it all day long, on to Mallison, to come down into London, or going back the other way. All that freight should be on the railways, but how can we persuade people of that, given the state of the service? The lorries are pumping out NOx just at the level of pushchairs with children in, or little ones going to school, and they are sucking everything in. We know that will be affected for the rest of their lives. The situation is very serious.

Investment in transport infrastructure is so important to help tackle such problems. As the report states: “Rail improvements can encourage more people to travel by train instead of car, helping to reduce the number of cars on the road and reducing harmful CO2 and particulate emissions.” That is exactly what Enfield residents need, what they want to hear and what they want to see.

On growth and productivity, Enfield Council, through initiatives such as the north-east Enfield area action plan, is seeking to bring more inward investment, development and regeneration opportunities to that part of the borough. The north-east Enfield area stretches from the M25 southwards to Ponders End and includes the communities of Enfield Lock, Enfield Highway, Turkey Street and Southbury in my constituency, as well as Ponders End in Edmonton. The area sits at the heart of the Lea valley corridor, along the route of the west Anglia main line. It is home to the second largest industrial estate in the capital, at Brimsdown.

We are fortunate to have some world-leading technology companies with factories or depots in the area, such as Siemens, Johnson Matthey and the defence contractors Kelvin Hughes and ChartCo. Also, over the past few years, in that part of the borough and elsewhere we have seen a growth in scientific and technical microbusinesses. Enfield has a well-deserved reputation for innovation and enterprise.

Securing further investment, however, is crucial to maximising Enfield’s potential. The upgrading of the west Anglia main line, with its more reliable and frequent rail service, will widen the labour catchment areas for business; it will help to attract new businesses to north-east Enfield; and it will ensure that businesses that are already there will want to stay and grow. Russell Gould from Kelvin Hughes says on page 19 of the report: “It is critically important that Kelvin Hughes and ChartCo have efficient, fast and reliable commuting connections in and out of London. Kelvin Hughes supports any initiative that enables us to maintain and expand our competitiveness.”

Anyone who wants to see Enfield’s incredible potential only has to look at the Meridian Water development—the 85 hectare, £3.5 billion investment that will provide 10,000 new homes, new leisure facilities, schools, jobs and a new train station over the next 20 years. Given that the borough of Enfield is already the fifth most populous in the capital and is, according to the latest Greater London Authority figures, due to become the fourth most populous by 2026, those new homes are very important to the future development of the borough, as well as to the quality of life I mentioned.

Ensuring the success of new housing developments, however, is contingent upon significant improvements first being made to Enfield’s transport infrastructure. Enfield Council has already made good progress in co-ordinating the essential infrastructure to ensure that the Meridian Water scheme is a success, securing an investment of £122 million for essential rail infrastructure and station improvements. In addition, the advent of four-tracking, as a precursor to Crossrail 2, will help spur much-needed redevelopment in north-east Enfield and beyond. As Doug Taylor, the leader of Enfield Council, said:

“The council fully supports the transformational potential of Crossrail 2. We are confident the scheme will unlock tens of thousands of homes and jobs along the wider Upper Lee Valley.”

Should all that come to pass, Enfield certainly has a bright future. The compelling case for investment made in the taskforce’s report would, if implemented, play a crucial role in enabling my borough to succeed. I join my colleagues from across the House, in particular those with constituencies running up the west Anglia main line, in calling on the Government to give the green light to this vital investment as soon as possible. I
look forward to the Minister’s response and to learning more about how the Government will deliver the taskforce’s recommendations. I also assure the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden, Sir Alan Haselhurst, of my support for the Government’s investment in the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium, but in many places. Such issues are very real and urgent.

We also know that the corridor the west Anglia main line serves is economically significant. It is described in the report as a “vital region” for the UK’s economy, and by the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium as a strongly entrepreneurial hub of national innovation and knowledge, “driving UK growth and economic dynamism.”

While pointing to the significant development and regeneration potential of both London and Cambridge, the consortium also suggests there are major development sites along the corridor in Broxbourne, Harlow, Peterborough, South Cambridgeshire and Stevenage. But, put simply, the region’s potential is significantly undermined by its poor transport links. As the consortium summarises in its report on the strategic case for investment in the west Anglia rail route, “The risk is that if transport investment fails to keep pace with the phenomenal growth potential of the Corridor, then it will become a brake on that growth. Transport constraints will fragment labour markets, restrict integration of business clusters, and thereby reduce productivity growth and inward investment.”

Mr Walker: Broxbourne Council is running an initiative called Ambition Broxbourne to bring higher value jobs to the borough. What will limit the council’s ability to do that is a rail service that does not match its ambition.

Daniel Zeichner: Indeed, that is absolutely the case. I am sure the Minister is listening closely to the strong case that is being built.

I want to turn to my own constituency of Cambridge, if I may. Although I am here as a Front-Bench spokesman in this debate, Cambridge is a key feature of the Corridor. It is the top city for innovation in the UK. We out-perform the next seven best performing cities put together, and Cambridge is a magnet for leading technology and life science companies. Yet, as the West Anglia Taskforce report finds, the city’s transport links are restricted by problems related to the west Anglia main line. Irregular, unreliable links between Cambridge and London are described in the report as, “the greatest potential obstacle to future growth.”

Cambridge Ahead, an important business-led local organisation that speaks for a wide range of businesses and stakeholders, has stated that although Cambridge is poised for the next wave of growth, it is held back by a need for infrastructure investment. I commend its report, “The Case for Cambridge”, to the Minister. Within it he will find a clear ask for a new rail station south of the city on the Biomedical Campus, serving Addenbrooke’s Hospital and close to where AstraZeneca has relocated. The report is clear that without such transport
improvements, future relocations of major companies risk being made not to the UK but to elsewhere in the world. Both reports urge that this new station be progressed rapidly, and I would welcome an update from the Minister on likely timeframes.

Returning to the West Anglia Taskforce, the report argues that investing in the west Anglia main line and consequently improving the public transport network would unlock a larger labour market and relieve congestion. It would also spur the development of thousands of homes, tackling Cambridge’s chronic housing shortage and supporting high-skilled employees in the area.

Joan Ryan: The majority of my advice surgery at the moment is on housing—I do not know whether it is the same for my hon. Friend—which is a major issue for London, of course. I understand from the report that the development of 25,000 homes could be brought forward into the 2020s if four-tracking is delivered early as a precursor to Crossrail 2. Does my hon. Friend agree that that must be a priority for the Government?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. We understand that the Government are looking for innovative ways to boost housing, so where better than to look to the recommendations here where we can offer clear guidance as to how to do it?

The taskforce’s recommendations would benefit not only Cambridge, but the entire corridor. As we have heard, four-tracking the rail line between Coppermill Junction and Broxbourne in advance of Crossrail 2 by 2026 would improve journey times and unlock the housing development we have just talked about. In fact, four-tracking the line, followed by Crossrail 2, would unlock up to 100,000 new homes and up to 45,000 new jobs.

Four-tracking would also improve journey times to Stansted and create extra line capacity. I have spoken before in this Chamber in support of improving surface access to Stansted in order to effectively utilise unused capacity. As the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden stated earlier, we know the constraints we face at the moment in terms of airport capacity, with any new runway in the south-east unlikely to be up and running for at least 10 years. Investing in the west Anglia main line could help. It would achieve Stansted in 40 minutes and Cambridge in 60.

So the case is clear, but what of the response? In a written answer from 20 September, we are told that the Government are still,

“carefully considering the recommendations of the draft report”.

I hope we will hear something stronger from the Minister today.

As I have said, I commend the right hon. Member for Saffron Walden for securing today’s debate in the hope of persuading the Government to commit to further investment in our railways, but if we are to believe the reports that Network Rail is facing a shortfall in its budget for control period 5, ending in 2019, then the deliverability of already scheduled renewals and enhancement works must inevitably be brought into question. We should remember that in 2015 the planned electrification works on the midland main line and TransPennine route, beset by delays and rising costs owing to appalling mismanagement, were, to use a delicate phrase, paused—a decision the Government planned from before the 2015 general election, but covered up until afterwards—before being unpated, but with a delayed timetable.

The Times has reported that Ministers had been told about a likely black hole in Network Rail’s budget by the end of control period 5, in part due to the ballooning cost estimates of upgrades, including the great western main line where costs shot up from £548 million in 2011 to a current estimate of £2.8 billion. This morning it was announced in a written statement that the electrification of the great western main line, already delayed once, has now been shelved indefinitely, breaking a pledge in the 2015 Conservative party manifesto of upgrading the great western main line as one of its regional priorities.

It is unacceptable that promises on upgrades are broken time and again. The Government cannot continue to repeatedly make promises to the electorate and then renege on them. The Secretary of State should reverse today’s announcement and commit to delivering the promised electrification upgrades in full under the agreed timescale.

I invite the Minister to take this opportunity to dispel the rumours that the midland main line electrification project or other works will be delayed or cancelled. In last night’s Adjournment debate, the Minister refused to confirm that the planned electrification would be completed by 2023, despite the former rail Minister having given the assurance after the Hendy re-plan that the works were both deliverable and affordable. In the light of today’s announcement on the great western main line, the Minister’s refusal to give a confirmation is ominous for the midlands. MPs were given a clear promise, which the Minister seemed to row back from last night, so will he take this opportunity to confirm that the full works will be completed on schedule and that the midlands will not miss out again?

Will the Minister provide clarity on whether Network Rail is indeed facing the rumoured shortfall? Will he provide a reassurance that if such a shortfall occurs, Network Rail will not be forced to pursue further asset and property sales, which jeopardise the long-term integrity of our rail network as an integrated national asset and which represent poor value for money to the taxpayer? Will he also explain how his Department has managed to preside over a situation where the projected cost and timetabling for the improvement and maintenance of the network is repeatedly so wildly off the mark, often by millions of pounds?

In conclusion, we know that infrastructure spending, including building better transport links, has been shown to increase productivity and attract investment, helping to grow our economy. Indeed, evidence also suggests investment in infrastructure can have a stronger positive effect on GDP per capita than other forms of investment. In the light of the vote to leave the European Union, strengthening our economy and maintaining the global competitiveness of our assets is essential; the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor vies with world cities such as New York, Tokyo and Paris and competes with major international technology regions such as Silicon Valley. Now more than ever it is the time to reinforce our strengths through targeted investment. Improving connectivity along the corridor by improving the west Anglia main line would be a fine start.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to be here in Westminster Hall for the second time today discussing rail issues. I had not been here since my appointment, and now I am spending all day here, which can only be a good thing. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who spoke in his usual courteous style. I am impressed by the ingenuity with which he sought to broaden his topic to many areas beyond the West Anglia Taskforce; I may well deal with them later.

First, it is important to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden (Sir Alan Haselhurst) not only on securing the debate but on the taskforce’s report. He expressed concern that there was repetition; but I view repetition as valuable when it is for emphasis, and my right hon. Friend once more emphasised many of the report’s key themes. That is only to the good. As he pointed out, I was in Bishop’s Stortford only a fortnight ago to join him at the launch of the report. I was impressed to see the support that he had gathered from across the political spectrum from local government, national Government in the form of the Department for Transport, London government, and many companies and private individuals who had come together to support the report’s findings. They all recognised how improvements to the train service would help them to do better business, and to grow locally and together on a much larger scale, along the route. I will say to the House what I said to them: I am grateful for the work of the taskforce in the past few years, and the report is one of the most helpful and constructive of the many I am sent and which, as has been pointed out, all too often litter my office floor. Sadly, many of them never come back to London because I have read them and that is where their use ends. In the present case, the report is a constant companion in my red folder everywhere I go, because I use it as an example to show other people looking at their local railway areas what a real, proper value-adding taskforce looks like, and what they should aim to achieve. I fear that my right hon. Friend has probably encountered too many colleagues asking him for advice on how to run a taskforce, and I thank him for his patience in steering them all in the right direction.

Critically, the report is based on solid evidence and the authors are united in agreement. Such taskforces are a useful mechanism for reconciling competing interests and ambitions to ensure that consensus is reached, as in this case. The report recognises the many challenges that the network faces, and the limitations, where they exist. Yet it also focuses on the opportunities, with a range of realistic and specific recommendations, minus the many extraneous embellishments, as my right hon. Friend put it, that people sometimes seek to add, rather like baubles on a Christmas tree. He is to be congratulated on avoiding a temptation that others may fail to avoid.

The report also makes a clear and compelling case for action, so it is just the sort I want. I should pay tribute to the many taskforce members, to local leaders, to the former Mayor of London, and Val Shawcross and the present Mayor of London, for all the support that they have offered. There is a risk that such thanks become rather like an Oscars speech and that someone gets missed out; my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) pointed out earlier the danger of missing out one or two key figures. I hope that anyone not mentioned will feel that they were included, because it was very much a team effort.

Today I want to express my hope that the taskforce will continue. It is important to continue to monitor the implementation of the report, and to assess changes in circumstances and priorities. There may be a need to update and refresh it. Clearly that will not happen for a while yet, but I see that as the taskforce’s role going forward. It has made a strong case for investment in the west Anglia main line. As the hon. Member for Cambridge pointed out, its corridor is one of the most productive, creative and innovative parts of the UK economy. The west Anglia main line does a vital job of linking Cambridge, with its world-leading university, science parks and track record of innovation, with one of Europe’s fastest growing airports, Stansted, and the global capital city of London. Indeed, as the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) pointed out, it is a fundamental driver of productivity in the local economy. Yet the line is still fundamentally the one that the Victorians laid down in the 1840s—one of the very first railways into London from the north and east. Its capabilities may have grown and shrunk as demand for rail changed over the past 170 years, but it is clear that the railway line now operates at near capacity for much of the day. The report made the reasons for that clear. In the 10 years to 2011, the number of working adults travelling to work on the line increased by more than 100,000. In the same period, the overall local population increased by about 250,000. As the report made clear, that means that demand on the railway can only grow.

Demand is not just about space for the people who use the trains. It is also about space on the tracks—the creation of paths for trains to operate on. At the moment, the fast trains catch up with the slow trains. Unable to get past, they trundle along behind. New, faster trains will help to change that, but only so far. What happens next, when we have used every bit of track capacity? That is the key question posed by the report. I am therefore pleased to see the sensible recognitions and solutions. They are ambitious, yes—but rightly so. They do not necessarily need to be either expensive or hard to achieve. Suggestions include improving pedestrian and cycle access at Northumberland Park and Whittlesford Parkway, new platforms at Stratford and a new station at Addenbrooke’s, supporting growth in Cambridge’s biomedical sector. The hon. Member for Cambridge asked for an update, and I am happy to confirm that we are working closely with Cambridge County Council to deliver that as soon as we can. I do not have any precise timings yet, but the detailed study of the viability of the new station is being undertaken with the county council and I hope to have more news soon. The hon. Gentleman has raised that with me, and I shall keep a careful eye on it. In his role as shadow Transport Minister he can, I am sure, ask about it again each time we face each other at the Dispatch Box. The report also provides further evidence that the Government are right to continue to develop Crossrail 2, and shows how the region can capitalise on that project.

Of course, the recommendations deserve careful consideration. We need to assess them against the case for investment across the network as a whole. The
Government will now give the report the consideration it deserves, which will be a thorough and careful assessment, so that we can respond formally next year. In the meantime we should not forget about the investment already taking place to deliver the premium service that my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne spoke of when he was still in his place. The improvements that Abellio is making are part of the new nine-year franchise agreement that started three weeks ago, under which, as many hon. Members have pointed out, the entire fleet of trains on the Greater Anglia franchise will be replaced: 1,043 new carriages will be in service by the end of 2020. I should point out to the right hon. Member for Enfield North that delivery is intended to start in 2019, so passengers will see them before 2020, which is the date for the entire fleet to be delivered.

Hon. Members have also pointed out that there is a commitment to the refurbishment of trains in the meantime. Accessibility will be key, given the changes in legislation. On my return from Bishop’s Stortford I encountered some of the refurbished carriages. Although I am only just the wrong side of 40, my knees did not quite enable me to stand up from the seat, as I was so low to the ground, because it was such an oddly-configured carriage. I recognise there is much work to do to enable everyone to feel that they have access to the carriages and can travel comfortably on them.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Minister talked about the Abellio upgrade, which I welcome, as the MP for South East Cambridgeshire. Does he agree that the route Abellio works on would also benefit from an increased station capacity—for example, a station in Soham, which is on that route?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for my hon. and learned Friend’s intervention. She and I have discussed this matter, and I have already laid out the various options. We are certainly seeing a growing economy in Cambridgeshire, which is changing the demographics rapidly in that part of the world. We need to be agile and flexible not only in this Department but across Government to ensure that we support Cambridgeshire in its wider aspirations for economic growth. I hear what she says.

Joan Ryan: I am grateful for the Minister’s clarification about when the new rolling stock will arrive. It is very important to be accurate about that. I have had a number of conversations with Abellio. It regularly told me that the stock would arrive in 2018, until I discovered that that was December 2018. To say 2019 is probably a fairer indication to our constituents of when they can expect to see this rolling stock coming on-stream—or on-track, should I say?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady’s intervention. Clearly where we get mixed messages it is frustrating if a train operating company is saying one thing, Network Rail is saying another and a Minister is saying another. It is important we know what we are talking about and get it accurate, so I shall write to her.

As I was saying, these improvements will have benefits not only in east Anglia or Cambridgeshire but across the country. We are seeing benefits in the east midlands, with engineering jobs being secured in Derby through the rolling stock order. Once the new trains are in place, it will enable a complete rewrite of the timetable to take advantage of the enhanced performance and acceleration that the new trains offer.

Two years ago, the great eastern main line campaign published a similarly well-evidenced and well-supported report to that of the West Anglia Taskforce. The great eastern campaigners highlighted the opportunities that faster and more frequent services on the companion main line into London Liverpool Street would deliver for Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. We listened and were convinced. We asked for improvements when we sought bids for the new franchise. It will take the new trains to achieve it, but Norwich in 90 will be a reality in a few years’ time. Abellio will continue to work with Network Rail and my Department to ensure that further improvements occur through targeted investment on the track—supported, I am sure, by the thousands of passengers and businesses who backed the campaign.

The West Anglia Taskforce has a similar request: Cambridge in 60 and Stansted in 40. Abellio has committed to work with the taskforce to see what the new trains might achieve in terms of performance and therefore time savings, and what else can be done to achieve those ambitious targets. I recognise that those targets need to be ambitious and that journey times matter, particularly in areas of economic growth, but ultimately there are limitations. As we have heard today, the west Anglia line is more constrained than the great eastern, for it is a two-track railway almost its entire length. The great eastern, on the other hand, benefits from four tracks for some 20 miles to Shenfield and has several further stations where trains can overtake.

We know from the West Anglia Taskforce’s work that it too wants a four-track railway for the first 18 miles from Coppermill junction to Broxbourne junction, to provide the extra capacity to deliver all the service improvements sought. Even though much of that is putting back tracks that once existed, the work is costly, so part of the Government’s work is to take a deliverable and affordable medium to long-term approach. It is a medium to long-term improvement, but work on the part of the Department must start now to assess it fully and properly. That is why the measured and sensible way in which my right hon. Friend the Member for Saffron Walden has approached the issue in his report is to be welcomed and commended.

Furthermore, the report recommends that local authorities and local enterprise partnerships work together with businesses to identify and develop ways in which they can assist with funding this work. It keeps at the forefront the principle that the beneficiaries of any enhancement on the rail network should make a contribution towards the costs. I believe that to be a responsible approach that benefits all who see an opportunity for rail improvements where they stimulate economic growth. I hope that the taskforce will continue its work and spread that message around the region. I welcome the opportunity to continue working together to look at how we can increase the funding pot.

I would like to mention two areas that my right hon. Friend briefly touched on. The first is Stansted. As he rightly pointed out, it is a growing airport. Now that we
have a decision on Heathrow, we have much greater clarity about the future of not only aviation in this country but what the needs will be in terms of service access to our airports. I share the wider ambition that I am sure there is in the room today to ensure greater rail access to Stansted, which would reduce incentives to travel there by coach or car on the M11. I look forward to working with the taskforce further to ensure that we can develop and meet the ambitions of Stansted.

My right hon. Friend also mentioned freight, which is all too often overlooked in debates on rail. Opposition Members mentioned air pollution, which encourages us to look at freight as an option. This is where we need real innovation in the rail sector. Often we think that a freight train has to be wagons, trucks and no passengers at all. I have been encouraged by some of the meetings I have had with those in the rail freight sector where we looked at how we could utilise spare capacity on the passenger network for small packages and small pieces of freight. That could help reduce air pollution in city centres. If the final mile of distribution in central London could be done by an electric car picking up the package from a London terminus, that would potentially make an immense difference to air quality here in London. I hope those who are listening from the rail freight sector are thinking innovatively about how routes into London termini can best be used in that regard.

There will be improvements for west Anglia main line users in the short term, even before the new trains arrive and new timetables become more achievable. All today’s trains will be refreshed, with 27 being modified to become fully accessible for disabled users. Next year, more than 70 additional carriages will be introduced to provide more capacity and more seats on both the west Anglia and great eastern main lines. All the trains that operate out of London Liverpool Street will be fitted with wi-fi, and those currently fitted with wi-fi will have their systems upgraded.

The railway infrastructure is also being upgraded. We have opened Lea Bridge station. Next year we will open Cambridge North station, to which I am sure the hon. Member for Cambridge is looking forward. Network Rail continues to consult on a programme of level crossing closures along the line to increase safety and speed up trains. As has just been said, we are looking at the new station for Addenbrooke’s.

The west Anglia main line is already starting to get the upgrade it deserves. With the taskforce remaining on the case and holding me to account, I fully expect that to continue. Once again, I thank everyone for their good work in delivering this report and showing how much we can continue to do for the people of west Anglia and the Lea valley.

3.38 pm

Sir Alan Haselhurst: I would like to thank my colleagues for being here today, to make either speeches or interventions. It is illustrative of the fact that we are an ecumenical crowd and that nothing divides us on the arguments put forward in the taskforce report, which have been amplified today. I appreciate the generous comments that have been made about the taskforce’s work. I should, in fairness, have mentioned the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy). Through his work on the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor APPG and on the taskforce, he has been a very solid, determined and resourceful supporter of this work. I thank also the Minister for his kind remarks, generous response and the attention he gives to these things. He is obviously a great enthusiast for the railways and needs to satisfy many different calls from around the country.

I hope it is recognised that there are many voices now along the London-Cambridge corridor insisting on improvement. They come from businesses of all kinds—some for which we have enormous regard in terms of their potential to improve our economy—the airport and the many commuters who rely on that line, in whichever direction they travel, to get to work. The voices are getting louder. The Minister tolerantly said that he was unconcerned about repetition, so I am tempted to say in conclusion, “Same time next week.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the West Anglia Taskforce report.

3.40 pm

Sitting suspended.
Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

4 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to an important half-hour debate on the independent adviser on Ministers’ interests. I call Mr Paul Flynn.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship for, I believe, the first time, Mr Hollobone. The office of independent adviser is now 10 years old. The story is one either of Ministers all behaving as saintly paragons of perfection or of the system not working, and I fear it is the latter. Since the office was set up, it has achieved virtually nothing and I would like to point out the way things have gone.

When the office was set up, the case of Shahid Malik was referred to it. He resigned from ministerial office when there were complaints about his behaviour. He was then found to be free of blame and restored to ministerial office. Since then we have had only one case, involving Baroness Warsi. She had already confessed to a venial sin: she had gone on an official trip to India and had taken with her a relative and a work partner. She agreed that there was a perception of impropriety in that, as did the adviser on Ministers’ interests. There was a mild reprimand but no action was taken. However, that was a tiny offence compared with other cases that have passed by without being referred to the adviser.

Possibly the least defensible one was in 2011 involving the then Secretary of State for Defence, who was accused of misconduct. There were well-publicised accusations of relationships with a Mr Werritty, and an extraordinary thing happened: in this case the then chief civil servant, on the advice of the then Prime Minister, decided to investigate the matter himself. That was against the ministerial code and the civil service code—the investigation was expressly forbidden by them—but it was the Prime Minister’s decision. The then holder of the office of independent adviser, Sir Philip Mawer, gave evidence to a Select Committee and said he should have been investigating the Member concerned, who promptly resigned from his post.

This was an extraordinary situation. We know that whatever that Member did was serious, because that is what the head of the civil service said. They said that it was so serious that he should resign. However, no information was given to the public about what he had done, how serious the offence was and whether he was fit for future office. He gained absolution by resignation and the public are in the dark. That is more serious now, yet it was not referred by the Prime Minister to the adviser.

There have been further cases since. One involved the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), who was accused of not being impartial in a BSkyB takeover. That case had a great deal of attention and certainly caused a considerable amount of public concern, yet it was not referred by the Prime Minister to the adviser.

The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—the present Prime Minister—was alleged to have leaked ministerial correspondence on Islamic extremism in Birmingham schools. Again, that is a matter of great concern, yet the case was not referred to the adviser.

There were minor cases, too. A Minister had a meal—not a cheap one—at the Savoy, allegedly provided partly by a group that was seeking favours from his Department. Again, that is a matter of some seriousness and if it was true, it would have been a breach of the ministerial code. That Minister explained that he was there eating as a private person, not as a Minister—so his private stomach, not his ministerial stomach was digesting that day. That was accepted by the then Prime Minister and there was no investigation.

The most recent case is possibly the most telling. Two Ministers in the Cabinet Office—the right hon. Members for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock)—decided to give £3 million to Kids Company, which was run by Ms Batmanghelidjh. The brave civil servants in the Department put out a letter saying that that was a mistake and that it should not have been done. That was a courageous thing for the civil servants to do. Civil servants give their advice, and that is it, but they went public and said, “This is the wrong thing to do,” putting in peril their future careers, because they would be regarded as troublemakers. They did the right thing but the Government did not. What happened to the £3 million? It was given to Ms Batmanghelidjh at Kids Company and the company collapsed four days later.

There is a possible explanation. The charge against the Government is that Ms Batmanghelidjh was the poster girl of the big society. She attended a meeting in the Cabinet Office to launch the big society. A huge amount of political credibility was given to her company when the Prime Minister was promoting the big society—he was the first and probably the last fan, now he has left office, of that concept. Why were those two Ministers not reported to the adviser for losing £3 million of public money? The temptation is to believe that the Prime Minister was acting for party-political advantage to protect the reputation of the big society. However, the public lost £3 million.

There is no redress in this situation. Nobody holds the Prime Minister to account on this. I have raised these matters many times in the past few years, and it is said that we have a chance to raise these matters at Prime Minister’s questions, but we do not have a hope of raising them in any detail there. The Liaison Committee could raise them but they never have, because whether they do so depends on the disposition of the members of that Committee.

This reform was intended to restore confidence in public life, because we went through the great screaming nightmare of the expenses scandal and our reputation was at rock bottom. I believe that now it is even worse than that—it is subterranean. We have not improved our standing with the public. It has probably gone
down and we know what happens: if politics falls into disrepute, we end up with an obscenity like Trump, or something even worse; people look for alternatives.

Let me turn to another matter of considerable interest. An application was made to serve on the Committee for Standards in Public Life by Tony Wright. One could hardly imagine a better candidate for that than the man who gave his name to the Wright reforms. He was interviewed by the Chair of the Committee and found to be a splendid candidate. A decision then had to be taken about whether Tony Wright should be on that Committee, but he was turned down by the right hon. Member for West Suffolk. Why on earth should a matter like that be a ministerial decision? That was very interesting. The decision should certainly be taken by people who are independent and outside this place. It just so happens, of course, that that Member might be seen to have had a vested interest as someone likely to be accused by the person responsible—the adviser himself. It is rather like a defendant in a court case being able to choose his own judge. The last person who should have been allowed to blackball Tony Wright was the right hon. Member for West Suffolk. That is the highly unsatisfactory situation we have now.

For all these years, the adviser has been there doing his job, getting paid a considerable salary, but with virtually nothing to do. On any basis, it is a waste of public money to continue to keep him in office. When the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs had a pre-appointment hearing, we were unanimous in saying that the present holder of the office was not the right one to take on the job because he has had a lifetime of public service, saying, “Yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir” as a civil servant. Was he the right man to provide that independence of thought and decision making? As a cross-party Committee with a Conservative majority, we decided that he was not, but that recommendation was ignored and overruled by the then Prime Minister. The whole idea of reform, which was a good one—that there must be some kind of surveillance of ministerial behaviour—was a waste and a failure. We are in a position to drive the public’s trust in this place and in politics generally is gravely damaged.

There are problems in other areas, too, including with the completely futile group, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, which has absolutely no power. Abuses take place through the revolving door, whereby people who leave Parliament are prepared to hawk around, and to prostitute their insider knowledge and contacts to the highest bidder. There is no way that can be stopped, as we have no mechanism for interfering with it. When people breach the few rules that do exist, there is no way of bringing them to book. We are in a completely futile group, the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments by the Prime Minister with independent advice. There has been no change to that approach, which has existed under every Government since the role was established. It is also he—I should say she; I must get that right now, Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. The reason why the two Ministers responsible for this matter are not standing here is that one is on paternity leave after the birth of his second son, Aubrey Valentine Hamilton, and the other is on a ministerial visit outside London. I spoke to the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) last week to express their sorrow that they could not be here to respond to the debate. I hope that he finds me a suitable stand-in who does not say the word “transparency” too many times.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution, and I congratulate him on securing this debate and on speaking so fluently. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, of which he is a member, has been looking into the matter for some time, so the debate is timely. As always, I have listened to him and considered, as carefully as I can, what he said. I will try my best to respond to as many of his points as possible.

As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the office of the independent adviser was set up by a Labour Government. It has a purpose that everybody knows about, and it is important to start by reiterating the lines of ministerial accountability. The very first section of the ministerial code makes it clear that:

“Ministers must...comply at all times with the requirements which Parliament itself has laid down in relation to the accountability and responsibility of Ministers.”

That is incorporated into a resolution of Parliament, as he well knows.

The code states what to all of us in politics is the blindingly obvious, which is that

“Ministers only remain in office for so long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister.”

It also sets out that it is the Prime Minister who

“is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister”.

It is also he—I should say she; I must get that right now, in the new regime—who decides

“the appropriate consequences of a breach of those standards.”

She makes the decisions, and is accountable to Parliament and the public for those decisions. The independent adviser is someone outside Government who can provide the Prime Minister with independent advice. There has been no change to that approach, which has existed under every Government since the role was established under Labour in 2006.

There are two key aspects to the role, both of which are important and one of which the hon. Gentleman almost completely ignores. First, the independent adviser provides Ministers and their departmental private secretaries
with advice on handling Ministers’ private interests in order to avoid any conflict between those interests and their ministerial responsibilities. That is set out in section 7 of the ministerial code and prevents any problems from occurring in the first place, helping to explain why fewer investigations are carried out by the independent adviser than perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like.

The second element of the job is to investigate when the Prime Minister, advised by the Cabinet Secretary, decides that allegations that an individual Minister may have breached the ministerial code of conduct are appropriate for investigation. Section 7 of the code sets out the adviser’s role with respect to ministerial interests, making it clear that:

“It is the personal responsibility of each Minister to decide whether and what action is needed to avoid a conflict or the perception of a conflict, taking account of advice received from their Permanent Secretary and the independent adviser”.

Again, that is a check to prevent problems from occurring in the first place, which helps to explain why so few investigations are carried out by the independent adviser.

Ministers are required on appointment to each new office to provide their permanent secretary and the independent adviser with a full list, in writing, of their interests that might be thought to give rise to conflict. Where appropriate, the independent adviser will advise Ministers and permanent secretaries on any action necessary to avoid a conflict or potential conflict of interest, removing future problems at the earliest stage. Ministers must then record in writing what action has been taken and provide the independent adviser with a copy of that record. The work is all behind the scenes, but it is crucial.

Paul Flynn: I did not use all the time available to me, so that I could give the Minister a chance to reply. Although I appreciate that he has difficulty in filling a quarter of an hour, it is not good enough just to repeat the situation and the rules of the code. He should answer the specific points I raised. Will he, for instance, tell us why the case of the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), the then Secretary of State for Defence, was not referred to the independent adviser, as Sir Philip Mawer said it should have been?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I happily took the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but he has intervened on me with 10 minutes to go in my prepared speech, and I have plenty to tell him about all that if he will please wait for that particular passage.

I emphasise that this is behind-the-scenes work because it is so crucial, and by doing it we address a lot of problems before the issues might arise. The hon. Gentleman can hardly complain about the independent adviser being impotent when the independent adviser is doing so much work to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Most importantly, the Government are as transparent as possible about the process. The Cabinet Office publishes a list of Ministers’ relevant interests twice a year, which enables external scrutiny of any potential conflicts. It is an ongoing process, not a one-off. The most recent list was published in July 2016, and the updated list will be published in a few weeks, when the hon. Gentleman will be able to enjoy the slim pickings in my first ever entry.

The pickings are slim because every Minister I know takes the ministerial code seriously from the first time they look at it. I wanted to continue being a trustee of a local charity in my constituency, but I took advice that I was not allowed to do so because it would be in conflict with the ministerial code. I could have continued with the trusteeship but, being in conflict, I would no doubt have been referred—happily, in the hon. Gentleman’s eyes—to the independent adviser for investigation. That is the process. The independent adviser’s job is to try to prevent problems from happening by giving sensible advice at key points in time.

The independent adviser, at the request of the Prime Minister and having consulted the Cabinet Secretary, investigates alleged breaches of the ministerial code. The decision on whether an individual Minister will remain in office is ultimately for the Prime Minister, who will take into account the facts established by the independent adviser. The results of any investigation by the independent adviser are made public.

As the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister, it is rightly for the Prime Minister, in consultation with the Cabinet Secretary, to decide whether an alleged breach of the ministerial code merits investigation by the independent adviser. In some cases, the Prime Minister may conclude that there is no need for such advice—the facts will already be clear. In other cases, she may decide that there is a need for further investigation before she can make a decision. In those instances, she may refer the case to the independent adviser. It is not the role of the independent adviser to initiate his own investigations. He is there to advise the Prime Minister on allegations of breaches of the ministerial code. He gives the advice; the Prime Minister makes the decision.

Let us also be clear that Ministers are personally responsible for deciding how to act and conduct themselves in light of the ministerial code, and they are responsible for justifying their actions and conduct to Parliament and the public. We also have an independent and robust free press in this country, which plays an important role in holding individual Ministers and the Government as a whole to account.

There have been suggestions in the past that the ministerial code should be ratified by Parliament. The Government’s view is that that would blur the lines between the Executive and Parliament. The ministerial code is the Prime Minister’s guidance to her Ministers on how they should conduct themselves in public office. Parliament already has a powerful range of mechanisms to hold the Government to account, some of which I enjoyed as a Back Bencher. The Government see no reason to change that well established approach and believe that the current model works well.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister explain how the system worked well in the case of Kids Company? The accusation was of largesse, with huge amounts of money being given to the then Prime Minister’s project. The person who stopped the investigation of the obvious waste of £3 million was the then Prime Minister. How can a system be fair and reasonable, and how can it work, when the Prime Minister acts as judge and jury when he himself is accused?

Chris Heaton-Harris: There has been absolutely no suggestion of any breach of the ministerial code in that particular case. There have been a number of investigations,
including one by the Select Committee on Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs, of which the hon. Gentleman is a member, and one by the Public Accounts Committee. The latter recommended a number of outcomes and lessons to be learned, and obviously those lessons will be learned, but there has been absolutely no suggestion of any breach of the ministerial code in that case.

The Government are confident that the role of the independent adviser, along with the broader commitment to transparency, will create a framework that is more robust and significantly stronger than the one that applies to the public sector. Publishing the list of Ministers’ interests is just one part of the Government’s commitment to transparency. The list, alongside the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, ensures that information about Ministers’ interests that are relevant to their Government role is in the public domain. Measures have been put in place, where necessary, to avoid any conflict of interest. The Government are proud to be one of the most transparent in the world, and we have taken steps to publish more information than ever before, including details of ministerial gifts over £140, overseas travel and any hospitality received.

The hon. Gentleman raised specific questions today about the role of the independent adviser, and he has raised questions about the independence of the role on numerous occasions. I have already made it clear that this is a personal appointment by the Prime Minister of the day. The post holder must be outside party politics and must provide his own independent views on the issues that are referred to him. The Prime Minister makes the appointment on the basis of an assessment of the post holder’s ability to provide such an independent perspective. It is our judgment that the current post holder, Sir Alex Allan, has the experience and necessary skills and judgment to make him ideally suited for the role. He has expertise, experience and ability to provide confidential and trusted advice to Ministers and their permanent secretaries from an independent, non-party political point of view.

I re-emphasise the process. If there is an allegation about a breach of the code and the Prime Minister, having consulted the Cabinet Secretary, feels that it warrants further investigation, she will refer the matter to the independent adviser on Ministers’ interests. Ministers are responsible for deciding how to conduct themselves in light of the code and for justifying their actions to Parliament and the people. The code makes it clear that Ministers only remain in office as long as they retain the confidence of the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is the ultimate judge of the standards of behaviour expected of a Minister, and the appropriate consequences come from her if there is a breach of those standards.

I know that the hon. Gentleman will be slightly disappointed by my reply. He comes across as slightly—I don’t know—Trumpist in looking for conspiracy everywhere, where perhaps none exists. Proper investigations have taken place. It is important for us to realise that the Government take transparency very seriously, and we will not blur the lines between the Executive and Parliament. Parliament already has mechanisms to hold the Government to account.

Today’s debate has demonstrated remarkably strongly held views on this subject. My remarks will not have pleased the hon. Gentleman.

Paul Flynn: I recall the words of Chaucer:
“That if gold ruste, what shal iren do?”
He spoke of:
“A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep”.
What we have here is an accusation that if the head is behaving in a partial way, and if the Head of Government is rotten, the whole flock will be rotten.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman has gone on a bit about how the standing of politics and how this place is viewed by the public has gone down. Those who look at his Twitter feed will see that he does not particularly like his voters and how they voted on Brexit. Maybe that is a disparity that he would like to examine slightly more closely than this issue.

I hope my remarks today have made it clear how the Government take issues of ministerial conduct very seriously, but we remain of the view that the appointment and dismissal of Ministers is a matter for the Prime Minister. We are satisfied with how the current model works.

Question put and agreed to.
Animal Cruelty: Sentencing

4.30 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered sentencing for animal cruelty.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank all colleagues who have come to discuss this important issue, and I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Justice for his time. I hope that he and his officials will listen carefully to this debate and realise that there is an animal abuse crisis in this country, and that it is in their power to do something about it. I hope that on the back of this debate, they will work with me before my private Member’s Bill to increase sentencing for animal cruelty is debated on 24 February next year.

The origins of my interest in the issue of animal cruelty go back to March this year, when a horrific case of abuse emerged in my constituency. Andrew Frankish, aged 22, and his brother Daniel Frankish, aged 19, from Redcar were convicted of causing unnecessary suffering to a protected animal. On several mobile phone clips filmed by the younger man, Andrew is shown picking up a bulldog at the top of some wooden stairs before repeatedly throwing her down them. On one occasion, he lifts her high over his head. Inspectors from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals said that the footage was the most distressing that they had ever seen. The video is widely available on the internet.

I hope, Mr Hollobone, that you will allow me to quote at some length the RSPCA inspector who dealt with the case, because it is important to get the full quote.

Anna Turley: My hon. Friend is right. In my discussions with the RSPCA and others, one issue that has come to light is that people can be banned for life from keeping an animal, but we have no way to enforce it at the moment. A register is potentially an important idea, and one that I hope the Government will consider as part of the discussion and debate on my Bill.

On researching how the two brothers could have received such an impossibly lenient sentence for a vicious, premeditated assault, I was astonished to find that the maximum sentence for any form of animal abuse is just six months’ custody. Incredibly, it has not changed since the Protection of Animals Act 1911. In 1911, one could see animals at circuses and monkeys on the shoulders of organ grinders on street corners; the Act was introduced essentially to make it an offence to override or overload animals pulling loads on the street.

Under the last Labour Government, the issue was meant to be dealt with by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which made provision to increase sentencing for a person found guilty of such offences to be liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 51 weeks, or a fine not exceeding £20,000. Incredibly, however, the provision to increase prison sentences was never enacted, so people who inflict cruelty on animals or make them fight for money can currently receive a maximum of only six months’ imprisonment should the magistrate deem a custodial sentence suitable. The public rightly find that hard to understand or accept as appropriate.

Since the incident of the Frankish brothers came to my attention, I decided to try to amend the law to ensure that sentences fit the crime. Just days after I applied for this debate, another two incidents in my constituency brought the issue back to the news agenda. A small dog was found buried alive in woods near Redcar on 19 October, with a nail hammered into its head. I am unable to discuss the case in more detail due to an ongoing criminal investigation, but on the same day, two sheep were found battered with a blunt instrument.

The people of my constituency have been horrified by all these cases, and it is important to pay tribute to their response. After hearing of the Frankish brothers incident and that of Scamp, the dog who was found with a nail in his head, they held vigils for the animals, with hundreds of people coming to lay flowers and candles and send two messages loudly and defiantly. First, the perpetrators do not represent our community. People in Redcar are decent and kind. I know many passionate animal lovers, and I meet some wonderful...
dog owners as I walk my own dog on Redcar beach or the Eston hills. Secondly, they are angry. They feel that the criminal justice system is letting them down. The police were called to the defence of one of the Frankish brothers after they were threatened. I do not condone such violence, but I fear greatly that that is what happens when the criminal justice system fails and people do not believe that a sentence fits a crime.

On researching my Bill, I was shocked by the number of horrific cases I came across. I read of a dismembered cat left on a war memorial, strangled cats, a deer with a tree branch forced up its backside and a McDonald’s bag over its head, a flock of 20 ducks strangled with cable around their necks and boiling liquid poured on a puppy. Just last week, a Shetland pony was found dead near Sunderland, its body slashed and its bottom lip, mane and genitals cut off. The list of horrific attacks goes on and on.

The RSPCA receives and investigates thousands of complaints about cruelty to animals each year. For example, it received 143,004 complaints in 2015, and 1,781 people were successfully prosecuted. Of the convictions in 2015, 50% were for cruelty offences under section 4 of the 2006 Act and 1.8% were for fighting offences under section 8. The latter acts of cruelty are some of the most extreme. For all cases, current punishments do not appear to fit the crime. During the last five years, the maximum fine imposed on anyone prosecuted by the RSPCA under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 was just £15,000, representing £2,500 for each of six offences. The courts often take the position that unless someone can repay a fine and costs incurred within a reasonable period, there is no point imposing large fines. That suggests to me that the focus should be on prison sentences.

I urge those who think that the crime of abusing defenceless animals is worth less serious attention than abusing people to look at the evidence, predominantly from the United States but also more recently from Europe, showing connections between the two. A 2001 to 2004 study by the Chicago police department “revealed a startling propensity for offenders charged with crimes against animals to commit other violent offences toward human victims.”

Of those arrested for animal crimes, 65% had been arrested for battery against another person. Of the 36 convicted multiple murderers questioned in one study, 46% admitted committing acts of animal torture as adolescents. Of seven school shootings that took place across the United States between 1997 and 2001, all involved boys who had previously committed acts of animal cruelty.

Because abusers target the powerless, crimes against animals, spouses, children, and the elderly often go hand in hand. Children who abuse animals may be repeating a lesson learned at home. Like their parents, they are reacting to anger or frustration with violence. Their violence is directed at the only individual in the family who is more vulnerable than they are—an animal. Professor Frank Ascione of the University of Denver graduate school of social work says:

“The research is pretty clear that there are connections between animal abuse and domestic violence and child abuse.”

According to a six-year gold-standard study conducted in 11 metropolitan cities in the US, pet abuse is one of four predictors of domestic partner violence. In both domestic violence and child abuse situations, abusers may manipulate and control their human victims through threatened or actual violence against family pets. Researchers have found that between 71% and 83% of women entering domestic violence shelters reported that their partners also abused or killed the family pet. Another study found that in families under supervision for the physical abuse of their children, pet abuse was concurrent in 88% of the families.

In the UK, a new academic study—the first of its kind in Europe—by researchers at Teesside University has also identified a link between animal abuse and domestic violence. The study of young people in eastern Europe found that violence breeds violence. Adolescent males who had experienced domestic violence either showed displaced aggression against animals or progressed to committing violence against family members. The findings point towards a worrying cycle of abuse in society if violence is not addressed or properly challenged.

I return to sentencing, and some comparisons with our devolved colleagues. In its recent review of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, the Northern Ireland Assembly increased the maximum penalty on summary conviction for the offences of causing unnecessary suffering and animal fighting to 12 months' imprisonment, a fine not exceeding £20,000, or both. The maximum prison sentence for those found guilty on indictment was increased from two years to five years. It should be noted that Northern Ireland is currently the only part of the UK that provides for more serious animal welfare offences to be tried in a Crown court. Up in Scotland, the Scottish Government have recently committed to reviewing penalties under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. If we look around the world, we can see that the maximum penalty for animal cruelty in Australia is five years and in Germany it is three years; six months here in the UK seems comparatively paltry, especially when we call ourselves a nation of animal lovers.

In addition to the examples from our colleagues in the devolved nations, there is a precedent for tougher sentencing in other UK legislation on the treatment of animals. Under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, a person can go to prison for three years if their dog injures a guide dog. In 2015, the Law Commission’s review of wildlife law recommended two years’ imprisonment for cruelty towards wildlife.

It should of course be noted that in 2015, all fines for animal welfare offences that were previously set at level 5 on the standard scale—including those at or above the equivalent level—were increased to unlimited fines. Nevertheless, fines are clearly not working. The fact still stands that under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, the sentence for an offence under section 4 on unnecessary suffering, section 8 on animal fighting, and section 9 on the duty of the person responsible for the animal to ensure welfare, is imprisonment for up to just six months. The lack of sentencing available to the courts severely blunts the Act as the existing jail terms are far too low to deter offenders, especially if we consider the fact that reductions can be given for early guilty pleas and the possibility of suspended rather than custodial sentences.

Such woefully inadequate sentences must be addressed if they are to be punishments that fit the cruelty inflicted on animals. My private Member’s Bill, which will have its Second Reading in February, will seek to increase the
custodial sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years, in line with the recent changes in Northern Ireland. If we are to continue declaring ourselves a nation of animal lovers, it is about time we showed it by sending out the message that we take animal cruelty seriously.

I thank the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs Home and the League Against Cruel Sports for their support for my Bill. I place on record my particular thanks to the staff at the RSPCA, who do a fantastic job dealing with some horrific cases and some situations that require real bravery. I commend them for the cases that they bring to conviction, such as that of the Frankish brothers. It is vital that we have their unique expertise to bring such cases to justice, and they deserve to see the sentencing process support their efforts.

Finally, I want to say a word about Baby the bulldog and the dog named Scamp. We will probably never know the full level of cruelty and torture these silent and defenceless animals endured. We can only begin to imagine the pain they experienced and the fear they felt. We cannot undo the suffering that man has done to them, but we can show each other that that kind of cruelty has no place in our communities, and that such depraved behaviour will face the punishment that it deserves. I am grateful for having been able to introduce this debate. I urge the Minister to put right the injustice by supporting my Bill in February.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. This is an hour-long debate that finishes at 5.30 pm. The guideline limits for the Front-Bench contributions are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. There should also be three minutes for Anna Turley to wind up the debate at the end. I therefore need to call the first of the Front-Bench speakers just after five past 5 pm. There are four people standing and 20 minutes left, so I am going to impose a five-minute time limit. That way, every Back Bencher will get to make his or her contribution. They will be led by Neil Parish.

4.45 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Thank you very much for dividing up the time; I shall try to ensure that I keep my speech below five minutes.

I thank the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) not only for introducing her Bill but for securing this debate. Whatever political party one comes from, what is going on is just abhorrent. The major issue, on which I hope we will hear more from the Minister, is the fact that however horrendous the crime, the maximum sentence that can be awarded is six months’ imprisonment. If the perpetrator pleads guilty, they automatically get two months knocked off that sentence, so they often serve around four months for the most horrendous crimes.

I agree entirely with the hon. Lady that if someone can string up a dog, cat or any other animal and beat it to death or kick it downstairs, or whatever the other horrendous things that have been happening are, it will not be too long before they can do that to a human. The Americans and others are linking things up and creating a register of those who have committed animal welfare crimes, and that would be a good way forward for this country.

Robert Flello: Does the hon. Gentleman think that as well as going on a register, those individuals should be reported to local social services, which should look carefully at their family environments?

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and yes, they should. Some individuals will be just completely and utterly cruel and base; perhaps others will be challenged in some way and so not necessarily able to understand all they are doing. It is a combination of all those things. There needs to be a link with social services, but we also need to send a message not only to those who are blatantly cruel but to those taking part in dog fights and keeping dogs for that purpose. There is a criminal element out there. Sometimes, making money from inflicting animal cruelty can be an easy way of making some sort of a horrible living.

We are talking about sentient beings. Animals feel pain. Many of us present will have animals of our own. At home we have both a dog and a cat, and I have had many other animals in my time as a farmer. When someone has an animal, they are its protector. Animals cannot protect themselves, so they are very much in our care. They give us much love, and then what do we do? Individuals treat them so dreadfully and they cannot protect themselves. It is just absolutely horrendous. We need to ensure that we send the right message to everyone out there that if they are going to abuse an animal and beat it to death, they will get a sentence of at least five years, if not longer. That would ensure that we at least send out the message that animal abuse is absolutely wrong and that perpetrators will go to prison, and it would prevent others from going down the same route.

I do not wish to say anything further because there are others who wish to speak, but I ask the Minister to please deal with this problem seriously, as they have done in Northern Ireland. Let us be clear and put up the sentences massively.

I pay tribute to the RSPCA, Battersea dogs home, the Dogs Trust, Blue Cross and many other charities that do some marvellous work in trying to make sure that our animals are protected and looked after properly.

4.49 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Nine hundred years before Christ, the prophet Solomon wrote the instructive and very apt words:

“A righteous man regards the life of his beast.”

Unfortunately, today we have a situation where we see that regard for a beast has been replaced by brutal and depraved wickedness against animals. Indeed, the startling report that the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) has brought before us by stops us in our tracks, by showing us how wicked some people can be.

In Northern Ireland, since 2012 4,000 cases of animal cruelty have been reported and investigated by the authorities every year. Think of that—since 2012, there have been 16,000 incidences of cruelty against animals in Northern Ireland. However, less than 120 cases are brought before the courts annually. In a week when it is fashionable to criticise the judiciary, and I will criticise the judiciary in this regard, we see that we have a record
of lenient sentencing, even in the trailblazing Northern Ireland; I am glad that the hon. Member talked about Northern Ireland in that way.

In fact, between 2012 and 2014, there were 114 convictions for animal cruelty in Northern Ireland, but only 15 of them resulted in custodial sentences. They were for pretty horrible cases. I do not want to go into the details, but in one instance a judge said in his summing up that he had seen “one of the vilest examples of premeditated abuse” of animals ever produced in Northern Ireland, when a cat was torn to pieces by fighting dogs. What sentence did that judge decide to hand down in that case in Northern Ireland? Wait for it—it was a sentence of six months, suspended. That was utterly pathetic. In my constituency, a 46-year-old man allowed his dog to starve to death and he received a non-custodial sentence and a stunning fine of £274.

Unfortunately, a message has been sent out by the judiciary that people can get away with perverse wickedness against animals, and that has got to stop. So what have we got to do? I hope that the Minister looks at the example of Northern Ireland and introduces four or five key measures. I agree that a register must be put in place. We have the perverse situation where I could be convicted today of abusing or hurting an animal and so long as it is not widely reported, the very next day I can go to a pet shop or a dog dealer and procure another animal to torture and to be inhumane towards. That is wrong; only a register will start to resolve that particular issue.

Secondly, we need to ensure that the punishment fits the crime. I welcome the fact that in Northern Ireland we have increased the fines and sentences that can be imposed, but those matters have not yet been tested and I wait eagerly for the first test in a court of law.

We have the perverse situation whereby if I am careless with my animal and it fouls on a pavement I can be given an £80 fine, but there are examples of £200 fines for people who have starved their animals to death. That is wrong; it must change, and change dramatically. We need a minimum fines system, whereby any act of animal cruelty will receive a minimum fine of £1,000. That system should be introduced, as well as a register.

We also need the ability to review sentences. The hon. Member for Redcar made it clear that the case she referred to had gone to a magistrates court. If she had wanted that sentence to be reviewed, of course she would have been told by the Director of Public Prosecution and the Attorney General that their hands were tied. We need to have a system whereby such cases can be reviewed. Actually, a call for that system to be introduced in Northern Ireland was made just yesterday. The Agriculture Minister has recommended that that change in the law should be made and I eagerly anticipate its being made; I hope that it is made quickly.

Maximum sentences in England should also be increased, in line with Northern Ireland. It is very unusual for me to say that; it is normally the other way round. It is important that the sentencing issue is addressed.

There are some good examples of work being done, but there are many other openings for people to abuse animals. For example, if someone can go on to Gumtree and buy a pet, that is wrong. That opens the way for cruelty and such gaps in the law must be addressed.

I know that the Minister is eager to do something about this issue; I know that he is willing to do it; and I hope that he will pick up on some of the examples that I have been given today. I also hope that we can see a better, fairer place, where we have a righteous regard for our beasts.

4.54 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this very important debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing it.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government continue to legislate to improve animal welfare, and a consultation on the offences and penalties under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 will be held in due course. Of course, under devolution animal welfare is the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament and the laws that govern it in Scotland are different from those in England and Wales. Today, however—usually—we have a consensus on an issue, because we all agree that it is completely unacceptable to cause an animal unnecessary suffering.

The Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is unique among animal welfare charities in the United Kingdom, because it is a reporting agency to the Crown Office, which means that its investigators are authorised to enforce the 2006 Act. In 2015, the SSPCA helpline received 241,403 calls, and its inspectors and animal rescue officers attended a record 80,944 incidents.

We all know that the popularity of programmes such as “Animal SOS”, “The Dog Rescuers”, “Pet Rescue”, “Animal 999” and “Animal Frontline” has raised public awareness of the animal cruelty and neglect that is taking place right in the heart of our own communities. However, we must continue to be mindful of the crime of animal cruelty. It is a crime—a very serious crime—that takes place right in our neighbourhoods.

Where we see neglect, we must continue to ensure that laws protect animals from such treatment and that those laws are fit for purpose. Sadly, there are too many cases, as reported by the SSPCA, of people who simply do not know how to look after their pet properly. It seems that there are large numbers of well intentioned people who welcome pets into their homes but are simply unequal to the task of giving them the care that they need. That tells us that a job of public information and education needs to be undertaken, so that potential pet owners are well acquainted with the full responsibility that having a pet would place on their shoulders.

However, where we find wilful cruelty—and unfortunately we do find it—we must take it extremely seriously. As we have heard today, we know that there is a connection between the wilful mistreatment of animals and violence against and mistreatment of fellow citizens, including domestic violence. That connection, as well as the need to protect animals, should give us pause for thought.

I was ashamed and disturbed to learn that the SSPCA has reported cases of “unimaginable cruelty”, and I honestly do not believe that a life ban from owning a pet is sufficient censure for such behaviour towards a helpless animal. We have plenty of evidence that such cruelty is a precursor to, and has a clear link with, violence against other people. Fines and community service orders do not provide enough of a punishment or a sufficient deterrent against such behaviour. Cases such as deliberately
starving an animal to death, or knowingly locking an animal in the boot of a car in soaring temperatures in the full knowledge and understanding that it will not survive such treatment, must surely be eligible for some custodial sentence.

When it comes to preventing cruelty to animals, we must all be vigilant. We are the ears and eyes of the agencies that seek to prevent cruelty to animals, and to challenge it where it takes place. We all have a responsibility to report cruelty or neglect wherever we find it. Courts across the United Kingdom must send out a clear signal that wilful cruelty to animals will not be tolerated and will be taken extremely seriously. There should be harsher custodial sentences, and greater penalties should be imposed on those who are found guilty of wilful cruelty than currently seems to be the case.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and our courts need to reflect that. I am interested to hear what Minister will than currently seems to be the case.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and our courts need to reflect that. I am interested to hear what Minister will

4.59 pm

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I apologise for my ever so slightly late arrival, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing it. She is otherwise known nowadays as Detective Turley—but that is another matter.

I pay tribute to the animal welfare charities that have worked tirelessly to raise the profile of the seriousness of animal cruelty in this country: Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Blue Cross, Cats Protection—not often mentioned in this context—and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I think that every Member who has spoken has outlined articulately that it is cruel and unacceptable in a civilised society that people should be able to get away with behaviour such as we are discussing. The briefing prepared by Battersea Dogs and Cats Home for the debate points out that a 2005 report observed that “between 71% and 83% of women entering domestic violence shelters reported that their partners also abused or killed the family pet.” I do not think that will surprise anyone in the room, and it further illustrates some of the points that have been made.

The change in the law demanded by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar is long overdue. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 made a provision for increased sentencing, but it has never been implemented. We need to see it implemented now, and at the level recommended by hon. Members today—with a five-year maximum sentence for animal cruelty of the severest kind. That would send out a message that animal cruelty will not be tolerated in our society.

We like to think of ourselves as a country that is at the forefront of best practice when it comes to animal welfare—that we love our animals—but I am ashamed to say that we are way behind. Let us get in line with practice in Northern Ireland. The powerful contribution made by the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) was really helpful because it illustrated another point: not only must we increase sentencing to the maximum available in Northern Ireland, but we need to remember that cultural change is required in our courts. The courts need to understand that implementation of the harsher sentencing guidelines will be required to make the change effective.

Robert Flello: Does my hon. Friend also think that it is important to send out a message about police animals? Police dogs are often attacked and sentencing is not appropriate, nor even is the definition of the offence. That needs to be looked at as well.

Angela Smith: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and with others who have pointed out that a register of abusers would be an effective way forward. All those things are important.

I want to finish with a comment about the RSPCA. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar described brilliantly the work that the charity does, pointing to the statistics relating to its investigative work and its work to bring abusers to court and secure convictions. The RSPCA is the oldest animal welfare charity in the country, and no other charity does what it does. It is rooted in our history of tackling animal welfare abuse. It has a very good reputation and it has the expertise and experience not just to deliver the investigative work that we need to enforce the Animal Welfare Act effectively but the carry out the prosecuting aspects of its work. We need to think carefully, therefore, about the RSPCA’s role. In general, we need to support the charity and its continued work in bringing animal abusers to justice. Those who would attack the RSPCA’s role need to think carefully about the impact of what they are arguing for.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the first of the speeches by the Front-Bench spokespersons. The guidelines are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister.

5.4 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on bringing the debate before the House. I recognise her strong interest in the matter: I understand that she queued for many hours to table her Animal Cruelty (Sentencing) Bill. I thank all hon. Members for their powerful contributions so far.

This subject should be revisited on a regular basis, not least, as hon. Members have said, because of the strong public interest it attracts. We have heard described today some absolutely abhorrent crimes. As the hon. Member for Redcar explained, the principal legislation in England and Wales is the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The equivalent legislation in Scotland is the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006, which contains similar offences and provides for sentences of up to 12 months’ imprisonment or a £20,000 fine.

I essentially want to say two things. First, I remain sympathetic to the case for stronger sentences. It is a strong case, particularly for the worst of the incidents we have heard about, and I certainly do not see any reason why the provision for 12-month sentences has not yet been implemented in England and Wales. Secondly,
it is important to remember that sentencing is only one small part of the action required to reduce the number of animal cruelty crimes across the UK.

I shall take those points in turn. As regards maximum sentencing, we have heard a lot of horrendous detail about some crimes that have committed in recent months, but we also need to keep in mind, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) said, that many of the animal cruelty cases that make it to the courts and into the newspapers seem to arise out of lack of awareness, transient personal problems, ignorance and even mental health issues. Without in any way playing down the suffering caused to the animals involved, it is important to keep that type of case in mind when considering sentencing options.

I would be slow to say that an increased maximum penalty across the board is the correct way forward, but one alternative worth considering is to separate out offences of deliberate cruelty from those that are, in essence, acts of negligence. The legislation in England and Wales, and in Scotland, seems to incorporate both kinds of act into the same offence, with the same maximum sentence. If deliberate infliction of suffering was made a separate offence, I do not see how anyone could oppose an increased maximum sentence, so that those engaged in torturing animals or in organised fighting, for example, could face a more severe punishment that reflected the public’s disapproval. They could receive a sentence that matched the crime. So in short, some increase in sentencing powers is a good idea.

My second point is that we should not see maximum sentencing as any sort of silver bullet, because there are other things we need to look at. For a start, there is not much point in increasing maximum sentences if courts are not using the full range of their current powers. That is why it is certainly welcome that the Sentencing Council for England and Wales has proposed new guidelines with the intention of ensuring that the most serious cases attract custodial sentences of an appropriate length. Equally, I welcomed the evidence given recently by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee here at Westminster. The witness said:

“The Scottish court system in the last four or five years has improved for intentional acts against animals. We are getting far more bans now. We are finally seeing some people being jailed”. But moving away from sentencing altogether, the same witness said that

“for a lot of the people we deal with, it is neglect and ignorance, so that is why we keep banging the education drum. We have the biggest outreach programme for children in Scotland: 340,000 children spoken to last year. They are the owners next year and in the next 10 years, so we can prevent some of them coming into it”.

So let us also keep in mind the role that education can play in preventing acts of animal cruelty. The SSPCA programme involves education officers, animal rescue officers and inspectors speaking to primary school children between the ages of eight and 11. Recent research by the University of Edinburgh has highlighted the hugely beneficial impact that such programmes can have, including increasing knowledge, creating positive attitudes and decreasing children’s tolerance of animal cruelty. Since the scheme was first implemented in 2010, the SSPCA has seen a 382% increase in the number of calls from children alerting the charity to cases of animals in need of help or cases of neglect.

That reminds us also of the importance of increasing public awareness, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran mentioned, and ensuring that everyone knows what to do if they suspect an offence and that those who no longer feel up to the task of looking after an animal know where to seek appropriate assistance. I also agree that buying a pet on Gumtree is utterly unacceptable.

There is a case for tougher sentences in the worst cases, but I would be reluctant to look at the whole range of offences on the same terms. We must always remember the other things we need to get on with, so that rather than dealing with offences after they have occurred we do what we can to prevent them from happening in the first place.

5.9 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to respond to today’s very important debate, and I am profoundly grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) for securing it. I commend the work she is doing on animal welfare, particularly with the private Member’s Bill she is sponsoring.

Alongside other Members on this side of the House, I fully support the campaign. Given the cases of animal cruelty in the Minister’s East Surrey constituency, I hope he will be equally supportive. As my hon. Friends know, I am a big softie when it comes to animals. I cried when I watched “Bambi”. When the television adverts about animal cruelty come on, I swap channels. I am the proud granddaughter of a baby, Reg the Staffie, who is my daughter Angharad’s dog. He is 11 and has fought off cancer four times. He is a gentle soul who is brighter than some people I know. He is completely loyal. One day I took him to the sand dunes for a walk and a woman came along with four Rottweilers off their leads, and they attacked Reg. He was being savaged by four of the biggest dogs I had ever seen. Not thinking about my own safety, I dived in, because that is what we do when we love our dogs. The woman seemed quite unconcerned when she tried to call them off, and therein lies the problem—responsible ownership. The problem is with people, not animals. Pets give us unconditional love, and owners should return that love and not treat animals in the way that some have, as Members have told us today. Reg, I am pleased to say, is okay.

People who are cruel to animals are cowards, bullies and thugs and include those who have made money from dog farming or puppy farms. Some own a dangerous dog to enhance their hard image. The majority of people treat animals well, but we are here today to talk about those who do not. It is not a new problem—it is a long-term societal issue.

The stories that have been mentioned today have been devastating—please forgive me, but in the short time I have, I will not mention Members individually—but it is not the first time these stories have been told and it is not the first time the issue has been debated in this House. In 2013, the House debated SSPCA prosecutions. In October 2013, there was a debate on sentencing tariffs. In July 2015, we debated sentencing for cruelty to domestic pets. In March this year, we debated sentencing for dog theft. In June this year, we debated dog fighting. Today, we debate animal cruelty sentencing.
In a report published on 21 September 2016 by the Justice Committee, it stated:

“Specifically the intention is to ensure that the most serious cases do attract custodial sentences and that the length of such sentences is appropriate, while also providing more nuanced factors for judging the seriousness of an offence.”

That report goes on to conclude:

“We agree with the Sentencing Council’s proposals regarding animal cruelty offences and welcome the seriousness attached to the gravest of cases for such offences.”

Despite that, the Government are yet to make any significant changes. The Minister and his colleagues have simply sat on their hands and provided empty excuses for their complacency. Will the Minister please commit to changing the law for the vulnerable animals that have been exploited and abused, so that their attackers will face justice that reflects the true gravity of their actions?

I look forward to the Minister answering the questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar and other Members. Will he also consider unduly lenient sentencing and uplifting sentences? Will he monitor, reassess and review sentences? Does he think that prosecutors should undergo special training for cruelty against animal cases? Will he consider making offences triable either way or making it so that the most serious go to the Crown court? I am sure all hon. Members will agree that this debate will send out a strong and powerful message that animal cruelty must stop and that sentences must represent the seriousness of these crimes.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I thank you, Mr Hollobone, for your efficient chairing of proceedings today. I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Redcar and other Members. Will he also consider unduly lenient sentencing and uplifting sentences? Will he monitor, reassess and review sentences? Does he think that prosecutors should undergo special training for cruelty against animal cases? Will he consider making offences triable either way or making it so that the most serious go to the Crown court? I am sure all hon. Members will agree that this debate will send out a strong and powerful message that animal cruelty must stop and that sentences must represent the seriousness of these crimes.

I assure the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) on securing today’s debate on animal cruelty and the skilful way in which she is handling her private Member’s Bill. She is airing the issues here in advance of the Bill being brought before the House. As the Chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), rightly put it, this issue should go beyond party politics. I understand the strength of feeling about offences against animals and why people feel anger towards those who commit such crimes.

So far as the Government are concerned, this matter sits between the Ministry of Justice and DEFRA. I assure the hon. Member for Redcar that the Government take animal welfare seriously. I know that the topic is of widespread concern to many. I also appreciate the concerns about those who carry out appalling acts of cruelty on defenceless animals and the wider implications of the links between animal and human abuse. The research carried out by Teesside University has been mentioned, and I assure Members that we will look at it closely.

Northern Ireland and Scotland have also been mentioned in the debate. The question was asked why, if Northern Ireland can increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty to five years, England and Wales cannot. Penalties are devolved to Northern Ireland. Each jurisdiction decides the appropriate maximum sentence for each offence, but we will look at the experience of Northern Ireland and Scotland and the impact the changes have specifically on offending behaviour. That is what we want to look at. We want to ensure that increasing the maximum sentence has an impact on offending behaviour.

Neil Parish: While it may be DEFRA that deals with animal welfare, it is the justice system that deals with sentencing. It is up to our courts to decide the length of sentence, but a maximum sentence of only six months gives the court very little flexibility. If we increased that maximum sentence dramatically, the courts would have much more flexibility in dealing with cases.

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will come on to the six-month point in a second, but on the five-year point, a maximum five-year sentence would be the equivalent of a sentence for gross bodily harm of a human being. Those are serious offences, and we do not have to stand back. The penalties need to work across the board. In other words, if we increase the penalty to five years in line with GBH, we will have to look at sentencing across the board. That is something the Government need to do to ensure consistency in the criminal law, which is important. As far as Scotland is concerned, again this is a devolved matter.

As is often said, however, prevention is better than cure. To that end, some animal welfare organisations help educate youngsters in animal welfare. I should mention the role of the RSPCA, as other Members have. It does great work in schools. Blue Cross, too, works in schools with children to help them become informed, responsible and active citizens. It is interesting to note from my research for the debate that the RSPCA has been campaigning for and enforcing animal welfare legislation for nearly 200 years. In that time the organisation has built huge expertise in animal welfare. It of course not only prosecutes people, but provides advice to owners about how to look after their animals properly. The Government recognise that tremendous effort, and it is to the credit of the RSPCA that it has improved the lives of many animals.

I am, however, aware of horrible cases, some of which have been mentioned today, specifically the one involving the Frankish brothers and their pet bulldog. I hope that Members appreciate that I am unable to respond specifically on the details of that case, but many people consider the penalty to have been too lenient. On that point, I would pick up on another issue that was raised: how we deal with unduly lenient sentencing. The Attorney General refers some sentences he considers unduly lenient to the Court of Appeal to reconsider. Those are summary-only offences and so animal cruelty is not currently within that scheme. That includes assault on humans and common assault, which are also not within the scheme. The Government are considering the scope of the scheme and how to implement our 2015 Conservative manifesto commitment to expand it.

On sentencing, we should remember that it is a matter for our independent courts. The court is best placed to decide on the appropriate penalty for an offence because it is in possession of the full facts of the case, many of which might not be reported in the newspapers. When deciding what sentence to impose within the maximum limits available, the courts are required to take account of all the circumstances of an offender, as well as mitigating and aggravating factors.
On maximum penalties, it is worth stressing that while sentencing is a matter for the courts, setting the framework that the courts work within is a matter for Parliament, as we all know as legislators. The maximum sentence of six months’ imprisonment for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal was set by Parliament to cover the most serious imaginable behaviours for that specific offence. It was only last year that the maximum fine for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal was raised from £20,000 to an unlimited fine, although I note the point made by the hon. Member for Redcar that in imposing that fine, the courts often means-test it to make sure that it is payable. I am aware of that nuance.

Ian Paisley: Is the Minister saying that as a rule of thumb a sentence against animal cruelty must be lower than a sentence imposed for human cruelty?

Mr Gyimah: Not at all. On the contrary, what I was saying is that any change in sentencing in one part of the law has to be made consistent across the entire criminal justice system. If there were a sentence of five years, we would need to look at other offences of a similar nature that have a five-year sentence to make sure that there is consistency. My point is about consistency in criminal law rather than about distinguishing between one form of cruelty and another.

The Government recognise that maximum penalties should be set to allow the courts to respond appropriately to the full range of cases that they are likely to face—my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton made that point. It is worth looking at some data. In 2015, 614 people were sentenced for the offence of causing, permitting or failing to prevent unnecessary suffering to an animal. The average custodial sentence was nearly three and a half months. If judges are not going up to the maximum six months, there is a question whether the issue is with the maximum sentence length or the courts are finding the current sentencing powers inadequate or restrictive in dealing with those cases. We have to look at that.

The maximum penalty for animal cruelty offences is under review. I assure the hon. Member for Redcar that we are also looking at that very closely in the context of broader criminal law. We do not want to create anomalies with other criminal offences. It is worth bearing in mind that the offence of common assault also has a maximum penalty of six months. In other words, if we were going to make a change here, we would have to look at the area of common assault as well.

It would be contrary to our system of justice simply to impose the maximum penalty, regardless of the circumstances, for any offence. Making all sentences the same would remove the courts’ ability to single out and highlight the more serious cases with more serious sentences. In short, prescribing sentences in that way could lead to injustices that we would want to avoid.

The sentencing guidelines for animal cruelty offences are issued by the independent Sentencing Council, as the House is aware. The council has recently consulted on revised guidelines for sentencing in the magistrates courts, which includes animal cruelty offences. The revised guidelines are designed to highlight the aggravating factors that are particular to those offences. That will assist magistrates in identifying the most serious cases that will in turn deserve longer sentences. Throughout the development of the guidelines, the council worked closely with the RSPCA and is now reviewing consultation responses and developing definitive new guidelines, which it intends to implement in May next year.

A point was made about a register for animal abusers, to prevent them from obtaining animals in the first place. DEFRA has no plans to introduce an animal abusers register. I do not consider it appropriate or necessarily proportionate, because we would then expect pet vendors and animal rehoming centres to check the details of all prospective animal owners. That would be quite an onerous approach.

Angela Smith: I think that issue is worthy of further investigation. The Minister may find that animal welfare charities and rehoming centres would welcome such an initiative and would not find it an unnecessary burden.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. I have tried to stress that the Government are in listening mode on a number of proposals, but that is why there is not a register—we see that it is actually quite difficult in practice to check everyone who wants to rehome an animal. The point that was made about going on Gumtree and buying a pet is relevant here, and we will look at that as well.

Robert Flello: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I want to allow Anna Turley time to sum up the debate. The Minister can take the intervention if he wants, but we are running out of time.

Mr Gyimah: I will bring my comments to a swift conclusion. I welcome this important debate and appreciate that there are concerns about those who carry out appalling acts of cruelty on defenceless animals. The Ministry of Justice is working with DEFRA with respect to animal cruelty offences, including animal fighting. As I have said, we will keep the maximum penalties for those offences under review. That includes monitoring sentencing trends, looking at the impact on offending behaviour in Northern Ireland and Scotland and identifying whether any evidence emerges that the courts may be finding their sentencing powers inadequate.

Finally, although I have focused on the justice issues, I understand that the hon. Member for Redcar will be meeting Lord Gardiner, the DEFRA Minister responsible for animal welfare. I hope that reinforces the fact that both the Ministry of Justice and DEFRA are addressing the issue of animal cruelty with the seriousness it deserves.

5.27 pm

Anna Turley: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for that response, which was thoughtful and considered. We appreciate the tone and the openness with which he is engaging with us, and the fact that he is keen to look forward. I hope that as we build towards the Bill we can continue to have that conversation, both with the Minister and with DEFRA. I appreciate that.

I was glad that the Minister referred to the Teesside University research, which is groundbreaking and symbolic in making the link between animal cruelty and abuse of human beings. It should be considered in the context of
The Minister’s point about relevance and severity within sentencing more broadly. Although I take his point about consistency and parity, it is important to acknowledge that there are already many inconsistencies in sentencing in the criminal justice system. There is already no parity, so, for me, that cannot be a reason to strike out the idea of raising a sentence.

I appreciated the Minister’s point about looking at whether animal cruelty sentences can be referred to the Court of Appeal, if we feel that they are not sufficiently strong. That is really important and deserves more exploration.

I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate today. We have seen a real strength of feeling and a sense of support around sentencing. The issue of a register of offenders, raised by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Flello), is important and warrants more investigation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith) said, not least because of the link to social services. We are talking not just about people who might be put on a register, but people who have undertaken serious offences. I do not think it is considerably onerous for organisations to undertake a quick online check, as they might already do for a criminal record or something of that nature.

A number of hon. Members raised points about education and awareness. They were absolutely right. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), in a very moving speech, talked about culture change within the judiciary and society, and about taking offences seriously so that if we do raise the sentencing limit, they are dealt with with due diligence. The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) is absolutely right about broader awareness, and I pay tribute again to charities that do that work.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Written Statements

Monday 24 October 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Gaming Machines and Social Responsibility Measures

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I wish to inform the House that on 24 October 2016, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has published terms of reference at: http://www.gov.uk and copies will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The review will be considering robust evidence on the appropriate maximum stakes and prizes for gaming machines across all premises licensed under the Gambling Act 2005; the number and location of gaming machines across all licensed premises; and social responsibility measures to protect players from gambling-related harm (including whether there is evidence on the impacts of gambling advertising and whether the right rules are in place to protect children and vulnerable people).

The review will include a close look at the issue of B2 gaming machines (more commonly known as Fixed Odds Betting Terminals—FOBTs) and specific concerns about the harm they cause, be that to the player or the communities in which they are located.

In launching this review I want to ensure that legislation strikes the right balance between allowing the industry to grow and contribute to the economy while ensuring consumers and communities are protected, including those who are just about managing.

The call for evidence period will close on 4 December, following which Government will consider proposals based on robust evidence provided to assist in our decisions.

Relevant documents have been published on the website at: http://www.gov.uk and copies will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS210]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): I attended the General Affairs Council on 18 October. The meeting was chaired by the Slovak presidency and held in Luxembourg. I also attended the extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council (Trade).

GENERAL AFFAIRS COUNCIL

The General Affairs Council (GAC) on Tuesday 18 October discussed the preparation of the October European Council; the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework; and implementation of the inter-institutional agreement on better law-making.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found at: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2016/10/18/.

I also represented the Government at an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) dedicated to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada (CETA).

Preparation of the October European Council

Discussions focused on the agenda of the October European Council—migration, trade, Russia and other global and economic issues. The UK emphasised again our role as an active and constructive participant in on going EU business, upholding both our rights and obligations until our departure.

On migration, the UK was supportive of the focus on upstream work with countries of origin and transit as part of a comprehensive approach. On trade, the UK reiterated support for an ambitious EU trade agenda, including strong support for CETA and TTIP, as an opportunity to shape the rules of global trade and provide economic benefits to citizens. On Russia, the UK expressed the need to stand firm against Russian attempts to undermine the rules based international order, and I made clear that we should be ready to consider all the tools at our disposal to end the violence in Syria.

Multiannual Financial Framework

Discussion on the MFF focused on the balance between budgetary prudence and the need to address current political challenges. There was agreement on the need to focus the next phase of discussions on how to respond to the priorities of migration, security and jobs and growth within the context of a responsible and disciplined overall approach to the budget which provides value for money.

Inter-Institutional Agreement implementation

Following the adoption of the Commission work programme, the Commission, the European Parliament, and Council will issue a joint declaration setting out the top priorities and objectives for the year ahead. The Slovakian presidency gave a presentation on this process at the GAC.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS COUNCIL (TRADE)

Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada (CETA)

The Council discussed ongoing negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between Canada and the European Union and its member states. The UK confirmed its support for the Council decisions on signing, provisional application and conclusion of CETA. Not all other member states were able to lift their reserves. Negotiations continue.

I also wish to inform the House that the Government opted in to the Council decisions on signing, provisional application and conclusion of CETA, insofar as they relate to the temporary presence of natural persons for business, otherwise known as Mode IV. The Government are committed to taking all opt-in decisions on a case-by-case basis, putting the national interest at the heart of the decision-making process.

[HCWS211]
The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This morning Sir Hugh Taylor has published the final report of the accelerated access review (AAR). The AAR was tasked with making recommendations to the Government on reforms to accelerate access for NHS patients to innovative medicines, medical technologies, diagnostics and digital products. The report sets out a framework of recommendations to streamline and accelerate the pathway for new products from development to their use with patients and to enable widespread adoption across the NHS.

The Government welcome Sir Hugh’s final report and are grateful to him, Sir John Bell, the external champions and the external advisory group for their excellent work, which draws upon contributions from many individuals and organisations from patient groups, the NHS, industry, academia and clinicians. We are grateful for the important input that this review has had from NHS England NICE, the MHRA and NHS Improvement.

The report provides us with a strong basis to make the right decisions about how the health system can be adapted to meet the challenges of the future, attract inward investment, grow our thriving life sciences industry and use innovation to improve patient outcomes in the context of the financial pressures on the NHS. It will be important to implement this report in a way that is affordable for the NHS. The Government will now consider the proposals in detail with our partners and will provide a fuller response in due course.

The Government remain strongly committed to the life sciences and to building a long-term partnership with industry. It is determined to help the UK become the best place in the world to produce new drugs and products that can transform the health of patients, where the research, development, regulatory, commercialisation and investment infrastructure enable innovation to flourish and thrive while improving patient’s lives.

AAR Final Report (AAR final.pdf) can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-10-24/HCWS209/.

[HCWS209]
The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):
The UK Guarantees scheme was announced in July 2012 with spending cover provided through the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012, receiving Royal Assent on 31 October 2012. The scheme provides a sovereign-backed guarantee to help infrastructure projects raise debt finance. Guarantees for up to £40 billion in aggregate can be offered under the initiative.

As part of the Hinkley Point C negotiations, EDF sought a Government guarantee to assist in bringing forward investment. The Government are confirming that they have approved the provision of a guarantee for up to £2 billion to the project for the construction of its new EPR nuclear plant in Somerset, backed by commitments from the shareholders. The guarantee will be available from 2018 to 2020 if necessary conditions are met and is at Government’s discretion. Even if made available, and EDF have indicated to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that it is not their current intention to take up the guarantee, I judge the likelihood of any call under the guarantee to be very low.

The Government will report to Parliament on the financial assistance given in line with the requirements set out in the Infrastructure (Financial Assistance) Act 2012.

Written Statements
Tuesday 25 October 2016

TREASURY

Hinkley Point C: UK Guarantee

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):
Apprenticeships transform lives and are vital in making this a country that works for everyone. As well as giving young people the chance to build a better future by taking their first step on the employment ladder, they give those already in work the opportunity to progress further. And for those just about managing, they can unlock a brighter future. That is why we are committed to 3 million new apprenticeships by 2020, spending £2.5 billion to transform this country’s investment in skills, in our people.

For employers, apprenticeships bring great benefits too, by boosting the skills of the workforce and helping to increase economic productivity. Yet for too long far too many employers have under-invested in the skills of their employees compared to other countries. It is time to change that and ensure all employers play their part in improving productivity and social mobility. So we are working in partnership with employers to implement major reforms.

The new apprenticeship levy, which we are introducing in April 2017, will put the funding of apprenticeships on a sustainable long-term footing so we can support opportunities for all. The levy will be set at 0.5% of pay bill and only employers with a pay bill of more than £3 million will have to pay the levy. Employers that are not eligible to pay the levy will continue to receive Government support towards the costs of apprenticeship training and assessment.

The levy applies to all UK employers but apprenticeship funding policy is devolved. It is for the devolved administrations to decide how they use their levy income. This statement sets out how we will fund apprenticeships in England to help build an economy that works for everyone.

To do that we are not only introducing the levy but also reforming the way we fund apprenticeships, introducing a dedicated register of approved apprenticeship training providers and launching the employer-led institute for apprenticeships. These changes will ensure apprenticeships are high quality, meet the needs of employers and provide opportunities for millions more people.

After extensive discussions with employers and training providers we are today publishing the final funding policy for May 2017 onwards and details of the new register of apprenticeship training providers. The adjustments we have made to the funding policy since our proposals in August will help ensure that the reforms benefit more employers, providers and apprentices.

Today we are confirming the final funding policy. Key features are:

- Higher funding for STEM apprenticeship frameworks and higher pricing of apprenticeship standards to support improved quality, and greater flexibility to train those with prior qualifications;
- Long period of time for employers to spend funds in their digital account, now with 24 months before they expose an increase from our original proposal of just 18 months;
- A commitment to introducing the ability for employers to transfer digital funds to other employers in their supply chains, sector or to apprenticeship training agencies in 2018, with a new employer group including the Confederation of British Industry, Federation of Small Businesses, British Chambers of Commerce, Charity Finance Group and EEF—the Manufacturers’ Organisation—to help Government develop this system so that it works for employers.
- 90% contribution from Government to the cost of training for employers that will not pay the levy;
- 100% contribution from Government to the cost of training for small employers that will not pay the levy and who take on apprentices who are 16 to 18 years old, 19 to 24 year old care leavers or 19 to 24 year olds with an Education and Health Care Plan;
- £1,000 each from Government to employers and training providers when they take on 16 to 18 year olds, 19 to 24 year olds who were in care or who have an Education and Health Care Plan;
- Help for training providers to adapt to the new, simpler funding model through an additional cash payment equal to 20% of the funding band maximum where they train 16 to 18 year olds on frameworks; and
- A simplified version of the current system of support for people from disadvantaged areas to ensure the opportunity to undertake an apprenticeship is open to everyone, no matter where in England they live, their background or family circumstances.

We will continue to work in close partnership with employers and providers in the implementation of these reforms. We know they are major changes and we want to work together to ensure we transform our country’s skills for the benefit of all.

[HCWS214]
FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the Foreign Affairs Council on 17 October. The Foreign Affairs Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Luxembourg.

Foreign Affairs Council

A provisional report of the meeting and conclusions adopted can be found at:

European Union global strategy

The Council discussed the follow up the EU global strategy on foreign and security policy and adopted Council conclusions. The Foreign Secretary made clear that the UK would continue to support European security after Brexit. He encouraged other European countries to spend more on defence and exploit the EU’s soft power.

Tunisia

The Council discussed Tunisia and adopted conclusions on the joint communication “Strengthening EU support for Tunisia”, which was presented by Member states Mogherini and Commissioner Hahn. Member states welcomed the EU stepping up its support but underlined that Tunisia needed to deliver reform for real progress to be made.

Syria

Foreign Ministers discussed the situation in Syria, in light of recent developments on the ground and the escalation of violence, including in Aleppo. The Foreign Secretary briefed Ministers on the 16 October London meeting that he had hosted. Ms Mogherini concluded that the EU should work closely with the UN both on the humanitarian track and on preparing for the post-conflict phase.

Migration

Foreign Ministers took stock of recent developments related to the external aspects of migration. Ms Mogherini briefly updated the Council on migration partnership frameworks, underlining to Ministers her view that they had created a positive change in attitude within partner countries.

Ministers agreed without discussion a number of measures:

Council conclusions on the Democratic Republic of Congo
The Council adopted decisions on partnerships priorities and compacts with Jordan for the period 2016-18 and with Lebanon for the period 2016-20.

The Council renewed the EU restrictive measures in view of the situation in the Republic of Guinea until 27 October 2017.

The Council approved the state of preparations of the first inter-summit meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and of the European Union, which will take place on 25 and 26 October 2016 in Santo Domingo.

The Council adopted the provisional agenda of the second EU-Iraq Co-operation Council, which will take place on 18 October 2016 in Brussels.

The Council adopted the common foreign and security policy report “Our priorities in 2016”.

The Council authorised the signature of an acquisition and cross-servicing agreement between the EU and the United States of America.

The Council approved the High Representative’s report on the 24th Operation Althea six-monthly review.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

IBRD Loan to the Government of Iraq

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I have today laid a departmental minute outlining details of a contingent liability of the US dollar equivalent of £360 million which DFID has undertaken, in respect of the World Bank Group.

The twin shocks of the Daesh insurgency and the 40% decline in Government revenue following the fall in oil prices since 2014 have threatened Iraq’s stability. At the G7 in May, the IMF, World Bank and G7 partners pledged to provide a $12 billion package of assistance to the Government of Iraq. The World Bank’s share of the package comprises three $1 billion development policy loans from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) arm of the World Bank, with the first to be disbursed this year. Provision of the IBRD loans will be conditional on Iraq committing to, and implementing, reforms in the areas of public expenditure, energy efficiency, and transparency of state-owned enterprises. These reforms complement the package of reforms already agreed between the Government of Iraq and the IMF in July of this year, and will support Iraq’s economic development.

The IBRD’s internal rules on loan exposure to any one country constrain the extent to which it can increase its lending to Iraq. This proposed UK guarantee will allow the IBRD to increase the size of its 2016 loan by the US dollar equivalent of £300 million. This will support fiscal stability in Iraq, and will underline the UK’s commitment to supporting a key ally in the fight against Daesh.

DFID’s contingent liability under this agreement is expected to be the US dollar equivalent of £360 million, covering the equivalent of £300 million of loan principal, plus the equivalent of around £60 million of interest payments. The agreement would be in place for the expected 15 year life of the IBRD loan. France and Canada are also currently considering using the same guarantee instrument to guarantee further additional IBRD lending to Iraq.

For the guarantee to be triggered, the Government of Iraq would have to be in arrears with the IBRD for over 180 days. The risk of Iraq defaulting, and the UK guarantee being called upon, is the same as the risk of Iraq defaulting on other IBRD lending. There is a strong incentive for Iraq avoiding a default, as this would prevent the IBRD from providing any further funding to Iraq. But in the event that the Government
of Iraq do default on a loan repayment to the IBRD, and the liability is called, the UK will provide a payment to the World Bank, in proportion to the UK’s guaranteed share of the overall IBRD loan. The payment will prevent the loss on the loan from impacting on the World Bank’s other lending activities. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

If the Government of Iraq subsequently provide a payment to reduce its arrears, the World Bank will transfer the UK’s share of the payment into a UK-controlled trust fund held at the Bank, to be used towards other World Bank activity as the UK sees fit.

[HCWS218]

TRANSPORT

European Maritime Safety Agency

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): The Government welcome the efforts of the Commission to address the ongoing migration crisis, but have decided not to opt in to the JHA content in the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending regulation (EC) No. 1406/2002 establishing a European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA).

The proposal—which has now been adopted—forms part of a wider package of measures by the Commission to ensure the protection of the EU’s external borders.

The Commission has taken the view that the challenges which have arisen from the recent migratory crisis cannot be adequately dealt with by member states acting in an uncoordinated manner and that integrated border management should be a shared responsibility of a new European Border and Coast Guard into which national authorities with coastguard and border control responsibilities, the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) and European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) can provide additional resources and contribute to better, more effective co-ordination and co-operation.

The core tasks of EMSA currently deliver a high, uniform and effective level of maritime safety and prevention of pollution within the EU, achieved by ensuring a consistent application of EU maritime law.

The amendments to the EMSA founding regulation will have the effect of immediately expanding EMSA’s role and responsibilities beyond its current core tasks of managing maritime pollution and safety. It will formally establish co-operation for the prevention, detection and investigation of criminal offences by enabling EMSA to make available information with other national authorities with coastguard and border control responsibilities, the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA) and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, which is currently accessible through ship reporting and other information exchange systems.

Such co-operation is indirect—EMSA itself will have no role to play in the exchange or analysis of such information between the agencies—and there is little practical or operational benefit for the UK from this measure. The Government maintain that the effect of the measure amounts to an obligation that falls within the scope of the JHA section of the treaties and is, therefore, subject to the UK’s JHA opt-in. It is on that basis that the Government have decided not to opt in.

[HCWS215]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Ministerial Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): An error has been identified in a reply to a written question given to the hon. Member for North Thanet, Official Report, 9 September 2013: Column 612W.

The reply given was:

Sir Roger Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions which French tropical overseas territories were included in his Department’s average temperature calculations in respect of winter fuel payments to expatriate UK citizens living in the EU member states. [167864]

Steve Webb: From 2015-16 winter fuel payments will no longer be payable to individuals in countries where the average winter temperature is warmer than the warmest region of the UK (South-West England). The Government have worked with the Met Office to analyse comparable winter temperature data across all EEA countries. The Met Office used recognised administrative regions for each country. For France this was the 27 regions, including French Guiana, Guadeloupe, La Réunion, Martinique and Mayotte. It does not include the French overseas territories, which are not part of the EEA.

It should have said:

From 2015-16 winter fuel payments will no longer be payable to individuals in countries where the average winter temperature is warmer than the warmest region of the UK (South-West England). The Government have worked with the Met Office to analyse comparable winter temperature data across all EEA countries. The Met Office used recognised administrative regions for each country. For France this was the 27 regions, including French Guiana, Guadeloupe, La Réunion and Martinique. It does not include the French overseas territories, which are not part of the EEA.

[HCWS213]
the proposal but also submitted a minute statement which outlined reservations on its application to the self-employed and competence.

There was a policy debate on the Commission’s New Skills agenda proposal and an endorsement of the Employment Committee (EMCO) opinion on it. The UK intervention set out the UK’s skills plan and apprenticeship reforms, emphasising the importance of putting employers at the heart of the system. The UK welcomed the EMCO opinion, including recognition that many of these issues were member state competence.

The Council endorsed the Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the EMCO reports on the European semester. The Commission noted and endorsed the streamlining of the European semester process.

There was an exchange of views, followed by a lunch time discussion, on youth employment. The Commission highlighted the tools and funding the Commission has made available to fight youth unemployment. There was then an exchange of views on long-term unemployment.

The presidency outlined the agenda for the Tripartite Social summit on 19 October.

The Council adopted Council conclusions on the Court of Auditors report on Roma integration. Introducing the item, the presidency noted that 6 million Roma living in the EU still faced discrimination and disadvantage. It would bring a second, broader, set of conclusions to Council in December.

The Council generally endorsed the joint EMCO/SPC opinion on the social pillar. The presidency and the Commission confirmed this would not pre-empt member state Government responses to the on-going Commission consultation.

Under any other business, the presidency provided information on the revision of the Blue Card directive, the action plan on integration of third country nationals, and the collaborative economy. The Greek delegation provided an update on labour market reforms in Greece.
Written Statements
Wednesday 26 October 2016

HOME DEPARTMENT

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TPIM notices in force (as of 31 August 2016)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPIM notices in respect of British citizens (as of 31 August 2016)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPIM notices extended (during the reporting period)</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>TPIM notices revoked (during the reporting period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TPIM notices revived (during the reporting period)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices (during the reporting period)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused (during the reporting period)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of current subjects relocated under TPIM legislation (as of 31 August 2016)</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. The TRG met on 7 June 2016. The next TRG meetings will take place on 20, 27 and 28 September 2016.

During the reporting period one individual was charged in relation to offences under section 23 of the Act—contravening a measure specified in a TPIM notice without reasonable excuse. This individual is not currently subject to a TPIM notice, the notice having been revoked in the last reporting period.

The case of Secretary of State for the Home Department v. EB [2016] EWHC 1970 (Admin) was heard at the High Court between 11 and 15 July 2016. In a judgment handed down on 29 July 2016 Mr Justice Mitting upheld the decision of the Secretary of State to impose a TPIM notice against EB. This judgment can be found at: http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2016/1970.html

[HCWS220]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

English Votes for English Laws Standing Orders

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): Today I am launching a scheduled technical review of the current English Votes for English Laws Standing Orders.

The previous Leader of the House of Commons committed to a review of the Standing Orders 12 months after their introduction and I am now honouring that pledge.

In October 2015, English Votes for English Laws was introduced to address the West Lothian question. It provides for the consent of English (or English and Welsh) MPs to legislation that solely applies to England (or England and Wales), while maintaining the important principle that MPs from all parts of the UK should continue to be able to deliberate and vote on all legislation before the House.

There will be a consultation period to inform the review which will come to a close on 2 December 2016, with publication of the outcomes of the review due later this session. The review will be available online only. Details of the review can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-votes-for-english-laws-review.

The terms of reference for the review are outlined below:

The impact of the Standing Orders on the legislative process.

The operation of the certification test.

Any suggestions for how the process could be further improved, or how understanding of the process could be further supported.

[HCWS219]
Written Statements
Thursday 27 October 2016

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):
A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Luxembourg on 11 October 2016. The Government are committed to leaving the European Union; in the interim, they continue to participate fully in ECOFIN meetings. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

Opening session
Ministers were briefed on the outcomes of the 10 October meeting of the Eurogroup and the Commission presented an update on the current economic situation. Ministers also discussed issues relating to the improvement and implementation of the stability and growth pact and Commission proposals for a European fund for sustainable development.

Current financial services legislative proposals
The Council presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Fight against fraud
The Council presidency and Commission delivered information on VAT-related aspects of the draft directive on the fight against fraud affecting the Union’s financial interests by means of criminal law (PIF directive).

Banking union
Ministers discussed the current state of play regarding implementation of banking union within the eurozone.

G20 and IMF meetings
Council followed up on the G20 and IMF meetings which took place in Washington on 6 to 9 October 2016. The presidency and Commission provided information on the outcomes including: continuing the work on resilience and sustainability, continuing the work on tax avoidance and tax evasion and considering issues around the digitalisation of financial services.

Climate finance
Ministers discussed preparations for the 22nd conference of parties to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) (Marrakesh, 7 to 18 November 2016), and agreed draft European Council conclusions.

European semester 2016—lessons learnt
Ministers exchanged views on key challenges, lessons learnt and the way forward for the European semester.

Joint report on health systems and fiscal sustainability
A presentation was given by the Commission on the joint Commission-EPC report of the health systems and fiscal sustainability. This was followed by an exchange of views.

Other business—the Basel Committee’s banking reform agenda
The Commission provided an update on the state of play in ongoing Basel negotiations.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):
We have today introduced the Technical and Further Education Bill.

My ambition is to drive long needed improvements in the quality of technical education in this country—mirroring the impact of this Government’s reforms to the quality of academic education. The reforms in this Bill are fundamental to the Government’s vision of ensuring that all people, irrespective of their background, have a level playing field to fulfil their potential and have high quality routes to secure not only their own futures but also the skills that British business needs.

Following implementation of the current Government programme of area reviews for the FE sector—which are designed to give institutions the opportunity to put themselves on a secure and sustainable financial footing—the Bill will also reflect the important principle of student protection, already set out in the Higher Education and Research Bill currently before Parliament, through the introduction of an effective insolvency regime for further education and sixth form colleges. The Bill we are introducing today ensures that, for the first time, suitable protections are available for students in further education, and this follows a public consultation, during July and August 2016, on introducing such a regime which saw broad support.

Beyond the measures in the Bill, this Government have a fundamental mission of social reform to deliver our vision of an education system that works for everyone. Education is at the heart of our ambition to make Britain a true meritocracy. That is why we have put responsibility for early years, schools, Further and Higher Education, adult skills and apprenticeships in one single Department. In light of these changes and the Department for Education’s existing two Bills in Parliament—the Children and Social Work Bill and the Higher Education and Research Bill—we have rightly reflected on our strategic priorities and the proposals for education legislation put forward at the time of the Queen’s Speech. I am clear that the Technical and Further Education Bill will enable us to get on with transforming technical education in this country while we continue to develop proposals for a school system that works for everyone.

The “Schools that work for everyone” consultation, which I announced in an oral statement to the House on 12 September, remains ongoing. This consultation asks how we can create more great school places in more parts of the country—including selective places for local areas that want them—and asks our independent schools, universities and faith schools to play their part in improving the quality of our state-funded schools. In addition, my Department has renewed its focus on ensuring everything we do drives towards improving social mobility with an emphasis on not just the most disadvantaged families but also on those that are just about managing. Our ambition remains that all schools should benefit from the freedom and autonomy that academy status brings. Our focus, however, is on building capacity in the system and encouraging schools to convert voluntarily. No changes to legislation are required.
for these purposes and therefore we do not require wider education legislation in this Session to make progress on our ambitious education agenda.

The Technical and Further Education Bill takes forward the Government’s ambition to streamline technical education to ensure clear routes into skilled employment. These reforms will put employers at the heart of the skills system, enabling them to drive the skills they need and value the most. Supporting individuals to a lifetime of sustained skilled employment will not only help to boost productivity and the growth of our economy in line with our industrial strategy but it will also deliver on the Government’s vision for an economy that works for all, not just the privileged few. The measures in the Bill build on the progress the Government have already made by investing in high quality apprenticeships and they deliver against the commitments the Government made in the Post-16 Skills Plan published earlier this year.

[HCWS223]

HOME DEPARTMENT

G6 Rome

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The informal G6 group of Interior Ministers held its most recent meeting in Rome on 20 and 21 October 2016. Representatives of the United States of America and the European Commission also attended the meeting.

The summit was chaired by the Italian Minister of the Interior, Angelino Alfano, and I represented the United Kingdom. The other participating states were represented by Jorge Fernandez Diaz (Spain), Tomasz Orlowski (Polish ambassador to Italy), Bernard Casseneuve (France), and Thomas de Maizière (Germany). The USA was represented by Jeh Johnson (US Secretary of Homeland Security) and Loretta Lynch (US Attorney General). The European Commission was represented by Dimitris Avramopoulos (Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship) and Sir Julian King (Commissioner for the Security Union). Representatives from other organisations including UNHCR, the International Organisation for Migration, Interpol and Europol also attended.

The first session took place on 20 October. This consisted of a discussion on migration in the 21st century, focusing on effective upstream action in source and transit countries, particularly in Africa. The discussion also covered procedures to identify those in need of protection, how to deter economic migrants who do not need our protection and approaches to enhance co-operation with transit countries. There was a general consensus that upstream intervention was essential to addressing the issue of illegal migration to the EU but that this will take time and will involve concerted and continued efforts by the EU and all G6 States.

The meeting continued on Friday 21 October, with the next session on security and terrorism, focusing on efforts to counter radicalisation. The attendees agreed the need to learn from each other and the importance of working closely with communities to deter extremism.

Participants noted that counter-radicalisation policies worked best when delivered in a “bottom up” way with full engagement from local communities in designing and developing the right strategies. The group reaffirmed the G6’s commitment to ensure that steps to improve security and counter terrorism are at the forefront of the EU’s political agenda.

The final session focused on cyber-security, which had been chosen as a discussion topic on the basis that, as technology progresses and cloud computing grows, cybercrime is perhaps the fastest growing criminal threat that we face. The attendees discussed how best to co-operate to address the problem and considered the implementation of the Budapest convention on cybercrime.

In my interventions, I outlined the large amount of work the UK is doing to address the current migratory pressures, including our upstream work, and reaffirmed our continuing commitment to help front-line member states manage the EU’s external borders. I also sought agreement from other member states that the EU’s approach to partnership frameworks with third countries must be comprehensive, and reiterated the three principles as set out in the Prime Minister’s speech at the UN General Assembly: to ensure that refugees claim asylum in the first safe country they reach in the region; to improve the ways we and our partners distinguish between refugees fleeing persecution and economic migrants; and to agree a better overall approach to managing economic migration which recognises that all countries have the right to control their borders. During the session on security I shared UK’s experience of countering extremism and radicalisation and highlighted the work of the Prevent programme. At the final session on cybercrime I reiterated the UK’s support for increased international co-operation to address cybercrime, and highlighted the work of the UK’s new National Cyber Security Centre in tackling this threat.

The next G6 will take place in Poland and is likely to be held early in 2017.

[HCWS224]

JUSTICE

Brussels IIa Regulation on Family Law

The Minister for Courts and Justice (Sir Oliver Heald): The Government have today decided to opt in to the European Commission’s proposal which repeals and replaces regulation 2201/2003, also known as the Brussels IIa regulation, on cross-border family matters.

Brussels IIa has applied since 1 March 2005 and is the main instrument for families involved in cross-border divorce or children proceedings. It establishes rules to decide which EU member state’s courts can determine divorce and other matrimonial matters, and parental responsibility matters (including residence and contact), and how orders arising from these cases can be recognised and enforced in another member state. It also provides rules on the return of children abducted to, or wrongfully retained in, other member states (usually by one parent), which supplement the international 1980 Hague Child Abduction Convention.
Following an evaluation of the current regulation the Commission's proposal aims to improve its use by providing clearer deadlines for certain procedures; making it easier for judgments to be recognised and enforced in another member state; clarifying and streamlining certain parts of cross-border child abduction proceedings; removing the possibility that a court will refuse to enforce a judgment on the basis that it would have applied different national rules to whether a child should have been heard in the proceedings; and clarifying and improving the procedures for co-operation between authorities.

Notwithstanding the result of the referendum on EU membership the Government consider it is in the UK's interests to opt in to this proposal. First the UK already applies the current regulation to the benefit of UK citizens, including children, in cross-border families, and it wants to avoid the risk that, if the new regulation comes into force before the UK's exit, and the UK has not opted in to the regulation, the existing regulation will no longer apply to the UK because it might be deemed inoperable. This might mean for a period of time no EU instrument regulates these matters for UK families even though the UK is still a member state. Secondly, even after a UK exit the regulation will affect UK citizens, principally in other member states, and it is in the UK's interests to influence the negotiations. As a family justice measure, this proposal must be agreed by unanimity in the Council.

During the negotiations the Government will aim to make sure that what is agreed respects national competence, limits any impacts on domestic law and procedures and minimises any additional burdens on the courts and the authorities that will use the new regulation.

[HCWS225]
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Government have been considering a submission from the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign on the need for an inquiry or independent review into the events that occurred at Orgreave coking plant on 18 June 1984, and subsequently.

This has been a difficult decision to make, and one which I have thought about very carefully. I have now concluded that there is not a sufficient basis for me to instigate either a statutory inquiry or an independent review. I know that this decision will come as a significant disappointment to the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign and its supporters and I have set out in a letter to them today the detailed reasons for my decision which include the following points.

Despite the forceful accounts and arguments provided by the campaigners and former miners who were present that day, about the effect that these events have had on them, ultimately there were no deaths or wrongful convictions.

The campaigners say that had the consequences of the events at Orgreave been addressed properly at the time, the tragic events at Hillsborough would never have happened five years later. That is not a conclusion which I believe can be reached with any certainty.

It was absolutely right that the Government established the Hillsborough independent panel. Significantly the panel’s report led to the High Court quashing the original inquests verdicts and the opening of the fresh inquests. The jury’s determinations and findings were unequivocal and clear: 96 victims were unlawfully killed.

The criminal investigations should now be allowed to proceed unimpeded. The IPCC is working with the CPS to assess whether material related to the policing at Orgreave is relevant to the Hillsborough criminal investigations. The intention is that criminal investigations in respect of Hillsborough will provide files to the CPS by the turn of the year following which the CPS will make decisions about whether any criminal proceedings will be brought as a result.

The campaign and their supporters explained to me when I met them that they want to get to the bottom of what happened on the 18 June 1984, and that only by doing so will their trust, and that of their community, be restored in the police.

However, there have been very significant changes in the oversight of policing since 1984, at every level, including major reforms to criminal procedure, changes to public order policing and practice, stronger external scrutiny and greater local accountability.

The operational delivery and practice of public order policing has moved on a great deal from the arrangements in 1984, and tactics have now been reviewed and altered several times both by the police and the courts.

Protection which were singularly lacking at the time of Orgreave now exist with the introduction in the mid-80s of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act which has vastly improved the way police investigations and powers operate.

The creation of the Crown Prosecution Service in 1986, with the introduction of independent CPS prosecutors, fundamentally altered the prosecution of offences. It ended the existence of ad hoc prosecution arrangements across the country whereby a mixture of police prosecutors and private firms of solicitors—hired by the police and acting for and on the instruction of the police—conducted prosecutions.

With regards to the external scrutiny of complaints against the police, this was strengthened by the creation, in 1985, of the Police Complaints Authority which was replaced in 2004 by the more effective Independent Police Complaints Commission and in turn will be replaced by the Office for Police Conduct in 2017. The exemplary standards of behaviour expected of everyone who works in policing were reinforced by the introduction of a statutory code of ethics, laid before this House in 2014.

Lastly, the introduction of directly elected police and crime commissioners in 2012 has given the public a voice in shaping their local policing priorities and improved the accountability of police leadership.

Over 30 years later, policing is very different and one of my key concerns as Home Secretary is to ensure there is a policing system which works effectively and fairly now. The policing landscape has changed fundamentally since 1984—at the political, legislative and operational levels. The same is true also for the wider criminal justice system.

There would therefore be very few lessons for the policing system today to be learned from any review of the events and practices of three decades ago. This is a very important consideration when looking at the necessity for an inquiry or independent review and the public interest to be derived from holding one.

Taking these considerations into account, I do not believe that establishing any kind of inquiry is required to allay public concerns or for any other reason.

I believe that we should focus on continuing to ensure that the policing system is the best it can be for the future, including through reforms before Parliament in the Policing and Crime Bill, so that we can have the best possible policing both in South Yorkshire and across the country.

The Green Paper, published by the Department for Work and Health and Disability

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): Today, we are publishing a Green Paper on work, health and disability. It represents an important step towards building a society that works for everyone, where all disabled people and those with health conditions are able to go as far as their talents will take them.

The Green Paper, published by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health, marks a new era of joint working to tackle the barriers that disabled people have faced for far too long and redefine how we think about work, health and disability.
A disability employment gap of 32 percentage points currently exists between disabled people and non-disabled people. We are bold in our ambition to halve that gap. We must also be bold in action, on the part of the welfare and health systems, employers and wider society.

We need a more personalised and integrated health and welfare system that puts individuals at its heart, but also one that protects those who need the most support. A welfare system that provides work for those who can, support for those who could and care for those who cannot.

The Green Paper focuses on how best to provide the support for those who could work. We will look at how best to improve the way that work and sickness certification works. Jobcentre work coaches will be encouraged to signpost claimants to therapy.

The Green Paper also consults on the crucial role that employers need to play, for this is not a challenge for the Government alone. Sickness absence costs business nearly £10 billion a year and having a strong, diverse labour market is vital for the economy’s future growth. The Green Paper asks how businesses can help attract and support disabled people in the workforce.

As part of the consultation, over the coming months, we will be talking with disabled people and those who have health conditions. We will be talking to carers, families, professionals, and a range of organisations who are so important to getting this right.

Together, our plan to help and support more disabled people into work is a key step towards building a great meritocracy where all that matters is the talent you have and how hard you are prepared to work.

[HCWS226]
Written Statements

Tuesday 1 November 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Government-owned Company: Provision of Indemnity

The Minister for Climate Change and Industry (Mr Nick Hurd): On 2 October 2015 the SSI steel works in Redcar was placed into compulsory liquidation and an official receiver (OR) was appointed as liquidator. On 12 October, following no buyer for the steel works being found, the decision was taken by the official receiver to set about the hard closure of the site. Since that time the official receiver has been undertaking a protracted liquidation of SSI and, in the absence of an owner, he has been overseeing the safe and secure hard closure of the site.

Government, through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, are currently providing an indemnity to the OR so that he can carry out his duties as liquidator of the company and ensure its ongoing safety and security.

The Department is establishing a Government company, known as the South Tees Site Company, in order to take forward the safety and security of the site and all of its assets. STSC will have a management team as well as a board of directors, accountable to the BEIS Secretary of State. In order to allow the board of directors and management team to carry out their duties BEIS has agreed to indemnify them against all claims, proceedings, costs—including the cost of defending proceedings—and expenses.

Over the summer recess the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy identified a need to provide the indemnities immediately. As a result the Department wrote to the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the BEIS Select Committee on 2 September outlining our intention, asking for any objection to be notified within five working days. I can confirm that neither PAC nor Select Committee raised any objections to the issuing of these indemnities.

I would also like to take this opportunity to inform the House that there is an agreement in place between SSI in liquidation and STSC concerning the management of the site. BEIS has clarified to the OR that his indemnity of 2 October 2015 indemnifies him for all claims, proceedings, costs and expenses raised against or incurred by the OR as a result of a breach by STSC of the agreement.

It is not possible at this stage to accurately quantify the value of such indemnity. HMG has considered the risks of this indemnity and I believe the likelihood of such indemnities being called upon is low. The indemnity is limited to liabilities arising as a consequence of the site assessments and the current BEIS indemnity remains in place. If the liability is called upon, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

As a matter of record I have laid a departmental minute for both Houses explaining the procedure followed and containing a description of the liabilities undertaken.

CABINET OFFICE

National Cyber Security Strategy

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): Today the Government are publishing the national cyber-security strategy 2016-21. This strategy sets out the Government’s objectives for strengthening the security of the UK in cyberspace over the next five years.

Cyber is a tier 1 threat to the UK’s economic and national security. The policies, institutions and initiatives developed under the previous strategy have helped to establish the UK as a leading global player in cyber-security. However, the scale and dynamic nature of cyber-threats, and the increasing dependency of our economy and society on digital products and services, mean that our current approach to cyber-security needs to be further strengthened. Therefore, the Government are today publishing the new five-year national cyber-security strategy, which defines our vision and ambition for achieving a UK that is secure and resilient to cyber-threats; prosperous and confident in the digital world.

The strategy sets out a series of ambitious policies and initiatives across the following themes:

- Defence against the threat;
- Deterrence of hostile actions against the UK, its people, businesses and allies;
- Development of our cyber-security industry, enhancement of our cyber-security skills and strengthening of our scientific research base.

This activity will be supported by international action to invest in partnerships to shape the global evolution of cyberspace in a manner that advances the UK’s cyber-security interests.

At the heart of the strategy is the creation of a new national cyber-security centre (NCSC)—a world-class centre of excellence to co-ordinate the national cyber effort and provide a unified source of advice and support for the private and public sector.

This strategy will be delivered through Government working in partnership with the devolved Administrations, the wider public sector, industry, academia and the public. It is supported by the £1.9 billion national cyber-security programme.


CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Draft BBC Charter and Draft Framework Agreement

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): On 15 September 2016, I announced the publication of the draft BBC royal charter and draft framework agreement.
The debates in the devolved legislatures and both Houses on these important documents have now concluded. I have listened with interest to the views raised and the debates have very much shown how far we have come. I am pleased today to announce the publication of updated versions of the draft royal charter and draft framework agreement on www.gov.uk which will shortly be submitted to the Privy Council.

The updated versions take into account and reflect the outcome of the debates and contain some minor and technical changes to the initial draft versions I published on 15 September 2016.

I can confirm that a copy of the royal charter and a copy of the framework agreement will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses when ready.

[HCWS231]

EDUCATION

Safeguarding

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): I am pleased today to announce the publication of updated versions of the draft royal charter and draft framework agreement on www.gov.uk which will shortly be submitted to the Privy Council.

The updated versions take into account and reflect the outcome of the debates and contain some minor and technical changes to the initial draft versions I published on 15 September 2016.

I can confirm that a copy of the royal charter and a copy of the framework agreement will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses when ready.

We recognise that these children may have family or potential carers with whom they are seeking to be re-united, under the Dublin regulation. The Department for Education and Home Office will work together to make sure the system for identifying these children and uniting them with family or potential carers is further strengthened bearing in mind that the primary responsibility of all involved must be must be safeguarding and promoting the best interests of the child. We are already working closely with the Local Government Association and local authorities where children are arriving, and will look to build on these strong relationships. Specifically, we will regularly review funding to support and care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, working closely with the LGA and local authorities.

In developing our strategy we will evaluate the procedures for, and speed of, transferring unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children who have been identified for transfer from Europe. We will also ensure that the strategy is informed by evidence from other immigration programmes, including the measures in place to ensure sufficient safeguarding and security checks are undertaken on those being transferred to the UK.

We recognise the particular vulnerabilities of these children and will review the information currently provided to asylum-seeking and refugee children about their rights, their current circumstances, and the role of local authorities in caring for them.

We will also consult the devolved Administrations to ensure a joined up approach across the United Kingdom. We will also consult with all relevant public bodies on the strategy, including local authorities in England, NGOs, the Children’s Commissioners for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In doing so, we will seek the views of local authorities to identify any further action that might be taken to prevent unaccompanied asylum-seeking or refugee children going missing and we will consider whether to introduce a new set of standard actions for the police on first encountering an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child.

We will also consider arrangements for Children’s Commissioners across the UK to make representations on behalf of children transferred where appropriate and consistent with their statutory remit.

In taking forward this work my Department will also revise the statutory guidance published in 2014 on the care of unaccompanied and trafficked children so it covers the safeguarding of children transferred under Dublin provisions and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who arrive spontaneously who then explain that they have family in the United Kingdom with whom they wish to live.

Finally, in recognition of the importance of this issue, we commit to updating Parliament annually on delivery against the strategy and providing quarterly updates to the Children’s Commissioners for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, ensuring transparency and appropriate scrutiny. We will also commit to publishing regular updates on the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children transferred to the UK.

The Government’s strategy has been to support efforts to find a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the refugee crisis; we must deal with the root causes of this crisis, as well as respond to the consequences. The UK has been at the forefront of the response to the crisis in...
Syria and the region. The Government have pledged over £2.3 billion in support of the crisis in Syria; our largest ever humanitarian response to a single crisis. Under the Syrian vulnerable persons resettlement (VPR) scheme, the Government have committed to resettle 20,000 of the most vulnerable refugees direct from the region. Around 2,800 people have arrived in this country since the Syrian VPR scheme began, around half of them children, and we are on track to meet this landmark commitment. The Government have also established a new resettlement scheme focused on children at risk in the Middle East and North Africa, the first of its kind focused on the region and which will see up to 3,000 people, of all nationalities, resettled to the UK over the next four years. We have worked closely with the UNHCR to develop this scheme and it reflects their advice on how best to safeguard the children caught up in this conflict.

[HCWS232]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

October Agriculture Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The UK was represented by deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Shan Morgan, at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 10 October in Luxembourg.

Commissioner Vella gave a presentation on the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT), which focused on the poor and deteriorating state of the swordfish stock. He noted that immediate and remedial action was needed, including the introduction of a catch quota. A number of member states intervened with differing support or opposition. The presidency concluded by noting the positions, and said a more detailed preparation of the EU position would take place at working group level.

Commissioner Vella promised full transparency for the EU/Norway fisheries negotiations, as well as discussions with coastal states which feed in to this. He wanted to ensure a balance between the interests of different member states, in particular those who wanted to maximise the quota for arctic cod and those who have traditionally had to pay for it in terms of exchange of quotas with Norway. A number of member states, including the UK, underlined the importance of accessing additional quota for choke species, to avoid any disruption connected to the introduction of the landing obligation.

The Council also agreed on the 2017 catch quotas in the Baltic.

Commissioner Hogan presented the omnibus regulation, as a tool for simplification of the four common agricultural policy regulations. The Commission wants the regulation to enter into force by 1 January 2018, so that there are three years of stability before the next multi-annual financial framework. The main proposals include: a sector-specific income stabilisation tool; simpler rules for loans and financial instruments aimed at young farmers; an optional national flexibility of the “active farmer” definition; and easing the process for undue payments. Most member states indicated that they needed more time to assess the details and submit comments, but noted some proposals were not simplification. The UK welcomed flexibility on the active farmer definition, and wider access to the income support tool. Commissioner Hogan underlined that this regulation was a big opportunity but that all comments would be taken on board.

Any other business items

Items on the market situation and sugar were taken together. Commissioner Hogan made a presentation on the current market situation, noting that the milk market observatory had reported an improvement in the dairy market, and the milk production reduction scheme will further improve the situation. He also made it clear that sugar quotas will come to an end in October 2017.

Poland presented a joint statement which it had co-ordinated outlining concerns of new greening proposals. This was supported in advance by 18 other member states, including the UK. Commissioner Hogan understood a number of measures were not supported, and offered four concessions which will be discussed at the next Special Committee on Agriculture.

Austria argued that international financial institutions are not taking animal welfare in to account when they make lending decisions.

Slovenia reported from their conference entitled “The Customer has the Right to know”, which highlighted the advantages of country of origin labelling.

The Council took note of the Dutch presentation outlining the conclusions of the 39th conference of directors of paying agencies.

Commissioner Hogan gave a short explanation on a European Court of Justice case (C-113/14), and confirmed that the necessary amendments to the fixing regulation were being arranged as quickly as possible.

[HCWS228]
Written Statements

Thursday 3 November 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Trade Union Industrial Action: Electronic Balloting

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): Section 4 of the Trade Union Act 2016 specifies that the Government should make provision for an independent review to consider the delivery of secure methods of electronic balloting of trade union members.

The Government are committed to the independent review and I am pleased to announce today that Sir Ken Knight CBE, the former Chief Fire and Rescue Adviser for England, will chair the review.

I am publishing the terms of reference in parallel. The review will start shortly and the final report presented to Parliament no later than December 2017.

[HCWS234]

HEALTH

Gosport Independent Panel: Terms of Reference

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I wish to update the House about the investigation into Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

On 10 July 2014, the former Minister for Care Services (Norman Lamb), announced the establishment of the Gosport independent panel, chaired by Bishop James Jones, to review documentary evidence held across a range of organisations concerning the initial care of families’ relatives and subsequent investigations into Gosport War Memorial Hospital.

When the former Minister announced the terms of reference for the Gosport independent panel on 9 December 2014 the Government expected the panel to complete its work by December 2017 [HCWS78].

As a consequence of the greater number of families now in contact with the panel and the increase in the volume of material the panel is reviewing, the panel now expects to complete its work in spring 2018.

It is also available online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements.

[HCWS233]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules as set out below. These changes continue our reforms to the UK immigration system.

The changes we are making to the rules will ensure that those who do not qualify for international protection on account of their conduct, for example serious criminality, are not granted settlement or limited leave to remain in the UK under the immigration rules.

We are also abolishing the “28-day grace period”, during which we currently accept out of time applications for a range of routes including work and study, to encourage greater compliance with the immigration rules. This will make clear that people must comply with the rules and make any application for further leave before their current leave expires.

The changes also include the reduction in the threshold of NHS debt from £1,000 to £500 for family cases and armed forces cases to align with changes made elsewhere in the rules in April 2016.

The changes also provide for a new English language requirement for non-European economic area national partners and parents applying to extend their stay in the UK. The new requirement, which can be met by passing, as a minimum, an A2 level common European framework of reference for languages speaking and listening test, will apply to partners and parents whose current leave on a five-year route to settlement under the family rules is due to expire on or after 1 May 2017.

The new A2 requirement will deliver on the Government’s manifesto commitment to ensure that those coming to the UK on a family visa with only basic English become more fluent over time. We believe this will improve integration in communities. An associated statement of intent and policy equality statement will be published today on gov.uk.

Following a review by the independent Migration Advisory Committee, on 24 March 2016 the Government announced two phases of reforms to tier 2, to be implemented in autumn 2016 and April 2017. The changes being laid today implement the first phase of these reforms. This includes changes to the salary thresholds for tier 2 (general) and short-term intra-company transfers (ICTs), and closure of the ICT skills transfer category. There are exemptions from the new salary for certain occupations in health and education.

We are also making technical changes to the immigration rules to clarify the concepts of a first country of asylum and a safe third country.

[HCWS235]
Written Statements

Friday 4 November 2016

DEFENCE

Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015 Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon):

Today I am providing an update on progress on the Type 26 Global Combat Ship programme.

The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) set out the Government’s commitment to build eight Anti-Submarine Warfare Type 26 Global Combat Ships.

We have been working with industry to agree the optimum schedule for the Type 26 and OPV build programmes to reflect the outcome of last year’s Strategic Defence and Security Review. I can confirm we now plan to cut steel in summer 2017 to build the first batch of the eight planned Type 26 ships, subject to detailed contract negotiations.

In parallel to these negotiations we will continue to further mature the detailed ship design, and continue to mobilise the wider supply chain, a critical enabler for the start of manufacture. BAE Systems has recently awarded the latest tranche of sub-contracts for parts of the ship’s infrastructure, and today I am announcing a £100 million contract with MBDA to provide the Sea Ceptor self-defence missile system. This contract with MBDA will support design work to allow equipment to be manufactured to equip the entire Type 26 fleet.

This takes our total financial investment in the Type 26 programme to date to £1.9 billion, demonstrating the Government’s continuing commitment to shipbuilding in the UK. This is an important step securing hundreds of highly skilled shipbuilding jobs on the Clyde until 2035 and hundreds more in the supply chain across Britain. It also marks the continuing progress in delivering the Type 26 programme that will meet the modern needs of the Royal Navy.

[HCWS237]

TRANSPORT

Rail Franchising

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): Today, I am announcing the competition for a new combined rail franchise - the West Coast partnership (WCP).

This new proposition is seeking to attract a world class partner to develop and enhance the existing Intercity West Coast (ICWC) operation and help shape the development of HS2 and operate its first services in 2026.

We are embarking on a new chapter in the modernisation of our railways. A strong private sector partner is vital now to work with the Government and as an advocate for passengers on the West Coast, to ensure excellent passenger services in the run up to HS2 introduction, and a smooth transition to the next generation of rail franchising as HS2 becomes the new backbone of Britain’s railways.

I want to be very clear that this is a new type of franchise requiring a new kind of approach to bidding.

A unique feature of this competition is that the winning bidding group will need transformational expertise across all rail operational and customer service disciplines.

The new operator will need to build on the existing ICWC long-distance, inter-city, cross-border services between England, Scotland and Wales by delivering a service which truly puts passengers at the heart of the railway.

The new operator will have to demonstrate how they will drive up punctuality and reliability - working to deliver a right time journey experience for passengers and examine closely the potential for better connections between the towns and cities they serve to enable economic growth.

The new operator will also need to bring about a transformation in passenger satisfaction around fares and ticketing, delivering the passengers expectation to have all of the information they need to choose the best ticket for their journeys.

This exciting competition is aimed at attracting a world class partner to enhance and develop the ICWC services and take forward the delivery of the train services on HS2.

There are a number of key interfaces between the delivery of HS2 and the ICWC rail franchise and I believe there are significant benefits in bringing the two projects closer together to ensure the best outcomes for passengers both before and after the start of the HS2 services.

Benefits of the partnership proposition include:

- ICWC passengers benefitting from new technology before the introduction of High Speed services

An experienced operator coming on board at an early stage to shape service design based on knowledge of the markets and passenger needs

A strong partner acting collaboratively with HS2 Ltd to design, launch and operate the passenger services on HS2 and manage the timetable recast of the West Coast Main Line. The successful bidder will need to work in partnership with the DfT, HS2 Ltd, local transport authorities, Transport Scotland and the Welsh Government.

Today’s announcement to market of this new proposition is the first step in a process. The Expression of Interest (EOI) for the WCP is due to be published in December 2016, followed by the invitation to tender in October/November 2017 with the new franchise scheduled to commence 1 April 2019.

The delivery of the WCP will require a new short term contract of approximately 12 months for the continued operation of services.

[HCWS236]
Written Statement

Monday 7 November 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Information Commissioner’s Office: Triennial Review

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): Following a statement by the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Human Rights, my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab) on 16 July 2015, I wish to inform the House that the triennial review of the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) that was announced in Parliament on Tuesday 25 November 2014, has been published today and a copy has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government welcome the review’s positive assessment of the ICO’s contribution to the protection of personal data and the increased transparency in public life over the last 30 years. The review rightly notes the considerable strides the ICO has made in improving its performance in a number of areas against a challenging economic backdrop.

The review also recognises that the environment in which the ICO operates has changed considerably over the last decade due to the proliferation of digital information and rapid changes in technology. In turn, the ICO’s powers and functions have grown to meet this challenge. In response, the review concludes that the functions of the ICO are still required but recommends that the organisation should be restructured as a multi-member commission to encourage a greater breadth of decision-making and accountability.

The Government have considered the review’s recommendations very carefully. It agrees that the expansion in role highlighted by the review does necessitate a step change in governance and leadership at the ICO and that is why we welcomed the separate decision by the previous Information Commissioner, Christopher Graham, to widen the existing leadership cadre to allow for greater collective decision-making on regulatory matters.

However, the Government have decided that reconstituting the ICO as a multi-member commission is not the right change to make to its governance arrangements. The new Information Commissioner, Elizabeth Denham, took up post in July 2016. Her first priority is to ensure that the organisation is properly equipped to take forward the requirements of the general data protection regulation (GDPR), which will come into force in the UK in May 2018; and to provide clarity and certainty to businesses and organisations as they make preparations to implement the regulation. Alongside this is a need to prepare the organisation for any changes to data protection regulatory landscape after the UK exits the European Union.

Strong and stable leadership is crucial during a period of rapid organisational change and the Government believe that a single Information Commissioner working through an enhanced senior leadership team is the best model for achieving this. We therefore do not intend on making any statutory changes to the governance model of the ICO.

More broadly, the review recommended that the ICO improves its digital and technological capability to meet the economic and societal challenges posed by the rapidly growing digital economy. A number of improvements have been made over the last year, expanding the number of technology experts at the ICO and improving the visibility of technology in the ICO’s communications. This additional expertise has significantly strengthened the ICO’s investigation and enforcement capability in relation to cyber and other data protection breaches. The Information Commissioner is committed to publishing a refreshed technology strategy in 2017, including further investment in expertise available to the ICO and drawing on external knowledge through better research and collaboration with experts from academia and industry.

[HCWS238]
Written Statements
Tuesday 8 November 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Civil Service Compensation Scheme

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): Today I have laid an amended civil service compensation scheme before Parliament along with a report setting out the process by which we have sought to try to reach agreement with relevant trade unions.

The terms outlined in the civil service compensation scheme 2016 will come into effect from tomorrow, 9 November.

This amended scheme is in line with the Government’s response to the consultation on the civil service compensation scheme that was published on 26 September and the offer made to trade unions on the same day.

The Government have reformed the civil service compensation scheme to align with wider compensation reforms planned across the public sector, giving the civil service an effective, cost-efficient system to help civil servants leave when exits are needed. Our overarching aim will always be to provide the best possible service for the public and to create a civil service that treats our workforce with fairness and respect.

I believe that these reforms represent a strong negotiated settlement. It has been reached with trade unions that have engaged constructively in discussions. As a consequence we have an agreement that provides a firm foundation for the management of the civil service and its people for a generation. This administration will not seek to deviate from this agreement.

With this reform concluded, I want to work with trade unions on the aspirations we both have to make the civil service an even better place to work.

[Treasury]

ECOFIN: November 2016

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 8 November 2016. EU Finance Ministers are due to discuss the following items:

Ministerial dialogue with the European Free Trade Association

ECOFIN will be preceded by a meeting of EU and EFTA Finance Ministers at which they will discuss issues of investment and economic growth.

Early morning briefing

Ministers will be briefed on outcomes of the 7 November meeting of the Eurogroup and the Commission will present an update on the current economic situation.

Commissioner Margrethe Vestager has been invited to the session to discuss state aid and taxation. Vestager has responsibility for enforcing competition rules in the areas of antitrust, cartels, mergers and state aid.

Building a fair, competitive and stable corporate tax system for the EU

Proposals on: a common corporate tax base; a common consolidated corporate tax base; double taxation dispute resolution mechanisms in the EU; and hybrid mismatches with third countries were published on 25 October 2016. The Commission will give a presentation on its proposals which will be followed by an exchange of views.

Anti-money laundering directive

The presidency will present on the current state of play on the fourth anti-money laundering directive. That will be followed by a ministerial discussion on this topic.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

Statistics

Ministers will be briefed on EU statistics including the 2016 statistical package, the progress made on strengthening co-operation with Eurostat, and the European Statistical Governance Advisory Board report on the implementation of the European statistics code of practice.

Council conclusions will be presented for endorsement by Ministers.

European Court of Auditors’ annual report on the implementation of the 2015 budget

The European Court of Auditors will give a presentation on their annual report on the implementation of the 2015 budget.

Implementation of the banking union

Ministers are to discuss the current state of play on the implementation of the banking union.

Packaged retail and insurance-based investment products (PRIIPs) regulation

The Commission will provide an update on the current state of play in relation to the entry into force of the PRIIPs regulation.

Criteria and process leading to the establishment of the EU list of non-co-operative jurisdictions for tax purposes

Ministers will discuss draft Council conclusions on the criteria and process leading to the establishment of the EU list of non-co-operative jurisdictions for tax purposes.

Panama Papers Taskforce

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): In his statement to the House on 11 April 2016, the former Prime Minister David Cameron announced the creation of a cross-agency taskforce to analyse all the information that had been made available from the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)’s Panama papers data leak. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I now wish to update the House on the work of the taskforce.

In its short existence, the taskforce has added greatly to the UK’s understanding of the evermore complex and contrived structures that are being developed to

[Treasury]
mask offshore tax evasion and economic crime. This intelligence will ensure that the UK remains uniquely placed to contribute to the international effort to uncover, and take action on wrongdoing, regardless of how deeply hidden the arrangements are, as well as identify those jurisdictions where regulatory oversight requires improvement.

We can today report that the taskforce has:

opened civil and criminal investigations into 22 individuals for suspected tax evasion
led the international acquisition of high-quality, significant and credible data on offshore activity in Panama—ensuring the important work of the taskforce was not delayed by the ICIJ’s refusal to release all of the information that it holds to any tax authority or law enforcement agency
identified a number of leads relevant to a major insider-trading operation led by the Financial Conduct Authority and supported by the National Crime Agency
identified nine potential professional enablers of economic crime—all of whom have links with known criminals placed 43 high net worth individuals under special review while their links to Panama are further investigated
identified two new UK properties and a number of companies relevant to a National Crime Agency financial sanctions enquiry
established links to eight active Serious Fraud Office investigations
identified 26 offshore companies whose beneficial ownership of UK property was previously concealed, and whose financial activity has been identified to the National Crime Agency as potentially suspicious
contacted 64 firms to determine their links with Mossack Fonseca to establish potential further avenues for investigation by the taskforce
seen individuals coming forward to settle their affairs in advance of taskforce partners taking action.

The taskforce’s respective partners will engage the relevant prosecuting authorities to bring any identified wrongdoing before the courts.

The Government have also invested to develop their expertise in data and intelligence exploitation. This has ensured that Departments and agencies are well placed to forensically analyse massive-scale data of this kind, which are becoming ever-more frequently available.

The taskforce has established a Joint Financial Analysis Centre (JFAC). Using the data and intelligence gathered from across the taskforce, the JFAC has developed cutting-edge software tools and techniques, ensuring the taskforce has access to the very best information from which to work.

The proactive acquisition of data, alongside the establishment of the JFAC, has enabled the taskforce to identify a number of areas for further investigation across the full range of tax and economic crime, as well as links to organised crime, which will be the focus of its work over the coming months.

Taskforce members are present in Panama, using established relationships with the Panamanian authorities, and working with diplomatic colleagues, to offer support to analyse all the available data. Taskforce members have also worked with international partners as part of the Joint International Tax Shelter Information Centre to exchange information and intelligence as part of the wider international effort.

More generally, the Government have introduced tough new powers, increased penalties and game-changing measures to tackle offshore and onshore tax evasion. In the summer 2015 Budget, the Government gave HMRC an additional £800 million to invest in compliance and tax evasion work. This is expected to recover £7.2 billion in tax by the end of 2020-21. This includes tripling the number of criminal investigations that it undertakes into serious and complex tax crime, focusing particularly on wealthy individuals and companies. The aim is to increase prosecutions in this area to 100 a year, by the end of this Parliament.

The Government have also been pivotal in increasing global financial transparency in more than 100 countries, including British overseas territories and crown dependencies, by automatically sharing offshore account data. This additional data will help identify and pursue the tiny minority of tax evaders still hiding their money offshore.

The Government aim to make the UK a more hostile place for those seeking to move, hide or use the proceeds of crime or corruption. In October 2015, the Government published the national risk assessment for money laundering and terrorist financing to better understand the risks and vulnerabilities for the UK. The action plan, published in April 2016, and the Criminal Finances Bill, introduced to Parliament in September, will significantly improve our capabilities to tackle money laundering and recover the proceeds of crime, including proceeds of corruption.

The London anti-corruption summit earlier this year brought more than 40 countries together and resulted in a commitment to more than 600 actions. Since then, the UK has made real progress on its own commitments —our public register of beneficial ownership information is now live, the first G20 country to do so; and the National Crime Agency is working to get the new international anti-corruption co-ordination centre operational by next April.

[HCWS247]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pension Scheme: Contingencies

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The armed forces pension and compensation schemes will be requesting a supplementary estimate in due course to address a shortfall in the net cash requirement amount, which originally appeared in the HM Treasury’s central Government main supply estimates 2016-17, published in July 2016 (HC 967).

This shortfall in the net cash requirement has arisen due to an inadvertent publishing error by HMT in the central Government main supply estimates 2016-17.

This will be corrected at the supplementary estimate stage; however, a Contingencies Fund advance has been sought in the interim, which will be repaid once the supplementary estimate is approved by Parliament and Royal Assent of the accompanying Supply and Appropriation Bill has been obtained.

Parliamentary approval for additional cash of £438,193,000 will be sought in the supplementary estimate for the armed forces pension and compensation schemes. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £438,193,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS249]
Future Reserves 2020: Update

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): On 29 June 2016 I informed Parliament (HCWS49) that, following the strategic and defence security review 2015, which set out the need to strengthen the armed forces’ contribution to UK resilience, the Army would in future plan to use Regular and Reserve phase 1 trained personnel in response to crises within the UK. This will increase the productivity, utility and size of force available in the event of a national emergency. To reflect this, the term “Trained Strength” will now include all personnel trained to undertake the core functions of the Army.

The public consultation on the presentation of revised Trained Strength figures for the Army Reserve has now been completed and we will commence publication of the new statistics from 1 October. I have agreed the following revised growth profile for the for the Army Reserve with the Chief of the General Staff; unchanged growth targets for the Maritime Reserve and Royal Auxiliary Air Force are included for completeness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trained Strength</th>
<th>31 Mar 17</th>
<th>31 Mar 18</th>
<th>31 Mar 19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maritime Reserve</td>
<td>2,320</td>
<td>2,790</td>
<td>3,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army Reserve</td>
<td>26,700</td>
<td>28,600</td>
<td>30,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Auxiliary Air</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>1,860</td>
<td>1,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Force</td>
<td>30,880</td>
<td>33,250</td>
<td>35,060</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These targets now replace all those announced on 19 December 2013 (Official Report, column 124WS).

[HCWS248]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment Council: October 2016

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I attended the EU Environment Council in Luxembourg on 17 October along with the Minister for Climate Change and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd).

I wish to update the House on the matters discussed.

Effort share and land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF)

Ministers undertook a full round table debate of the Commission’s legislative proposals on the “non-ETS” package—the effort share regulation (ESR) and the land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) regulation, published in July 2016. The Commission strongly welcomed the EU’s ratification of the Paris agreement and supported a focus on implementation via agreement to both the ESR and EU emissions trading system (ETS) directive. Ministers exchanged comments on a number of the technical aspects of the proposals. The UK noted the importance of swift agreement to the proposals in the context of implementation of the Paris agreement and, along with several other member states, supported taking the effort share negotiations in parallel with discussion on the EU ETS.

Any other business—39th International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) assembly: information from the Commission

The presidency congratulated the role of the EU and member states in brokering the recent agreement for aviation at the ICAO general assembly in Montreal. It noted the further work to be done on implementation and underlined the relevance of the deal for the EU’s aviation emissions trading system (ETS).

The Commission hailed the landmark aviation deal and underscored the global and non-discriminatory nature of the deal. On aviation ETS, the Commission said it would present a proposal in early 2017 following an analysis of the ICAO deal.

Sustainable water management—Council conclusions

Ministers supported the adoption of the Council conclusions on sustainable water management. The Commission welcomed the conclusions and explained that it would come forward with a proposal to revise the water framework directive (WFD) in 2019 which would include options for member states to maintain ambitious objectives. The UK and other member states all welcomed the call in the conclusions for the Commission to work with member states to develop options well before the 2019 WFD review to allow continued high ambition post-2027.

Convention on biological diversity (CBD)—Council conclusions

The presidency circulated a compromise text to its draft Council conclusions in order to prepare the EU position for the conferences of the parties to the convention on biological diversity, the Cartagena protocol and the Nagoya protocol, which is to be held on 4 to 17 December 2016 in Cancun, Mexico. The Council adopted these conclusions following the agreement of a revised compromise text.

AOB—CITES conference of the parties 17: information from the presidency and Commission

The Council was updated on the outcome of the 17th convention on international trade in endangered species conference of the parties in Johannesburg last month. The Commission and the UK welcomed the outcome, with the UK praising the science-based approach which was taken, such as maintaining ivory market closure through retaining annotations to the four southern African populations of elephants on appendix II.

AOB—lessons learnt from the national emissions ceiling (NEC): information from Poland, Romania and Hungary

Some member states raised concerns as to how negotiations were conducted in reaching provisional agreement on this directive. The Commission appreciated that there had been compromises to get to an agreement but welcomed the overall achievement in getting to this stage.

AOB—identification of endocrine disrupting substances; information from the Danish, Swedish and Dutch delegations

The Council took note of this AOB item. The Commission noted that a communication on this issue had been presented at June Environment Council and that the Commission was reflecting on comments before putting forward a revised text to member states.

Other AOBs:

The Council noted information from the Commission and the presidency on the 28th meeting of the parties (MOP28) to the Montreal protocol on substances that deplete the ozone layer.
The Council noted information from the presidency on the 2016 world conservation congress of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The Council noted information from the Commission on a communication from the Commission on a European strategy for low-emission mobility.

The Council noted information from member state delegations on natural resources management on the example of the Białowieża Forest (information from Poland); and unspent funds from the new entrants reserve (NER300) funding programme (information from Cyprus).

Environment Council: November 2016

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 14-15 November in Brussels. I will represent the UK.

As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries will be a political agreement on fishing opportunities for EU vessels for certain deep-sea fish stocks, and an exchange of views on establishing a multi-annual plan for demersal stocks in the North sea.

On agriculture there will be an exchange of views on: a report from the agricultural markets taskforce; EU agricultural research and innovation; and a study on the impact of concessions in free trade agreements on agricultural products.

There are currently nine confirmed Any Other Business items tabled for this Council:

- Implementation of the landing obligation, including the potential issue of fisheries choke (tabled by the United Kingdom)
- Completion of action plans for EMFF specific ex-ante conditionalities (tabled by the Commission)
- Outcomes from the informal EU forest directors general meeting (tabled by the presidency)
- Animal welfare during transport (tabled by Sweden)
- Animal welfare platform (tabled by the Netherlands)
- Endocrine disruptors (tabled by the Netherlands)
- Ministerial conference on lumpy skin disease (tabled by Bulgaria and Austria)
- Anti-microbial resistance (tabled by Denmark)
- Use of geographical indications on foods which imply customary name (tabled by Greece).

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Councils: November 2016

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 14 November. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) on 15 November. The Foreign Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Defence) will be chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. The meeting will be held in Brussels.

Foreign Affairs Council

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include the Eastern Partnership and the security and defence implementation plan (SDIP). The meeting will potentially also cover a range of countries from the southern neighbourhood including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran and Yemen. It is expected that Libya will also be covered.

Eastern Partnership

Ministers are expected to exchange views on recent developments in the six Eastern Partnership states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

Syria

Ministers will discuss Syria. The EU has already imposed sanctions against the Assad regime to restrict their capacity to wage war on the Syrian civilian population.

The October Foreign Affairs Council agreed to impose further restrictive measures and 10 new sanctions listings have since been agreed. The October European Council Conclusions declared the EU to be “considering all available options, should the current atrocities continue.”

The EEAS has proposed a revised EU Syria strategy and the UK will press for this to recognise that a political transition in Syria is vital to our shared interests on counter-terrorism and migration, and make recovery/reconstruction project funding conditional on a political transition. It is important that any EU strategy for Syria does not delay an EU response to the current situation inside Syria. We will encourage an EU approach that focuses on supporting the UN-led process, seeking a lasting political solution to the conflict and pursuing robust action against those who stand in the way of peace.

Libya

Discussions are expected to cover the latest developments in the Libyan political process. On 31 October the UK and US co-hosted a ministerial meeting which discussed Libya’s economic challenges and how to support the implementation of the Libyan political agreement. We will encourage the EU to consider how it can best continue to support the Presidency Council and Government of National Accord.

Security and Defence Implementation Plan

EU Foreign and Defence Ministers will discuss the security and defence implementation plan—part of the follow up to the European global strategy. We anticipate Council conclusions welcoming the SDIP and agreeing to take forward its proposals.

Foreign Affairs Council (Defence)

The FAC(D) will discuss the European Defence Agency, including the budget for next year; the Commission’s European defence action plan, where the Commission will update member states on progress; EU/NATO co-operation, where we will welcome progress so far and call for greater momentum; and ongoing CSDP operations and missions.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): During the Westminster Hall debate on Iran-UK relations on 12 October my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) asked a question regarding a planned meeting with the US and Iranians on banking issues. In response to that question I answered,

“...in fact, we discussed that matter in some of the forums we had with leaders who have come over from Iran. I am very much focused on going back to that committee. Unfortunately, the very people who wanted to attend felt that they might trigger the sanctions simply by being at the meeting to discuss this matter. That is the cautionary environment that we now face.”

The correct response should have been that we recognise there may be some concern from UK and European banks and businesses in engaging in Iran-related trade, particularly those which employ US persons due to fear of non-compliance with US sanctions. However, we place huge importance on tackling the issues that have been raised by the banking community, and want our banks to be able to support British companies working legally in Iran. It is in our economic interest, as well as Iran’s, to support legitimate business. After years of restricted relations some challenges remain, but we are committed to working through them with international partners, Iran and the banking community.

To address these issues the Foreign Secretary hosted a banking roundtable with Secretary Kerry and the US Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) in London in May 2016. We subsequently arranged a second banking roundtable in July, to be hosted by the Foreign Secretary with OFAC and the Iranian Central Bank. Although the US participants arrived for the event, and were ready to engage, the Iranian delegation unfortunately did not attend, which led to the cancellation of the event. A meeting did, however, take place between the UK Government and OFAC officials to discuss the banking issues that we are working hard to resolve.

[HCWS2454]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Review of Terrorism Legislation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, David Anderson, QC, the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, prepared a report on the operation in 2014 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and Part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which was laid before the House on 17 September 2015.

I am grateful to David Anderson for his report and have carefully considered its recommendations and observations. I am today laying before the House the Government’s response (Cm 9357) to his report, copies of which will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS244]
in this spending period, to be focused on improvements that will deliver additional benefits to passengers. We remain committed to modernising the Great Western mainline and ensuring that passenger benefits are achieved. This decision underscores the Government’s approach to wider rail investment: that passenger outcomes must be delivered in conjunction with achieving the best value from every pound spent.

[HCWS239]
Petition

Wednesday 26 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Middlesbrough,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Andy McDonald.]

[P001967]
Petition

Wednesday 2 November 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of South Norfolk,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Richard Bacon.]
Petition

Thursday 3 November 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Oldham West and Royton,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jim McMahon.]
Observations from the The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James):

The closing or relocation of delivery offices is an operational matter for Royal Mail’s management, provided it does not affect its ability to deliver the universal postal service—the collection and delivery of letters six days a week throughout the UK at uniform, affordable prices.

No final decision has been taken in respect of the closure of the Bredbury delivery office. Royal Mail is conducting a feasibility study to look at the impact of relocating the delivery operations of the Bredbury Office to its Stockport delivery office. The study includes discussions with its staff and trade unions.

In the event that the move goes ahead, detailed planning will take place to ensure a smooth transition for the postal operator’s operations, its staff and customers. It is standard practice for Royal Mail to put plans in place to minimise disruption to local services. For example, it offers re-delivery to a nominated neighbour and delivery on a day nominated by the customer. These are free of charge services. Alternatively, Royal Mail can deliver items to a different address within the same postcode area.

The House may also be interested to know that there are existing arrangements, available as standard across the country, which provide delivery or redelivery for many items free, or at low cost, to a nearby Post Office branch, at the request of the recipient.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 3 November 2016

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Small Shops Regulation

The following is an extract from the response to the hon. Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay) during the debate on small shops regulation on 2 November 2016.

Margot James: My hon. Friend said that there was a great deal of disquiet among small retailers in his constituency about the programme to make tax digital. I have heard such disquiet in my meetings with the Federation of Small Businesses and discussed it with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. There are some signs of progress. There is no chance of the programme being rowed back or changed radically, but the Treasury is consulting on changing the threshold and removing unincorporated businesses entirely. It is also consulting on delaying its introduction for one year for businesses of a certain size, and there is even the possibility of some financial support for very small businesses. So, the Treasury is listening. I think the consultation deadline is fast approaching, so I urge my hon. Friend to make haste in contributing his views on behalf of his local retailers. — [Official Report, 2 November 2016, Vol. 616, c. 390WH.]

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay).

The correct response should have been:

Margot James: My hon. Friend said that there was a great deal of disquiet among small retailers in his constituency about the programme to make tax digital. I have heard such disquiet in my meetings with the Federation of Small Businesses and discussed it with the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. There are some signs of progress. There is no chance of the programme being rowed back or changed radically, but the Treasury is consulting on changing the threshold and removing some unincorporated businesses entirely. It is also consulting on delaying its introduction for one year for businesses of a certain size, and there is even the possibility of some financial support for very small businesses. So, the Treasury is listening. I think the consultation deadline is fast approaching, so I urge my hon. Friend to make haste in contributing his views on behalf of his local retailers.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 8 November 2016

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Syria

The following is an extract from Questions to the Foreign Secretary on 18 October 2016:

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the many barriers to creating safe routes out of Syria is the Syrian Government’s practice of declaring stolen passports belonging to those who oppose them. Will the Foreign Secretary, as a matter of some urgency, speak to his colleague the Home Secretary about the position of Zaina Erhaim, an award-winning Syrian journalist who recently had her passport confiscated as she came into Heathrow?

Boris Johnson: I am aware of the case. It is very difficult, because we must, in law, confiscate passports that have been stolen, but we are doing what we can to assist the lady in question.

Letter of correction from Boris Johnson:
An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) during Questions to the Foreign Secretary. The correct response should have been:

Boris Johnson: I am aware of the case. It is very difficult, because we confiscate passports that have been stolen, but we are doing what we can to assist the lady in question.

INDEX TO THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES  VOLUME 616
SESSION 2016–17

24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

SCOPE
The index is derived from the headings that appear in Hansard.
The index includes entries covering the names of all Members contributing to the Parliamentary business recorded in Hansard, including Divisions.

REFERENCES
• References in the indexes are to columns rather than pages.
• There are separate sequences in Hansard for the material taken on the floor of the House, Westminster Hall sittings, written statements, written questions, ministerial corrections and petitions
• References consisting of a number by itself indicate material taken on the floor of the House.
• References ending in ‘wh’ indicate Westminster Hall sittings.
• References ending in ‘ws’ indicate written statements.
• References ending in ‘w’ indicate written questions.
• References ending in ‘p’ indicate written petitions.
• References ending in ‘mc’ indicate ministerial corrections.
• References under all headings except the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business and the titles of legislation are listed in one numerical sequence irrespective of whether the material is taken on the floor of the House, is discussed at a Westminster Hall sitting, is a written statement or is a written question.
• References under the names of Members contributing to Parliamentary business are listed in numerical sequence under the following headings-
  • Chamber Debates (which includes interventions and points of order as well as significant contributions to debates);
  • Westminster Hall Debates (covering all debates held as part of the Westminster Hall sittings);
  • Written Statements (consisting of ministerial statements issued in writing);
  • Questions (which includes all written, oral and urgent questions); and
  • Petitions (which includes all oral and written petitions).
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Ali, Rushanara
Chamber Debates
European Council 45
Social Housing, Regulation 751-5
Questions
Mental Health Services, Veterans 1244

Aldous, Peter
Questions
Business Growth Strategy 1386
STEM Industries 415-6
Supported Accommodation 17
Topical Questions 646, 1395

Alexander, Heidi
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1274

Ashworth, Jonathan—continued
NHS Funding 649-50

Atkins, Victoria
Chamber Debates
Investigatory Powers Bill 819
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1160, 1162, 1211-5

Attorney General
403

Backbench Business
460, 1093, 1410

Bacon, Mr Richard
Petitions
Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts 4p

Bailey, Mr Adrian
Chamber Debates
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1100-1
Nissan, Sunderland 692
Small and Medium Sized Co-operative Development 1407
Westminster Hall
Coeliac Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 344-5wh
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 27wh, 30-1wh, 39wh, 44wh
National College for Wind Energy (01.11.2016) 358wh

Bailey, Rebecca Long
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 285-9, 296
Questions
Manufacturing Industry 137

Baker, Mr Steve
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1276
European Council 35-6
Homelessness Reduction Bill 542-3
Questions
Manufacturing Industry 136

Baldwin, Harriett
Under-Secretary of State for Defence
Chamber Debates
Yemen (07.11.2016) 1240-1
Questions
Defence Spending 1244-6
Departmental Funding 1250
Procurement Programmes, Supply Chain 1235-7
Topical Questions 1252-3

BAME Representation on Boards
415

Bardell, Hannah
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 175
Westminster Hall
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016) 395-7wh, 401wh
Leaving the EU, North-East Exports 93-4wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 453wh, 459wh, 481-4wh
Questions
Homophobia in Sport 1024
Tax Credits (Concentrix) 143
Topical Questions 420

Barron, Kevin
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1060
Community Pharmacies 913-8
Privileges 445, 451-4
Questions
Orgreave 788
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Berry, James—continued
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1093
Living Wage 1129-31, 1139-40
Police Officer Safety 972-4
Westminster Hall
Disclosure and Barring Service
(26.10.2016) 142-4wh, 146wh, 151wh
Questions
Online Radicalisation 633-4
Sex and Relationship Education 411
Topical Questions 420, 1253

Bett's, Mr Clive
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1043-8
Homelessness Reduction Bill 549-53, 606
Midland Main Line Electrification
(07.11.2016) 1369, 1373
Press Matters 807
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the
Chagos Islands 63wh, 65wh, 67wh,
69wh, 75-6wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 481wh,
488wh
Questions
Leaving the EU, Local Government 8
Ogrrave 792

Bilateral Trade Deals
1030

Bill Presented
442, 808

Bingham, Andrew
Chamber Debates
Young People's Mental Health 465-9
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016)
264-6wh, 270wh
Questions
Innovation 1375-6

Birmingham Pub Bombings
Legal Aid 394

Black, Mhairi
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 299-304

Blackford, Ian
Chamber Debates
Improving Lives, Work, Health and
Disability Green Paper 676
Nissan, Sunderland 693
Westminster Hall
AERA Pension Scheme 164wh, 171-3wh
Local Government Pension Scheme
(24.10.2016) 1-9wh, 16-7wh, 20-2wh
Questions
House of Lords, Membership 872-3
Standing Orders, Reform 421-2

Blackman, Bob
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 434
Homelessness Reduction Bill 540-9, 566,
609
Private Members’ Bills 159
Questions
Caste Discrimination Consultation 414
Leaving the EU, Northern Ireland
Economy 268
Rough Sleeping 4

Blackman, Kirsty
Chamber Debates
Criminal Finances Bill 228-9
Leaving the EU, Financial Services
1107, 1110-1
Private Members’ Bills 160

Blackman, Kirsty—continued
Westminster Hall
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016)
391-400wh, 403wh, 416wh
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016)
39-40wh, 47wh
Questions
Bilateral Trade Deals 1030

Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 944
Protection of Family Homes
(Enforcement and Permitted
Development) Bill 614-5, 617

Blackwood, Nicola, Parliamentary
Under-Secretary of State for Health
Chamber Debates
Capita Contract (Coventry) 1496-500
Care Homes for Older People
1151-4
Chronic Urinary Tract Infections 622-4
Young People’s Mental Health 512-9
Westminster Hall
Social Media and Young People’s
Mental Health 440-4wh

Blenkinsop, Tom
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 436
European Council 52
NHS Funding 661
Nissan, Sunderland 689
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, North-East Exports
90wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 445-51wh,
454wh, 456-5wh, 473wh,
482wh, 486-7wh, 492wh
Questions
Teesside Investment 11-2
Topical Questions 148

Blomfield, Paul
Chamber Debates
Midland Main Line Electrification
(07.11.2016) 1367

Blunt, Crispin
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 173
Article 50 1264
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and
Syria 1083
European Council 34
Press Matters 808
Prison Safety and Reform 1072
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for
the LGBT Community 1400
Yemen (26.10.2016) 339, 355-7
Westminster Hall
Libya (26.10.2016) 120-2wh, 125wh

Bone, Mr Peter
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1274
Boozat Branch of the Post Office 1488
Business of the House 1060
Calais 62
European Council 42
Prison Safety and Reform 1074
Private Members’ Bills 158, 424
Symmetry Park, Logistics 1006
Westminster Hall
CPS and Disability Hate Crime
(08.11.2016) 515wh
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016)
179wh, 184-6wh, 188wh, 199wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 448wh,
454wh, 461-2wh, 468wh
Questions
Bilateral Trade Deals 1030
House of Lords, Membership 873
Manufacturing, Leaving the EU 1381
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Brake, Tom—continued
Questions
Trade Negotiations, Parliamentary Vote 1032
Voting Rights, Overseas UK Citizens 871

Brazier, Mr Julian
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1283
Defence Spending 1245
Engagements 889
Human Rights Act 766
Refugees, Age Identification 639
Single Market 145

Brennan, Kevin
Chamber Debates
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 702-8, 710
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1179
Questions
Topical Questions 150

Bottomley, Sir Peter
Chamber Debates
Press Matters 801
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 58wh, 61wh
W est Sussex Schools Funding (02.11.2016) 376-7wh
Borwick Branch of the Post Office 1488

Bradley, Karen, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Chamber Debates
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 697-702
Press Matters 797-808
Written Statements
Draft BBC Charter and Draft Framework Agreement 26-7ws
Information Commissioner’s Office, Triennial Review 35-6ws
Questions
Creative Industries 1023-4
Nuisance Calls 1017-8
Topical Questions 1025-8

Brock, Deidre
Chamber Debates
Westminster Hall
Plumbers’ Pensions 52-3wh
Questions
Northern Ireland Economy 263

Brokenshire, James,
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 908
Police Officer Safety 961

Bronte, Mr Nicholas
Chamber Debates
Justice Committee 744-5
Y emen (26.10.2016) 389

Bruce, Fiona
Questions
Fixed Odds Betting Terminals 1018
Topical Questions 1392
Vulnerable Witnesses 404-5

Bryant, Chris
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1276
Business of the House 433
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 700, 705, 708
European Council 44
Press Matters 803
Private Members’ Bills 157
Privileges 444-5, 449-51, 457
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1403
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 61wh, 64wh, 66wh
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016) 395wh, 397wh, 406-8wh, 414-5wh
Questions
House of Lords, Membership 874
Ogrevae 795-6
Topical Questions 1396

Buck, Ms Karen
Chamber Debates
Calais 65
Homelessness Reduction Bill 568-70
Young People’s Mental Health 462
Questions
House Building 14

Building Regulations 16

Burden, Richard
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 169
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid 396
Homelessness Reduction Bill 543-4
Prison Safety and Reform 1071
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 282wh
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 9-12wh, 18-9wh

Burgon, Richard
Chamber Debates
Points of Order 1405
Prison Safety and Reform 1069-70
Questions
Access to Justice 770

Burnham, Andy
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 175
European Council 38
Police Officer Safety 963, 979-82, 984, 1001
Press Matters 804
Questions
Midlands Engine 13-4

Brown, Lyn—continued
Westminster Hall
Disclosure and Barring Service (26.10.2016) 144-8wh, 150-1wh
Questions
Europol/European Arrest Warrant 631

Brown, Mr Nicholas
Chamber Debates
Justice Committee 744-5
Y emen (26.10.2016) 389

Burnham, Andy
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 175
European Council 38
Police Officer Safety 963, 979-82, 984, 1001
Press Matters 804
Questions
Midlands Engine 13-4
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Cadbury, Ruth—continued
Young People’s Mental Health 480, 501-4
Questions
House Building 15
Calais 55
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 328
Young People’s Mental Health 488-91
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 242wh
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 437-8wh
Questions
Topical Questions 777, 1039
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Chamber Debates
Criminal Finances Bill 226
Westminster Hall
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016) 395wh
Libya (26.10.2016) 114wh
Questions
Departmental Efficiency Savings 875
Leaving the EU, Northern Ireland Economy 269-70
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Petitions
Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts 7p
Capita Contract (Coventry) 1489-500
Carbon Monoxide Alarms 1383
Cardiff Central Station 516wh
Care Homes for Older People 1146
Carmichael, Mr Alistair
Chamber Debates
Criminal Finances Bill 197
Investigatory Powers Bill 836-7
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1097
LIVING Wage 1133, 1136-7
Nissan, Sunderland 690
Prison Safety and Reform 1072
Questions
Refugees, Age Identification 639
Syria 3-4mc
Carmichael, Neil
Chamber Debates
Grammar and Faith Schools 1419-26, 1445-6
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1267
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) 598-9
Nissan, Sunderland 689
Westminster Hall
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 428wh
Cash, Sir William
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1262
Business of the House 1058
Cash, Sir William—continued
European Council 31
HS2 Ltd, Communication and Engagement 525-6, 528, 530, 532, 534, 536
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1099, 1101-3, 1107, 1109, 1112
Caste Discrimination Consultation 414
Caufield, Maria
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 911, 922, 936-7
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 259
Questions
Engagement 888
Prison Safety 759-60
Topical Questions 644, 777
Chalk, Alex
Chamber Debates
Grammar and Faith Schools 1423
Westminster Hall
Libya (26.10.2016) 117wh, 119wh
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 426-30wh, 432wh, 444wh
Questions
Topical Questions 152, 419-20
Champion, Sarah
Chamber Debates
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1398-9
Questions
Orgreave 785
Sex and Relationship Education 411
Change of use of Abberley Hotel 520
Chapman, Douglas
Chamber Debates
Yemen (26.10.2016) 371-2
Westminster Hall
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016) 198-9wh
Lariam 210wh, 212wh
Questions
House of Lords, Membership 874
Procurement Programmes, Supply Chain 1237
Chapman, Jenny
Chamber Debates
NHS Funding 664
Questions
Domestic Abuse 636
Infrastructure Investment 1378
Released Offenders, Employment 771
Chase Railway Line 861
Cherry, Joanna
Chamber Debates
Care Homes 60
Criminal Finances Bill 215, 221
European Council 43
Investigatory Powers Bill 817-8, 825-9, 836, 850-4
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1094, 1106-8, 1113, 1120
Nissan, Sunderland 694
Questions
Access to Justice 769
International Students 626-7
Orgreave 784-5
Child Sexual Exploitation
Telford (25.10.2016) 81wh
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Davies, David T. C.
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1280
Business of the House 430
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 1085
Police Officer Safety 968, 978, 981-3
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 33wh
Questions
Cybercrime 404
Human Rights Act 766
Orgraeve 786-7

Davies, Dr James
Chamber Debates
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 97-100
Questions
Topical Questions 878

Davies, Geraint
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1041, 1046
Article 50 1279
Business of the House 1064-5
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1303, 1312, 1316, 1321, 1330-1, 1343-5, 1357, 1363
Policy Officer Safety 961
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 25wh, 27-8wh, 33-4wh, 41wh, 45wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 451wh, 456wh, 460wh, 462wh, 465wh, 469wh
Questions
EU Budget, UK Contribution 2017-18 142

Davies, Glyn
Questions
Voting Rights, Overseas UK Citizens 871

Davies, Mims
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 427
Westminster Hall
Coeliac Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 341wh
Questions
Neighbourhood Plans 5-6

Davies, Philip
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1272, 1276
Business of the House 436
Homelessness Reduction Bill 594-5
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1156-8, 1161, 1165, 1173, 1193-210, 1223
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1180
Police Officer Safety 976-9, 1001
Press Matters 803
Private Members’ Bills 156-7, 424
Privileges 444
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 234wh, 245wh
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016) 400-1wh, 407wh
Questions
Fixed Odds Betting Terminals 1019
International Men’s Day 412
Justice System, Women 767
Orgraeve 782-3
Topical Questions 150, 417-8

Davis, Mr David, Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1255-7, 1259-85

Day, Martyn
Chamber Debates
NHS Funding 652-3
Young People’s Mental Health 504-6
Questions
Human Rights Act 765-6

De Piero, Gloria
Chamber Debates
Police Officer Safety 973

Deaths in Custody Suites 762

Dehnbolina, Thangam
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1049
Homelessness Reduction Bill 603
Questions
Trade Negotiations, Parliamentary Vote 1031

Defence
1235, 33ws, 40ws

Defence Estate 1286

Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016) 179wh

Defence Spending 1244

Delegated Legislation 244, 741, 1364
Delegated Legislation (Committees) 1145, 1364

Departmental Efficiency Savings 875

Departmental Funding 1249

Dinenage, Caroline, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities
Westminster Hall
West Sussex Schools Funding (02.11.2016) 379-83wh
Questions
BAME Representation on Boards 415
International Men’s Day 412-3
Topical Questions 418-20

Disclosure and Barring Service (26.10.2016) 139wh

Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1275
European Council 40
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 231wh
Questions
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 764

Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1281
European Council 53-4
Veterans and Service Personnel 1458

Dodds, Mr Nigel
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 172
Westminster Hall
Libya (26.10.2016) 111-2wh
Questions
Engagements 890
Northern Ireland Economy 262

Domestic Abuse 636

Davies, Chris
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1050
Business of the House 1066
Defence Estate 1298
NHS Funding 664
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 266-9wh
Questions
Topical Questions 642, 1026

Cunningham, Mr Jim
Chamber Debates
Calais 67
Capita Contract (Coventry) 1494-5
Community Pharmacies 912
Concentrix 329
Criminal Finances Bill 219
Homelessness Reduction Bill 544
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 282wh
Coeliac Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 340wh
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 3wh
Questions
Iraq and Syria, RAF Campaign 1237
Topical Questions 1254
Voter Registration, Young People 869

Cybercrime 403

Dakin, Nic
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 916
Westminster Hall
Coeliac Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 343wh
National College for Wind Energy (01.11.2016) 348wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 445wh, 462wh, 475-7wh, 490wh
Questions
Innovation 1376

Danczuk, Simon
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 594-5

David, Wayne
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 26wh, 43wh

Davies, Byron
Chamber Debates
Calais 64
Police Officer Safety 989-91
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 30-1wh
Questions
Orgraeve 788

Davies, Chris
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1050
Business of the House 1066
Defence Estate 1298
NHS Funding 664
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 266-9wh
Questions
Topical Questions 642, 1026
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Donaldson, Sir Jeffrey M.
Chamber Debates European Council 36
Questions
Leaving the EU, Republic of Ireland 266

Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Chamber Debates European Council 47
Nissan, Sunderland 693-4
Westminster Hall
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 427wh, 436-7wh
Questions
Topical Questions 1037

Doneelan, Michelle
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 581-3
Questions
Trading Opportunities Abroad 1034-5

Dorries, Nadine
Westminster Hall
AEA Pension Scheme 171wh
Highways England Compensation, Broadway in Chadderton 158wh
Questions

Double, Steve
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 922
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 255-62wh
Questions
Clean and Reliable Energy 1390
Topical Questions 146
Tourism 1020-1

Double Taxation Treaties
Developing Countries 134

Doughty, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Article 50 Debates 50 1277
Calais 66
Concentrix 292, 303, 313-6
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1302, 1306, 1309, 1313-4
Veterans and Service Personnel 1449-54, 1457, 1466, 1476, 1478, 1484, 1486-7
Yemen (26.10.2016) 341, 347, 353, 367
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 73wh
Cardiff Central Station 517wh, 522wh
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 2wh
Questions
Engagements 879-80
Military Campaign against Daesh 1248

Dowd, Jim
Questions
Engagements 278

Dowd, Peter
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 330-2
Westminster Hall
CPS and Disability Hate Crime (08.11.2016) 493-7wh, 515wh
Questions
Regional Infrastructure Development 140-1

Dowden, Oliver
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 184
Article 50 1279
Community Pharmacies 921-4

Draft BBC Charter and Draft Framework Agreement
26ws

Drax, Richard
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 187
Article 50 1281
Defence Estate 1297
European Council 45
Investigatory Powers Bill 823, 838
NHS Funding 659
Police Officer Safety 996-7
Press Matters 805
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 259-62wh

Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 229wh

Dromey, Jack
Chamber Debates
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid 401
Living Wage 1142-5
Police Officer Safety 958, 964-5
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 282wh
Coeliac Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 339wh
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 3-4wh, 12-3wh, 20wh
Questions
Manufacturing, Leaving the EU 1381-2

Drummond, Mrs Flick
Chamber Debates
Defence Estate 1290
European Council 42
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 80
Homelessness Reduction Bill 596-7
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 251
Yemen (26.10.2016) 345
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 298wh
Questions
Armed Forces 1246

Duddridge, James
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1278
Defence Estate 1294
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 60wh, 67-9wh
Questions
Prosecution of Sexual Offences 409

Dugher, Michael
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 920-1

Duncan, Sir Alan, Minister for Europe and the Americas
Chamber Debates
Sri Lanka, Human Rights 1231-4
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1398-404
Written Statements
Foreign Affairs Council 7-8ws
Foreign Affairs Councils, November 2016 43-5ws

Duncan Smith, Mr Iain
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1261
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 670
Nissan, Sunderland 683-4

Dunne, Mr Philip, Minister of State, Department of Health
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 949-51
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 109-13
NHS Provision (Brighton and Hove) (24.10.2016) 125-30
Select Committee on Health 1091
Written Statements
Gosport Independent Panel, Terms of Reference 31ws

Durkan, Mark
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1269
Concentrix 293-4, 317-9, 333-6
European Council 40
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1307, 1318
Questions
Leaving the EU, Republic of Ireland 266-7
Orgeave 796

Eagle, Maria
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 900, 905
Concentrix 286, 294, 321-3, 333-4
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 672
Nissan, Sunderland 691
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1176, 1181
Police Officer Safety 957
Questions
Orgeave 792-3

Eagle, Ms Angela
Chamber Debates
European Council 36
NHS Funding 658-9
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1401
Questions
Innovation and Research, Science 1382
International Students 627

ECOFIN
15ws
November 2016 37ws

Economic Growth
131
Midlands 142

Education
5ws, 16ws, 27ws

Edwards, Jonathan
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 186
Article 50 1273
EU Customs Union 1009, 1014, 1032-3
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1336, 1345-7
Nissan, Sunderland 693
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 32-3wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 462-5wh

Efford, Clive
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 180
Concentrix 286
NHS Funding 664-5
Points of Order 1300

Elliott, Julie
Chamber Debates
Nissan, Sunderland 686
Press Matters 803-4
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, North-East Exports 95-6wh
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Elliott, Tom
Questions
Leaving the EU, Northern Ireland
Economy 269
Pardons for Gay and Bisexual Men (Northern Ireland) 773-4
Voting Fraud 676

Ellis, Michael, Deputy Leader of the House of Commons
Westminster Hall
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016) 413-5wh

Ellison, Jane, Financial Secretary to the Treasury
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 291-9, 301, 314
Questions
Double Taxation Treaties, Developing Countries 135
Tax Credits (Concentrix) 143-4
Topical Questions 148-9

Ellwood, Mr Tobias, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
Chamber Debates
Yemen (26.10.2016) 387-9
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 76-9wh
Libya (26.10.2016) 124wh, 127-30wh
Written Statements
Ministerial Correction 45ws

Elmore, Chris
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1062
Concentrix 325-6
Police Officer Safety 991
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 36-7wh, 46wh
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 435-6wh
Questions
Departmental Funding 1249-50
House Building 15
Voter Registration, Young People 870

Elphicke, Charlie
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1282
Criminal Finances Bill 197, 201, 203-4, 235
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1303-4, 1311, 1313-5, 1320, 1322-3
Questions
Double Taxation Treaties, Developing Countries 135
Europol/European Arrest Warrant 630

Evans, Chris
Chamber Debates
Criminal Finances Bill 225-8
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1108-10
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 38-9wh
Questions
Justice System, Women 767

Evans, Graham
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1064
Police Officer Safety 997
Questions
Northern Ireland Economy 261
Topical Questions 1028

Evans, Mr Nigel
Westminster Hall
Global Biodiversity 328wh, 335wh
Questions
Tourism 1021

Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1302

Exiting the European Union 1ws

Exiting the European Union Committee 1365

Extradition Orders
Vulnerable People 640

Fabricant, Michael—continued
Procurement Programmes, Supply
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1282
Concentrix 291-9, 301, 314
Questions
Bilateral Trade Deals 1031
Counterfeit and Substandard Electrical Goods 1379-80
House of Lords, Membership 874
International Students 626
Leaving the EU, Local Government 8
Midlands Engine 13

Field, Frank
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1282
Concentrix 291-2
European Council 43

Field, Mark
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1045
Criminal Finances Bill 241
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 77, 83
Investigatory Powers Bill 816
Questions
EU Budget, UK Contribution 2017-18
141-2
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Goodwill, Mr Robert—continued
Questions
Immigration 634-6
Refugees, Age Identification 637-40
Topical Questions 643-4, 646

Goport Independent Panel
Terms of Reference 31ws

Gove, Michael
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1263-4
Defence Estate 1292
NHS Funding 654
Nissan, Sunderland 684

Government-owned Company
Protection of Indemnity 25ws

Grady, Patrick
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 439
European Council 53
Nissan, Sunderland 696
Points of Order 442
Private Members’ Bills 160, 423
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the
Chagos Islands 68wh, 72-4wh
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016)
180wh, 188-9wh
Lariam 222-5wh
Libya (26.10.2016) 122-4wh
Questions
Double Taxation Treaties, Developing Countries 134-5
Topical Questions 644

Graham, Richard
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 309-11
EU Customs Union 1033-4
Homelessness Reduction Bill 593-4
Nissan, Sunderland 688

Grammar and Faith Schools 1410

Grant, Mrs Helen
Westminster Hall
Housing in Kent (02.11.2016) 417wh

Grant, Peter
Chamber Debates
European Council 50
Private Members’ Bills 161
Yemen (26.10.2016) 382

Gray, Mr James
Chamber Debates
Veterans Care Sector: Government Role
255
Westminster Hall
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016)
180-1wh, 185-8wh
West Sussex Schools Funding
(02.11.2016) 363wh, 368wh
Questions
Iraq and Syria, RAF Campaign 1237
Rough Sleeping 3

Gray, Neil
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 296-7, 302, 304
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights
1323-8
Questions
Military Campaign against Daesh
1247-8
Topical Questions 878-9

Grayling, Chris
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016)
290-1wh

Green, Damian, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
Chamber Debates
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 666-7, 669-78
Written Statements
Work, Health and Disability 22-4ws

Green, Kate
Chamber Debates
Capita Contract (Coventry) 1490, 1493, 1497
Community Pharmacies 898
Concentrix 290, 293, 307-9, 334
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 1086
Grammar and Faith Schools 1414,
1423, 1433-7, 1444-5
Homelessness Reduction Bill 540-1
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 674
NHS Funding 657
Prison Safety and Reform 1073
Questions
Business Growth, North of England
1389
Topical Questions 152, 419, 879

Greening, Justine, Minister for Women and Equalities
Written Statements
Supporting Apprenticeships 5-6ws
Technical and Further Education 16-7ws
Questions
Caste Discrimination Consultation 414
Sex and Relationship Education 410-2
STEM Industries 416
Topical Questions 417-21

Greenwood, Lilian
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 171-2
Grammar and Faith Schools 1421
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 678
Midland Main Line Electrification
(07.11.2016) 1367, 1372-4
NHS Funding 664
Police Officer Safety 967
Young People’s Mental Health 495
Questions
Armed Forces Covenant 1241

Greenwood, Margaret
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 927
NHS Funding 665
Questions
Orgreave 795

Griffith, Nia
Chamber Debates
Investigatory Powers Bill 845-6

Griffiths, Chris
Chamber Debates
Defence Estate 1287-8
Veterans and Service Personnel 1475-80,
1482
Questions
Defence Spending 1246
Iraq and Syria, RAF Campaign 1238-9
Mosul, Reconstruction and Governance
1240

Vol. 616]
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Hammond, Greg, Minister for Trade and Investment
Questions
Topical Questions 1038
Trade Negotiations, Parliamentary Vote 1031-2
Trading Opportunities Abroad 1034-6

Hansard, Mr David
Chamber Debates
Article 1275
European Council 51-2
Justice Committee 744
Police Officer Safety 963-4, 967
Questions
Online Radicalisation 634
Prison Safety 760
Supported Accommodation 17
Topical Questions 1395

Harbours, Docks and Piers Clauses Act
1847 (Amendment) Bill
1227

Harman, Ms Harriet
Westminster Hall
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016)
392wh

Harper, Mr Mark
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 181
Article 50 1271
Defence Estate 1293
European Council 38
Private Members’ Bills 156
Westminster Hall
CPS and Disability Hate Crime (08.11.2016) 498-502wh, 508wh

Harrington, Richard, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions
Westminster Hall
AEA Pension Scheme 175-8wh
Plumbers’ Pensions 53-6wh
Written Statements
Ministerial Correction 10ws

Harris, Carolyn
Chamber Debates
Living Wage 1121
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 27wh
Questions
Counterfeit and Substandard Electrical Goods 1379
Topical Questions 641

Harris, Rebecca
Chamber Debates
Police Officer Safety 985-6

Hart, Simon
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 754-6wh, 260wh, 272wh
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 427-8wh

Haselhurst, Sir Alan
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 170
Defence Estate 1291
Private Members’ Bills 154
Westminster Hall
West Anglia Taskforce Report 525-9wh, 542wh

Hayes, Helen
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1046
Homelessness Reduction Bill 572-5
Young People’s Mental Health 460-5, 479, 519-20

Hayes, Helen—continued
Westminster Hall
Disclosure and Barring Service (26.10.2016) 139-42wh, 150wh, 153-4wh
Questions
Engagements 276

Hayes, Mr John, Minister of State, Department for Transport
Westminster Hall
A34 Safety (26.10.2016) 135-8wh
Highways England Compensation, Broadway in Chadderton 157-60wh
Written Statements
European Maritime Safety Agency 9-10ws

Hayman, Sue
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 186
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 53
Yemen (26.10.2016) 346
Questions
Affordable Homes 11
Topical Questions 420

Heald, Sir Oliver, Minister for Courts and Justice
Chamber Debates
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid 398-402
Written Statements
Brussels IIA Regulation on Family Law 18-9ws
Questions
Access to Justice 768-71
Human Rights Act 765-6
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 763-5
Topical Questions 776-7, 779

Healey, John
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 555-9, 607
Questions
Rough Sleeping 4-5

Health
3ws, 31ws

Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Bill
808

Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill
72

Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill (Programme)
113

Heappey, James
Questions
Infrastructure Investment 1378
Smart Energy System 146
Topical Questions 1395

Heaton-Harris, Chris
Chamber Debates
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1180
Westminster Hall
Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests 546-50wh

Heaton-Jones, Peter
Chamber Debates
Care Homes for Older People 1146-50
Defence Estate 1297-8
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1215-21
Questions
Topical Questions 19-20
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Henderson, Gordon Westminster Hall Housing in Kent (02.11.2016) 417-21wh, 424-5wh Questions Coastal Communities 18 Manufacturing Industry 135-6

Hendrick, Mr Mark Chamber Debates Yemen (26.10.2016) 357, 369-70

Hendry, Drew Chamber Debates Airport Capacity 170-1 Defence Estate 1293


Hermon, Lady Chamber Debates Defence Estate 1290-1 Exting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1386 Questions Armed Forces Covenant 264

Heroin Addiction 640

High Streets (England) 6

Highways England Compensation Broadway in Chadderton 155wh

Hinds, Damian, Minister for Employment Written Statements Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council 10-2ws

Hinkley Point C UK Guarantee 5ws

HMP Chelmsford 762

HMP Maghaberry 772

Hoare, Simon Chamber Debates Investigatory Powers Bill 820-1, 832 Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 247 Questions Orgreave 787 Topical Questions 1252 Voter Registration, Young People 869

Hodge, Dame Margaret Chamber Debates Criminal Finances Bill 195, 219-24

Hodgson, Mrs Sharon Chamber Debates Nissan, Sunderland 687

Hoey, Kate Chamber Debates European Council 41 Westminster Hall British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 60wh

Hoey, Kate—continued Questions Topical Questions 464

Hollern, Kate Chamber Debates Capita Contract (Coventry) 1491-2 Westminster Hall Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 13-5wh

Hollinrake, Kevin Chamber Debates Air Quality 1046 Concentrix 296 Questions Business Growth, North of England 1388 Manufacturing Industry 136 Topical Questions 779


Home Department 625, 13sw, 15wh, 21wh, 32sw, 45wh

Homelessness Reduction Bill 540

Homophobia in Sport 1024

Hopkins, Kelvin Chamber Debates Nissan, Sunderland 694 Questions Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 763

Hopkins, Kris, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Questions Armed Forces Covenant 263-5 Security 270

Hosie, Stewart Questions Economic Growth 133-4 House Building 14

House Building and Planning 1

House of Commons Commission 741

House of Lords Membership 872

Housing in Kent (02.11.2016) 417wh

Howarth, Mr George Chamber Debates Private Members’ Bills 156 Westminster Hall Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 8-9wh


Howlett, Ben Questions Affordable Homes 11 Engagements 885 International Students 627

HS2 Ltd Communication and Engagement 521

Huddleston, Nigel Questions Online Radicalisation 633 Topical Questions 149 Tourism, Exchange Rate 1022

Human Rights Act 765

Hunt, Mr Jeremy, Secretary of State for Health Chamber Debates Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 72-81 NHS Funding 649-65 Written Statements Accelerated Access Review 3-4ws

Hunt, Tristram Chamber Debates Community Pharmacies 935-6 Concentrix 289 Living Wage 1124 NHS Funding 661-2 Westminster Hall Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 7wh Questions Midlands Engine 13
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Jones, Mr Marcus—continued
Westminster Hall
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 15-20w
Martin Luther King’s 1967 Visit to Newcastle 311-3w
Questions
Business Rates 18
Light Pollution 15-6
Supported Accommodation 17
Topical Questions 20-1

Jones, Susan Elan
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 574, 578
Prison Safety and Reform 1075
Questions
Fixed Odds Betting Terminals 1019

Justice
759, 18ws

Justice Committee
744

Justice System
Women 766

Kane, Mike
Chamber Debates
Grammar and Faith Schools 1435, 1439-41, 1446
Westminster Hall
West Sussex Schools Funding (02.11.2016) 377-9w, 381w
Questions
Orgreave 790

Kawczynski, Daniel
Chamber Debates
Yemen (26.10.2016) 346, 378-9
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1097

Keeley, Barbara
Chamber Debates
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 105-10
Young People’s Mental Health 476, 506-15
Westminster Hall
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 438-40w

Kendall, Liz
Chamber Debates
Grammar and Faith Schools 1412
Homelessness Reduction Bill 583-4
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1093-8, 1120
Living Wage 1123

Kennedy, Seema
Chamber Debates
Yemen (26.10.2016) 374-5
Westminster Hall
CPS and Disability Hate Crime (08.11.2016) 496w, 499w
Questions
Local Charities Day 1021
Small Businesses 1388
Topical Questions 879

Kerevan, George
Chamber Debates
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1102, 1112-4
Yemen (26.10.2016) 346, 378-9
Questions
Armed Forces 1247
Leaving the EU, Devolved Administrations and Prosecutions 406
Topical Questions 151

Kerr, Calum
Westminster Hall
Global Biodiversity 328-30w

Kinahan, Danny
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 185
European Council 46
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 241-3w
Questions
Armed Forces Covenant 264
HMP Maghaberry 772
Topical Questions 21

Kinnock, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1269
European Council 49
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 23-30w, 48w
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 453w, 459w, 469-72w, 479w, 491w
Questions
Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon Project 1384

Kirby, Simon, Economic Secretary to the Treasury
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 332-6
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1117-9
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1176-82
Questions
Economic Growth, Midlands 142-3
Smart Energy System 146
Topical Questions 150-1

Knight, Julian
Chamber Debates
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid 398
Questions
Economic Growth 133

Knight, Sir Greg
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 428

Kwarteng, Kwasi
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 177
Yemen (26.10.2016) 376-7
Westminster Hall
Libya (26.10.2016) 107-12w, 116w, 114w, 117w, 125w

Kyle, Peter
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 286
NHS Provision (Brighton and Hove) (24.10.2016) 116, 120, 126, 128
Questions
Topical Questions 1394

Lamb, Norman
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 906, 909, 937-8
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 78, 94-7
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1097
NHS Funding 653

Lammy, Mr David
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 281-6w, 305-6w

Lancaster, Mark, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence
Chamber Debates
Veterans and Service Personnel 1468, 1479-86

Lancaster, Mark—continued
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 254-60
Westminster Hall
Lariam 225-8w
Written Statements
Armed Forces Pension Scheme, Contingencies 40-1w
Questions
Armed Forces Covenant 1241-2
Mental Health Services, Veterans 1242-4
Topical Questions 1251-2, 1254

Lariam
209w

Latham, Pauline
Questions
Topical Questions 776

Lavery, Ian
Questions
Voting Rights, Overseas UK Citizens 872

Law, Chris
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 184
Concentrix 290, 293, 306, 319-21
Questions
House of Lords, Membership 872-3
Welfare Polices, Disabled People 416-7

Leader of the House
421, 14w

Leaving the EU
Departmental Responsibilities 774
Devolved Administrations and Prosecutions 406
Financial Services 1093
International Co-operation 407
Local Government 7
North-East Exports 88w
Northern Ireland Economy 268-9
Regional Funding 145
Republic of Ireland 265
Wales (25.10.2016) 23wh

Lee, Dr Phillip, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice
Questions
Criminal Driving Offences 773
Justice System, Women 766-8
Topical Questions 777-8

Lefroy, Jeremy
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 432, 1060
European Council 50
HS2 Ltd, Communication and Engagement 525, 527, 531
Prison Safety and Reform 1075-6
Westminster Hall
Lariam 214-6w, 218w
Questions
Engagements 278
Topical Questions 1038

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act
763

Leigh, Sir Edward
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1062
European Council 35
Westminster Hall
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 4w, 6w, 20w
Questions
Orgreave 629-30
Trade Negotiations, Parliamentary Vote 1032
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index Item</th>
<th>Session/Order</th>
<th>URL Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathias, Dr Tania</strong>—continued <strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagements 280</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>May, Rt. Hon. Mrs Theresa, The Prime Minister</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chamber Debates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Council 26-8, 30-54 <strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagements 271-82, 880-90</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maynard, Paul, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chamber Debates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase Railway Line 864-8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midland Main Line Electrification (07.11.2016) 1370-4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Westminster Hall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiff Central Station 521-4wh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Anglia Taskforce Report 537-42wh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written Statements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail Franchising 33-4ws</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rail Update 46-8ws</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meale, Sir Alan</strong></td>
<td>Westminster Hall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing in Kent (02.11.2016) 419wh</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 4wh</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 430wh, 436-7wh, 440wh, 444wh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mears, Ian</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Business of the House 429, 1057-8 <strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Students 625</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental Health Services</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans 1242</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Menzies, Mark</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**Yemen (26.10.2016) 372-3 <strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topical Questions 1038</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mercer, Johnny</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 246-54, 259-60</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Westminster Hall</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lariam 211-4wh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Merriman, Huw</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community Pharmacies 903, 905</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Investigatory Powers Bill 857-8</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Police Officer Safety 978</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young People’s Mental Health 491-3, 497</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Departmental Efficiency Savings 875</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud 632</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topical Questions 643</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Metcalfe, Stephen</strong></td>
<td>Questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topical Questions 419</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Midland Main Line Electrification</strong></td>
<td>(07.11.2016) 1366</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>126</strong></td>
<td>Midlands Engine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Miliband, Edward</strong></td>
<td>Chamber Debates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article 30 1262</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nissan, Sunderland 684-5</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ogrevae 786</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military Campaign against Daesh</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1247</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Pawsey, Mark—continued
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1156, 1158-9, 1164, 1167-8, 1185, 1198, 1211
Nissan, Sunderland 688
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1178
Questions
Engagements 884
Procurement Programmes, Supply Chain 1235-6
Small Businesses 1387
Topical Questions 1391

Penning, Mike, Minister for the Armed Forces
Westminster Hall
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016)
194wh, 204-8wh

Pennycook, Matthew
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 432
Calais 69
Concentrix 294
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1359-61
Questions
Topical Questions 23

Perkins, Toby
Chamber Debates
Yemen (26.10.2016) 337-8, 364-5
Questions
Counterfeit and Substandard Electrical Goods 1380
Leaving the EU, Northern Ireland Economy 268
Topical Questions 22

Perry, Claire
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 907
Petition
244, 393, 860

Petitions
(27.10.2016) 520, 1006, 1487

Phillips, Jess
Chamber Debates
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid 394-9

Phillipson, Bridget
Chamber Debates
Nissan, Sunderland 687
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, North-East Exports 96-7wh
Questions
Topical Questions 776

Plumbers’ Pensions
49wh

Point of Order
71, 893

Points of Order
(07.11.2016) 1300
442, 809, 1405

Police Officer Safety
956
Policing
21ws

Poulter, Dr Daniel
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 184
Questions
Topical Questions 1393

Pound, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 911
Homelessness Reduction Bill 545, 552, 561
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1197
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1181
Questions
Armed Forces Covenant 265
Light Pollution 16

Pos, Rebecca
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1049
Defence Estate 1295
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 250
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016)
282-3wh, 293wh, 298wh
Cocaine Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 342wh, 345wh
Questions
Topical Questions 1027

Powell, Lucy
Chamber Debates
Grammar and Faith Schools 1413,
1424, 1426-30, 1434, 1440, 1442-3, 1447
Questions
Topical Questions 20

Prentis, Victoria
Chamber Debates
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 727
National Health Service Provision
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill (Local Consultation) 191-3
Questions
Prison Safety 759

Press Matters
797

Prime Minister
271, 879

Priority School Building Programme
137

Prisk, Mr Mark
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 553-5
Westminster Hall
West Anglia Taskforce Report 525wh
Questions
Empty Homes (England) 10
Topical Questions 21

Prison Safety
759

Prison Safety and Reform
1067

Pritchard, Mark
Chamber Debates
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1402
Questions
Innovation 1376

Private Members’ Bills
423
153

Privileges
443

Procedure Committee
1365

Procurement Programmes
Supply Chain 1235

Prosecution of Sexual Offences
408

Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill
610

Pugh, John
Chamber Debates
Grammar and Faith Schools 1437-8
Questions
Priority School Building Programme 138
Topical Questions 775

Purseylove, Tom
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1051
Airport Capacity 189
Article 50 1284-5
Business of the House 434
Chase Railway Line 563
European Council 51
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 678
NHS Funding 658
Nissan, Sunderland 691
Prison Safety and Reform 1076
Westminster Hall
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 452-6wh, 486wh
Questions
Bilateral Trade Deals 1030
High Streets (England) 7

Quin, Jeremy
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1046
Airport Capacity 176
Calais 63
Care Homes for Older People 1147, 1151
Community Pharmacies 898
Nissan, Sunderland 686
Westminster Hall
West Sussex Schools Funding
(02.11.2016) 364wh, 366-8wh, 370wh

Quince, Will
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 430
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1304
Homelessness Reduction Bill 588-91
Protection of Family Homes (Enforcement and Permitted Development) Bill 611
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 250

Qureshi, Yasmin
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 943-4
Press Matters 806
Questions
Engagements 279
Prison Safety 761

Raab, Mr Dominic
Chamber Debates
Investigatory Powers Bill 819, 821
Questions
Topical Questions 778, 878
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Reynolds, Jonathan—continued
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1114-7
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1178-9
Questions
Economic Growth 134

Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Chamber Debates
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1307
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 294wh
CPS and Disability Hate Crime (08.11.2016) 493wh, 505wh
Questions
Infrastructure Investment 1378
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 764
Manufacturing Industry 136
Security 270
Voting Rights, Overseas UK Citizens 872

Roberts, Liz Saville
Chamber Debates
Financial Crimes Bill 195-6
Police Officer Safety 993-4
Press Matters 805
Questions
Justice System, Women 768

Robertson, Angus
Chamber Debates
European Council 31-2
Questions
Engagements 274-5, 883-4

Robertson, Mr Laurence
Questions
EU Budget, UK Contribution 2017-18 141
Leaving the EU, Republic of Ireland 266

Robinson, Gavin
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1274
Calais 64
Criminal Finances Bill 194
Police Officer Safety 957
Questions
Released Offenders, Employment 772

Robinson, Mary
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 429
Homelessness Reduction Bill 570-2

Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Chamber Debates
Capita Contract (Coventry) 1489-94, 1496

Rosindell, Andrew
Chamber Debates
British Victims of Terrorism (Asset-Freezing and Compensation) 894
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 57-63wh, 67wh, 69wh, 79-80wh
Lariam 220wh
Questions
Topical Questions 1038

Rotheram, Steve
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 931
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 288-9wh

Rough Sleeping
3

Royal Mail delivery office in Bredbury
7p

Royal Mail delivery office in Marple
8p

Rudd, Amber, Secretary of State for the Home Department
Chamber Debates
Calais 55-7, 59-70
Written Statements
G6 Rome 17-8ws
Policing 21-2ws
Review of Terrorism Legislation 45ws
Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures 13-4ws
Questions
Fraud 632-3
Indefinite Leave to Remain 636-7
International Students 625-8
Oireachtas 628-30
Topical Questions 641-2, 644-8

Rutley, David
Chamber Debates
European Council 49-50
Young People’s Mental Health 478
Questions
Innovation and Research, Science 1383
Trading Opportunities Abroad 1034

Ryan, Joan
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1051
Lewisham 1122, 1126, 1134
Westminster Hall
West Anglia Taskforce Report 527wh, 529-33wh, 535wh, 539wh
Questions
Local Charities Day 1022
Trading Relationships, Israel 1029

Sandbach, Antoinette
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 258-9wh, 267wh, 270wh

School Admissions (Special Educational Needs)
810

Scully, Paul
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 182
Community Pharmacies 933-5
Lewisham 1125-7
Police Officer Safety 987-8
Questions
Trading Relationships, Israel 1029

Security
270

Select Committee on Health
1089

Selous, Andrew
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1048
Airport Capacity 186
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 1088
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) 91-4
Selous, Andrew—continued
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 675
NHS Funding 657
Prison Safety and Reform 1073
Select Committee on Health 1092
Questions
Released Offenders, Employment 771
Topical Questions 1027

Sex and Relationship Education

Shah, Naz
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 926-8

Shannon, Jim
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1051
Airport Capacity 188
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid 897
Business of the House 440
Capita Contract (Coventry) 1491
Community Pharmacies 945-6
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 731-2
Defence Estate 1293-4
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1322, 1357-9
NHS Provision (Brighton and Hove) (24.10.2016) 120
Police Officer Safety 994
Social Housing, Regulation 751-2
Veterans and Service Personnel 1459-64, 1481
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 257-8
Yemen (26.10.2016) 380-1
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 294-6, 305wh
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 69-70wh
Coeulac Disease and Prescriptions (01.11.2016) 347wh
CPS and Disability Hate Crime (08.11.2016) 502-5wh, 512wh
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016) 189-92wh
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 237-9
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 25wh
Libya (26.10.2016) 113wh
Social Media and Young People’s Mental Health 432-4
Questions
Armed Forces Covenant 263-4, 1242
Caste Discrimination Consultation 414
Topical Questions 1028
Vulnerable Witnesses 405

Sharma, Mr Virendra
Questions
Double Taxation Treaties, Developing Countries 134-5

Sheerman, Mr Barry—continued
Chamber Debates
Air Quality 1050
Business of the House 439
Grammar and Faith Schools 1411, 1415
Points of Order 1406
Questions
Armed Forces 1247
Cybercrime 404
Extradition Orders, Vulnerable People 640-1
House Building and Planning 2
IPSAs, Members’ Budgets 423
Manufacturing, Leaving the EU 1381
Single Market 145

INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Sheerman, Mr Barry—continued
Topical Questions 419, 1391
Tourism 1020

Shebrooke, Alex
Chamber Debates
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1156-70, 1172-3,
1185-7, 1193-4, 1196-8, 1201, 1203,
1206, 1208-9, 1215, 1217-20, 1225
Questions
Ongreeva 628

Sheppard, Tommy
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 320
Questions
House of Lords, Membership 874-5

Sheriff, Paula
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 438, 1062
Concentrix 301
Questions
Immigration 635
Ongreeva 794

Shaker, Mr Gavin
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 178

Siddiq, Tulip
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 597-8

Simpson, David
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 295wh
Global Biodiversity 314-5
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 25wh
Libya (26.10.2016) 113wh
Questions
Engagements 884
Leaving the EU, Northern Ireland Economy 268

Single Market 144

Skidmore, Chris, Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office
Questions
House of Lords, Membership 872-5
Topical Questions 878-9
Voter Registration, Young People 869-71
Voting Fraud 876
Voting Rights, Overseas UK Citizens 871-2

Skinner, Mr Dennis
Chamber Debates
Midland Main Line Electrification (07.11.2016) 1368
NHS Funding 662
Questions
Economic Growth 133
Ongreeva 629, 787

Slatter, Andy
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 181-2
Community Pharmacies 897
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1104
NHS Funding 663
Press Matters 806
Prison Safety and Reform 1074
Questions
Mental Health Services, Veterans 1242-3
Small and Medium Sized Co-operative Development 1407
Small Businesses 1387
Small Shops Regulation 139
Smart Energy System 146

Smith, Ruth
Chamber Debates
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 252
Westminster Hall
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016) 192-5wh
Larham 214wh, 218wh
Questions
Iraq and Syria, RAF Campaign 1238

Smith, Angela
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1272
Westminster Hall
Animal Cruelty, Sentencing (08.11.2016) 559-60wh, 565wh
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 234-6wh, 244wh, 251wh,
258wh, 265wh, 268wh, 276wh, 278wh
Global Biodiversity 319-22wh, 327wh,
333wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 447wh,
456-60wh, 483wh, 490wh
Questions
Engagements 886
Topical Questions 1392

Smith, Cat
Questions
Voter Registration, Young People 871

Smith, Henry
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 183
Business of the House 435
Calais 67
European Council 51
National Minimum Wage (Workplace Internships) Bill 1214, 1217
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1403
Westminster Hall
British Indian Ocean Territory and the Chagos Islands 65-7wh
Questions
Empty Homes (England) 10
Topical Questions 879

Smith, Jeff
Chamber Debates
Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1182
Westminster Hall
Disclosure and Barring Service (26.10.2016) 143-5wh
Questions
Engagements 886
Leaving the EU, Republic of Ireland 265-6
Topical Questions 877
Women’s State Pension Age 413

Smith, Mr Andrew
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 541, 551
Westminster Hall
A34 Safety (26.10.2016) 135wh
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 5wh
Small Shops Regulation 387wh, 389wh

Smith, Nick
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1280
Business of the House 438
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17

24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Sugar in Food and Drinks (Targets, Labelling and Advertising) Bill 1227

Sunak, Rishi
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 189
Article 50 1268, 1281
Calais 65
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 1086
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1093-4
NHS Funding 656
Police Officer Safety 964
Questions
Business Growth Strategy 1386
Topical Questions 21, 149, 775

Swire, Sir Hugo
Questions
Mental Health Services, Veterans 1243
Topical Questions 646

Symmetry Park Logistics 1006

Syria
3-4mc

Tami, Mark
Chamber Debates
Criminal Finances Bill 218-9
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 770
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 82, 86
Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts 393
Young People's Mental Health 484

Tax Credits (Concentrix) 143
Technical and Further Education 16ws
Technical and Further Education Bill 442
Teesside Investment 11
Tenancy of St Michael's Gate, Parnwell 1006

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures 13ws

The Royal Marines 860

Thewliss, Alison
Chamber Debates
Homelessness Reduction Bill 586-8
Yemen (26.10.2016) 361
Westminster Hall
Good Parliament Report (02.11.2016) 402-3wh
Plumbers’ Pensions 50wh

Thewliss, Alison—continued
Questions
Leaving the EU, Local Government 8-9

Thomas, Derek
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 928-9
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 292-4wh

Thomas, Mr Gareth
Chamber Debates
Sri Lanka, Human Rights 1228-31, 1234
Questions
Topical Questions 19

Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Chamber Debates
Police Officer Safety 956
Private Members’ Bills 160
Westminster Hall
CPS and Disability Hate Crime (08.11.2016) 507-11wh
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016) 25-6wh, 34-5wh, 43-4wh
Local Government Pension Scheme (24.10.2016) 1wh, 6wh
Questions
Prosecution of Sexual Offences 409-10

Thompson, Owen
Chamber Debates
Defence Estate 1295
Questions
Engagements 280

Thornberry, Emily
Chamber Debates
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 1080-2
European Council 28
Yemen (26.10.2016) 337-44, 348, 362, 382

Throup, Maggie
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 939-40
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 102-3
NHS Funding 662
Questions
Engagements 278
Released Offenders, Employment 771

Timms, Stephen
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1276
Homelessness Reduction Bill 577-8, 604
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 674-5
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1096
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 248wh, 255wh
Questions
Small Businesses 1387
Topical Questions 148, 1392

Timpson, Edward, Minister for
Vulnerable Children and Families
Written Statements
Safeguarding 27-9ws

Tolhurst, Kelly
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 186
Homelessness Reduction Bill 559-61
Westminster Hall
Housing in Kent (02.11.2016) 418wh
Questions
Engagements 885
Regional Infrastructure Development 138-9
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Tomlinson, Justin
Chamber Debates
Improving Lives, Work, Health and Disability Green Paper 676
Nissan, Sunderland 690
Westminster Hall
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 286-8wh
Questions
House Building 14

Tomlinson, Michael
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1284
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights 1305, 1310, 1325, 1336-9
Prison Safety and Reform 1073
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 246, 258
Westminster Hall
AEA Pension Scheme 168wh
Apprenticeships Funding (01.11.2016) 284wh, 296-8wh
Questions
Leaving the EU, Republic of Ireland 265-6
Orgreave 789
Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon Project 1384

Topical Questions
19, 146, 417, 641, 775, 876, 1025, 1036, 1250, 1390

Tourism
1019
Exchange Rate 1022

Trade Negotiations
Parliamentary Vote 1031

Trade Union Industrial Action
Electronic Balloting 31ws

Trading Opportunities Abroad
1034

Trading Relationships
Israel 1028

Transport
9ws, 33ws, 46ws

Treasury
131, 5ws, 15ws, 37ws

Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Chamber Debates
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 1087-8
Veterans and Service Personnel 1454-9, 1468, 1484
Veterans Care Sector, Government Role 256
Questions
Armistice Centenary 1321
Arms Sales 262
Counter-Daesh Campaign, Iraq and Syria 2721
Mental Health Services, Veterans 273

Turner, Karl
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1266
Prison Safety and Reform 1072
Westminster Hall
National College for Wind Energy (01.11.2016) 351wh
Questions
Engagements 277
Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 764
Mental Health Services, Veterans 1242-3

Turner, Mr Andrew
Questions
Tourism 1020

Twigg, Derek
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 431
NHS Funding 660
Questions
Topical Questions 149

Twigg, Stephen
Chamber Debates
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1402
Yemen (26.10.2016) 342, 356, 366-8

Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1268
European Council 37
Nissan, Sunderland 685

Umunna, Mr Chuka
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1271
European Council 48
Leaving the EU, Financial Services 1096
UN Vote on the Independent Expert for the LGBT Community 1398

Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme 406

Vaizey, Mr Edward
Chamber Debates
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 713-5
Investigatory Powers Bill 828-31
Press Matters 802
Westminster Hall
A34 Safety (26.10.2016) 131-5wh
AEA Pension Scheme 168-70wh, 178wh

Vara, Mr Shailesh
Questions
Topical Questions 777

Vázquez, Keith
Chamber Debates
Calais 63
Closure of Belgrave Library and Lunch Club at Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre, Leicester 1487-9
Criminal Finances Bill 196, 203-4, 232-6, 238
European Council 42
Grammar and Faith Schools 1411, 1421
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 81
Midland Main Line Electrification (07.11.2016) 1368, 1372
Yemen (26.10.2016) 337, 346, 357-9, 388
Yemen (07.11.2016) 1241

Veterans and Service Personnel 1449

Veterans Care Sector
Government Role 246

Vickers, Martin
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1063-4
School Admissions (Special Educational Needs) 810-2
Westminster Hall
National College for Wind Energy (01.11.2016) 351-2wh, 362wh
Questions
Economic Growth 131
Engagements 889
Nuisance Calls 1017
Topical Questions 645

Villiers, Mrs Theresa
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1265
Questions
Orgreave 629
Topical Questions 1037

Voter Registration
Young People 869

Voting Fraud
876

Voting Rights
Overseas UK Citizens 871

Vulnerable Witnesses
404

Walker, Mr Charles
Chamber Debates
Private Members’ Bills 153
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016) 243-5wh, 259wh, 271wh, 274wh
West Anglia Taskforce Report 526-7wh, 529-30wh, 533-4wh
Questions
Engagements 887-8

Walker, Mr Robin, Parliamentary
Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union
Chamber Debates
EU Customs Union 1010-6
INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

Wallace, Mr Ben—continued
Chamber Debates
Security
Concentrix 301, 306, 315

Whitford, Dr Philippa—continued
Chamber Debates
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs)
Bill 89-91, 96, 105
NHS Provision (Brighton and Hove)
(24.10.2016) 120, 124
Yemen (07.11.2016) 1240

Whittaker, Craig
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016)
246wh, 285wh, 257wh, 272wh
Questions
Leaving the EU, Republic of Ireland
265
Priority School Building Programme
137-8
Topical Questions 778-9

Whittingdale, Mr John
Chamber Debates
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts)
Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 724-5
Questions
Engagements 886

Warman, Matt
Chamber Debates
Calais 69
European Council 52
Investigatory Powers Bill 823-4, 838-9
NHS Funding 661
Press Matters 807
Questions
Midlands Engine 13
Topical Questions 779

Watson, Mr Tom
Chamber Debates
Points of Order 809
Press Matters 799-800, 808
Questions
Creative Industries 1023

Welfare Polices
Disabled People 416

West Anglia Taskforce Report
525wh

West, Catherine
Chamber Debates
Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts)
Bill [Lords] (31.10.2016) 708-10, 726
Press Matters 800
Privileges 448-9

Wiggin, Bill
Chamber Debates
Exiting the EU and Workers’ Rights
1306
Justice Committee 744
Press Matters 804
Westminster Hall
Driven Grouse Shooting (31.10.2016)
232wh

Williams, Craig
Westminster Hall
Cardiff Central Station 516-21wh
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016)
27wh
Questions
Fraud 632

Williams, Hywel
Chamber Debates
Concentrix 287
Questions
Engagements 281

Williams, Mr Mark
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, Wales (25.10.2016)
35-6wh
Questions
Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon Project
1383-4
Tourism 1021

Wilson, Corri
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 944-5
Concentrix 312-3

Wilson, Mr Roh, Parliamentary
Under-Secretary of State for Culture,
Media and Sport
Questions
Local Charities Day 1021-2

Wilson, Phil
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 940-1
Nissan, Sunderland 688
Westminster Hall
Defence Expenditure (27.10.2016)
196-8wh
Leaving the EU, North-East Exports
88-92wh, 106wh

Wilson, Sammy
Chamber Debates
Airport Capacity 178-9
Concentrix 291, 293-5, 300, 305, 307-8,
315, 318
Nissan, Sunderland 694

Wilson, Sammy—continued
Regional Infrastructure Development
140

Winnick, Mr David
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1279
Business of the House 430
Improving Lives, Work, Health and
Disability Green Paper 673
Point of Order 893

Winterton, Dame Rosie
Chamber Debates
Community Pharmacies 899
European Council 33
Nissan, Sunderland 689-90
Questions
Engagements 890

Wiseman, Carol
Chamber Debates
Business of the House 1024

Wood, Mike
Chamber Debates
Birmingham Pub Bombings, Legal Aid
402
Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs)
Bill 75
NHS Funding 651
Private Members’ Bills 157
Select Committee on Health 1089-92

Women and Equalities
410

Women’s State Pension Age
413

Woodcock, John
Chamber Debates
Police Officer Safety 962
Yemen (26.10.2016) 339-40

Work and Pensions
10ws, 20ws, 22ws

Work, Health and Disability
22ws

Wragg, William
Chamber Debates
Article 50 1279
Questions
Topical Questions 1252
Petitions
Royal Mail delivery office in Marple 8p

Wright, Mr Iain
Chamber Debates
Nissan, Sunderland 684
Westminster Hall
Leaving the EU, North-East Exports
102-3wh
Steel Industry (03.11.2016) 472-5wh
### INDEX—SESSION 2016–17
24th October, 2016—8th November, 2016

#### Wright, Mr Iain—continued
- Clean and Reliable Energy 1389
- Yemen (26.10.2016) 337
- Young People’s Mental Health 460

#### Zahawi, Nadhim
- Chamber Debates
  - Yemen (26.10.2016) 365-6

#### Zeichner, Daniel—continued
- Chamber Debates
  - Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill 75
  - NHS Funding 660
- Outsourcing and Tax Credits 1182

- Westminster Hall
- West Anglia Taskforce Report 533-6
- Questions
  - Rough Sleeping 4
  - Topical Questions 1038